

RED SAILS

(a prequel)

by Andre Jones

3356.5.3

Ultra range sensors indicate unusual readings from Sector Sig-Alpha 8. Will continue to monitor and update as necessary.

3356.6.17

Analysis of sector Sig-Alpha 8 anomaly is a rare energy of unknown origin. Main Directive overridden by Primary Protocol. Estimated arrival at Sig-Alpha 8 is 56.89 years.

3413.2.4

Arrived in sector Sig-Alpha 8. Energy source emissions detected from fourth planet orbiting star GGC567-89-0 *Glarian*. Coordinates relayed back to Terra on subspace channel.

3413.8.5

Primary Protocol parameters are sustained and now take precedence. Deceleration commencing and calculating for optimal orbit.

3413.8.2

Glarian 4 has approximately 80% water. Atmospheric and Environmental readings are suitable for human habitation. Initiating Section #456-7-78 of Primary Protocol: Adapting DNA sequence for optimal success for survival in an environment consistent with findings. Will continue orbit and shuttle equipment, bots and drones to establish base camp as set out in Section #456-7-78-5a.

3414.1.1-

Orb-t in dec-y. Dr-ve-s non resp--sive. Ini--at-ng progr-- to jett--on -ll clon--ing mate--aland g-netica--y m--ified cl--nes. Em--gency tr-n-po-ders w--l depl-- on imp--t...

PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

The sound of loud hoofbeats on gravel woke her. Slipping out from under the silk sheets, Mara went to the window overlooking the courtyard.

Her father's horse, Duyma, stumbled in, glistening and lathered with sweat. It's hoofbeats were erratic and it stepped sideways several times. It snorted and whinnied like she'd never heard before.

Part of her mind fretted for the horse's condition, but where was father and why would Duyma be so badly injured? As she was about to head down, the stable hand staggered half asleep from his bunk above the stalls and immediately began tending to the horse.

By the time she arrived, half the house guards were milling in the yard. At her approach they fell silent, and bowed. Surprised and unsure of a response, she walked past them quickly towards the stable.

Duyma was now settled in his stall. The stable hand, Graff, was applying liniment to the wounds on his flanks.

"What happened? Where's father?"

"My lady." Graff stumbled back, nervous. "Duyma has terrible cuts down his flanks."

What she had thought to be lather and sweat had also been blood.

"I see. And father? Where is he?" she repeated, though as she said it realised that Graff probably had as much knowledge of his whereabouts as she did.

"I—"

"Missing, my Lady."

Mara turned to the voice at the stable entrance to see the head guard, Trinol.

"I don't understand. How could he be missing? What about his retinue?"

Trinol shook his head. "Lady Olber, I've sent men out to search, but from the injuries of Duyma, it looks like there was an attack of rockions."

"Rockions? Father was nowhere near the Black Hills."

“True, but they could have migrated, or at least widened their hunting area. Forgive me, I’m not that knowledgeable of these large cat creatures.” He stepped closer and examined the lacerations. “From what I’ve heard, these seem to resemble the claw marks from rockions.”

Worried and at a loss for words, she stared first at the guard, then Graff who suddenly looked worried at the attention. He dropped his head at her stern look, pot of liniment hanging in his hands. “I-I d-did what I thought best, my Lady.”

“You did well, Graff. And did it quickly.” She changed her tone for the poor boy. “Please continue your good work with my thanks.”

Graff nodded in relief and turned to continue tending to Duyma’s wounds.

Mara quickly walked to her horse, Sleena, and gave her neck a calming rub before leaving the stable, silent, deep in thought.

Trinol, following several paces behind, was joined by three more guards.

Back in the manor house, Mara became aware of the many footfalls behind her. She paused and turned to look, noting the extra guards.

“Trinol? What is it?”

“My Lady. If your father is—”

“Is what? Missing? Dead? He’s a master horseman and experienced hunter ...” *And yet, Duyma returns alone and injured.*

“It would be wise to ensure your safety until we know what has happened.”

Mara took a few more steps before stopping and turning. “We should inform Uncle Refin—”

Trinol anticipated her words. “The moment I saw Duyma return alone I sent a rider to inform him, my Lady.”

The view from the stairs faced east. The horizon glowed with the dawn. Mara headed for the kitchens where Thelum would be baking fresh bread and other treats. She wasn’t hungry, though she normally ate a hearty breakfast; it was more out of habit than anything else.

Routine. She nodded at Thelum, busy by the oven, and lifted two hot pastries from the tray.

“I assumed father went north-east, towards Grillon Woods,” she said as she continued out the back door into the garden.

“He did, my Lady. A patrol saw his retinue two days ago heading that way,” Trinol replied. “We should have some news by noon, when our scouts return. In the meantime, I have also taken the liberty of doubling the patrols.”

Mara paused chewing. “You think there’s a threat?”

“I always think there’s a threat. It’s my job. The possibility has increased significantly.”

“Until father returns.”

“Yes, of course.” The guard nodded.

“You don’t sound so sure.”

“My Lady. It pains me to be blunt, but five well-armed and experienced hunters went out...and only one horse has returned bearing the injuries inflicted by the largest and most cunning beast in all of Jaranabi.”

Before Mara could offer a reply, there was a commotion coming from the courtyard. More horses and voices.

“See. They have returned.” The last pastry forgotten, she leapt to her feet and ran around the garden to enter the courtyard from behind the stables. To her utter dismay, her uncle was dismounting with several of his household guard as part of his retinue.

“Uncle Refin—”

“Dear Mara. I only just heard.” Lord Refin Blarik was middle-aged, several years older than her father, balding with a full beard. Dressed in his riding gear of open shirt, cape and black leather leggings, her uncle struggled to get his portly frame out of the saddle. After several curses at his guards for their sluggishness, he managed the climb without losing his footing. He threw the reins at one of the men and walked briskly to Mara where he embraced her in welcome.

“You got here quickly.” She pulled away from his embrace which to her mind he was being far too familiar than what she would have liked. “A messenger was sent out only a short time ago.”

“I was already on my way with other alarming news when we intercepted the rider. Tragic news to be sure.”

“Surely they are just missing?”

“Not if rockions were involved, Mara. They are—”

“Yes, the most fearsome beasts in all of Jaranabi. I’ve heard.” She looked crestfallen at his confirmation.

“Well, it’s true, nevertheless. I can assure you.”

“I- thank you, uncle. I should show you to your rooms.”

“Nonsense. I’ve been here many a time. I know my way. You do what you need to do here.”

Mara nodded and searched for the house staff to arrange refreshing drinks sent to him and his men. She then turned and noticed her head guardsman standing by a column in the hallway to the entrance.

“Lady Olber, may I have a quiet word?” the guardsman asked. At her nod, he sent the three guards to carry out their duties.

She crossed the foyer, walked through the hall and they moved back out into the chateau’s gardens. A flock of pigeons, in a pecking frenzy with the discarded pastry, erupted at their approach.

“Is this quiet enough? What is it?”

“I don’t wish to cast any suspicions on anyone, but when I sent out my messenger earlier, he knew nothing of any rockion attack. I simply sent him with the news of High Lord Pertram’s horse returning alone.”

“That is...interesting. I will think on it.” *That’s what father said when he didn’t have another response.* “You better go and see to your men.”

“Yes, my Lady, after I escort you to your rooms, assuming that is where you are going.”

She smiled, more at herself. “Yes. I am.”

Entering the large house, she went back through the foyer and continued up the main stairs. Her suite was halfway along the floor.

She turned to her guard. “All safe now.”

“Very good, my lady.” Trinol bowed and pivoted towards the door.

“Trinol?”

“Yes, my Lady?” He stopped and turned on the carpet.

“I do thank you and appreciate your work and that of the other guardsmen.”

“We are proud to serve and carry out our duties, my Lady.” Trinol bowed again, closing the door behind him.

As she dressed for bed, she wondered at how Refin knew of the rockions. “Well, he *is* the spymaster, after all,” she muttered. “That must be how.”

#

As she was about to drop off to sleep, Mara heard fumbling at her door. It never occurred to her to lock it in her own house. She sat up when her uncle stumbled through and closed the door behind him, a wine bottle in his pudgy hand.

“Uncle Refin? Are you lost?”

“Not at all, my dear.” As he stumbled over, it was clear from both his movements and his speech he was drunk. “Before you were born, this used to be my suite when I visited.”

“Yes. Mother told me.”

He stood by the end of her bed, swaying, looking at her. “Ah yes. My dear sister... your mother...”

“What is it?” She pulled her nightgown around her, feeling uncomfortable with his gaze. “Have you news of father?”

“Your father? Oh...yes. My agents tell me of sad tidings, I’m afraid.” He took a swig from the bottle and wiped his beard with his sleeve. “They visited the area in Grillon Woods and found the remains of several men and their horses, all horribly gored and mutilated.”

Mara went pale at the gross, callous description.

Refin moved around the bed. She thought he was offering a condolence hug, but after he put the bottle on the bedside table he climbed onto the bed, grabbed her and pulled her closer. Too close. Too firm.

“Stop it! Uncle—” She pulled an arm free and slapped him, made awkward and ineffective by the closeness. “You’re drunk.”

“What of it, vixen.” He moved forward to kiss her. “You sound just like your mother.”

His foetid breath nauseated her. She turned her head and grimaced in disgust. Shocked and stunned by his words and actions, she found the strength to push him away, enough to break free and move back. Tangled in the sheets, she was at a disadvantage.

“Guards!” Mara extricated herself from the linen and managed to crab backwards as he reached for her again. She fell onto the floor hitting her head but the thick rug prevented any injury.

Refin moved awkwardly to the side of the bed.

Mara aimed to kick him in the groin, but his obesity prevented a solid contact.

He doubled over, winded, cursing. Losing his balance, he slipped off the silk sheets and toppled to the floor.

“Guards!” she screamed again, scrambling back to avoid his falling body.

“Cry all you like,” he grunted as he rolled over and grabbed her by the ankle. “My men will prevent anyone entering.”

He may have been old and fat, but fortified by his wine and lust, he was still stronger than she was and he began to pull her closer to him by her legs. Mara writhed wildly breaking his grip and kicked at him but only landing a glancing blow to his jaw. Before she could move far, he angrily held her down and started to crawl onto her struggling body. She brought her leg up and managed to knee him in the stomach, which served only as a temporary hindrance.

Fuelled by his drunken state he grabbed her hair and slammed her head onto the tiles.

Mara blacked out momentarily. As she recovered from her daze, she realised he had ripped open her night dress and was running his hands over her breasts like an eager child with a new toy. An incoherent scream ripped from her throat as she scratched at his face, digging her nails in deeply.

He screamed in pain.

Quickly her hands were slick with his blood. The floor started shaking and Mara could hear horses whinnying nervously from the stable and the staff raising their voices in fear and alarm.

Over this came the sound of metal ringing on metal. When the door burst open, Trinol barged in with more of the house guards, swords drawn and bloodied. On the corridor floor, two of Refin’s men lay unmoving.

“Get out!” Refin yelled. Blood trickled down his cheeks into his beard.

Mara took the opportunity of the distraction and hit him in the nose with the palm of her hand. She heard and felt the satisfying crunch.

The old man shrieked, clutching his nose. “Little shrew. You broke it!” His voice now had a nasally twang. “You’ll pay—”

Trinol raced over and pushed the drunk lord away roughly with his boot, sending him to sprawl back onto the floor.

Mara stumbled to her feet, attempting to pull her ripped blouse closed.

“Escort Lord Blarik to his room!” he ordered as he grabbed a sheet and stepped over to wrap it around Mara’s bare shoulders.

She pulled it tighter, looking relieved and thankful.

“You little pup,” Refin raged from the floor. “You don’t order me around!”

“In this household, where you are a guest, he does!” Mara retorted.

“Agril, Robern, take Lord Blarik to his rooms now!” Trinol ordered.

The two guards made to pull the old man to his feet.

Refin shrugged them off. “You’re mistaken. I am *High* Lord Blarik now, and I will do as I please, where I please, with whom I please.”

Mara shook her head. “You? High Lord? You’re just an old lecherous drunk. My father—”

“Is dead, and I gained the title the moment his heart stopped beating.” Refin stumbled to his feet, swaying slightly.

“In the absence of High Lord Olber, the head of this house is Lady Mara Olber. I will obey her orders and no one else’s.” Trinol reached over and shoved the old man towards the door.

“You are making a grave mistake, young Trinol.”

“Men, use force if he resists. There will be an accounting for this behaviour tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow you will realise I’m the legitimate High Lord. Then I can assure you all, there will *definitely* be an accounting of your treatment.”

Trinol looked sternly at his men. “Why is he still here?”

The two guards turned quickly and pushed Refin out the door, almost causing him to trip over the bloodied bodies of his protectors.

“Who killed my men? Unhand me, you insubordinate oafs!” His curses and threats continued for several minutes.

In the uncomfortable aftermath Mara looked at the shambles of her bed. She shuddered and pulled her sheet tighter.

“Lady Olber...” Trinol stood, head down. “You have my humblest apologies for this neglect. I—”

“You will ensure Refin stays locked in his room and set guards. None of Refin’s men are to set foot within the grounds.”

“Shall I call for the healer? Are you injured? Did he ...”

“No healer is necessary. I am bruised and shaken only.” Mara looked up as her maid ran in, woken quickly from her sleep.

“Oh. My lady!” The maid glanced at her, seeing the sheet covering her and the state of the bed. Nervously she started tidying up the room.

“Cinnam. Leave that. Stop fussing. Please go and fetch Froshingha.” Mara reached for the wine bottle and took a quick sip while looking around the room. “Tell him to meet me in the library at his soonest convenience. I need his counsel more than anything else right now.”

“Very good, my Lady.” Cinnam curtsied, looking relieved to be somewhere else and left quickly.

“You think he will know of what Refin claimed?” Trinol asked.

Mara shrugged, taking another sip. “If there’s anything to know of the obscurities of lore, Froshingha will know it.”

The head guard nodded. “I will warn my men of the potential threat. On my life, none of Refin’s men will get in. No doubt that tremor alarmed them as well.”

“I have no doubt. Thank you, again, Trinol.”

The moment the door clicked closed, she dropped into the nearest chair and sobbed into her hands.

###

CHAPTER 2

“It’s an ancient lore, dating back several centuries.” Froshingha looked over his glasses at Mara like she was a student in class. “No one has used it in all that time.”

“But what is it exactly?”

Froshingha ran his fingers down the vellum page. “In time of war or great unrest, the senior family member can—with a majority vote from the council—decree who the new High Lord—or High Lady—will be.”

“War? Unrest? My father’s missing, perhaps dead, but surely not sufficient grounds to do this?”

Trinol cleared his throat. “There have been recent reports of trouble to the north, my Lady.”

Mara rolled her eyes. “Klarget is always skirmishing at our northern borders. This is nothing new. Surely, Refin was just rambling in his drunken stupor...”

“Perhaps, but being the spymaster, he would be privy to information no one else knows.”

“Not even my father? He would never go off hunting knowing there was an imminent threat on the borders.”

“Assuming Lord Blarik informed High Lord Pertram.”

“Is withholding vital information from his liege not an offence of some description?”

“If we could prove he knew of it but did not tell him...there could be a case.”

“What about sexual assault?” Mara asked.

“Umm. Sexual assault? It’s been tried. We’d need the victim and undisputed proof, otherwise it would merely be another ‘she said: he said’ scenario.”

“I’m the victim and have three witnesses.”

“Ah. Your injuries...I didn’t want to speculate.” Froshingha slumped in the plush chair. “I am so sorry this has happened to you. It is a truly despicable act.” The senior advisor sighed, thinking. “I see a quandary.”

“How so?”

“You alleging this assault—”

“I am not alleging at all. I’m telling you. Trinol and his guards witnessed it! They had to kill two of Refin’s men to get into my room.”

“And there is the nub of the matter. This contestation of being the Head-of-State is between yourself and him. It could be seen that your accusation is merely to discredit him in the face of the councillors. Your witnesses are beholden to you and your house, and might be presumed they are simply following your orders.”

“But it did happen! Doesn’t swearing an oath mean anything to these people?”

“Please believe me. I have no doubt. There have been many accusations made against Refin—all unproven.”

Mara wiped the tears of frustration. “What chances have I got then?”

“Limited.” The advisor shrugged. “And slim at best.”

“So, Refin gets away with it again and is allowed to be High Lord of all Jaranabi? There has to be another way. As an in-law, he isn’t really in the line of accession.”

“It’s a grey area, but his position might be just enough to tip the balance his way. In fact, there is a precedent. I believe your great grandfather was in a similar position. At one of the first major incidents with Dran’ali. There was no clear line of succession, but Patraig Olber came up with a strategy. The Houses back then were far less organised, so in an emergency session with borders being overrun, they voted him in. Within two months the borders were secure. There’s been an Olber in charge ever since.”

“Until now.” Mara looked glum. She sighed, turned to the family advisor and spoke softly in a steely voice. “Froshingha, tell me what you know about these other allegations of sexual assault. I want to hear everything, every sordid detail.”

#

Graff stared at all the activity in the courtyard, not having seen so many people in one place at one time.

“Boy. Get workin’. These horses need tendin’ too and won’t be doin’ it themselves.”

Jolted into motion by the head ostler’s vexation, Graff grabbed the reins of the two closest horses and encouraged them into the stalls and out of the sun.

Duyma and Sleena, the only other horses in the manor stables, whinnied at the new arrivals.

In the courtyard, nobles from far and wide and crotchety with the rapid travel in the heat of the day, trudged towards the manor house.

The lush grounds surrounding the manor were pock-marked with the forming of encampments of their retinue and armed escorts. Each set up a discreet distance from the camps of the other houses.

Mara and the household staff had been busy the moment she saw the standard of an allied house come up the road, realising a High Council had been arranged. She had to quickly get the staff to prepare the suites for visitors. Now, on the balcony outside her rooms, she stared at the kaffuffle below and beyond the estate walls. “But how could they get here so quickly?”

“They couldn’t, my lady.” Trinol moved closer to the parapet and pointed. “See there, the colours of Kindair House? And to the left, Hommin House? They are at least three days travel by horse, maybe four by carriage if pushed.”

“Refin must have planned this in advance.”

“It would appear so,” Froshingha agreed.

“The scheming pervert. That was why he arrived yesterday. He must have known about the seriousness this threat posed before father left. He kept the information to himself and...this is a coup!”

“But can we prove it?”

“Father wouldn’t have left if he had known of an impending threat,” Mara insisted.

“I believe you, but it is not me you need to convince. Would the councillors? May I be bold, my lady?”

“Of course. You can always speak plainly with me, Froshingha.”

He bowed his head briefly in acknowledgement. “With the greatest respect, High Lord Olber was...not the most perceptive or dynamic leader. This is the gossip among the local villages. Yes, we all loved, adored and respected him, but for those very same reasons; he was more of a chummy noble than a force to be reckoned with. Jaranabi has not had more than minor border skirmishes for over a century. No one here has actually experienced a war. Peace makes society complacent...and vulnerable to attack...from within as well as beyond the borders.”

Mara’s face paled at these words.

“The point is though; how does the council perceive our High Lord? I have little doubt Refin would make it out a minor dispute only, and nothing to worry about. That would make it far more plausible for your father to go hunting and leaving the remote possibility of this minor conflict in the capable hands of the spymaster.”

Trinol spoke after the advisor. “Or to put it more bluntly; how does the council perceive Lord Blarik? We’ve all heard the stories. Like him or loathe him, he is cunning and ruthless. Is he someone they want to make an enemy?”

“This is not going to end well. Let me think on it, and thank you both for your words.” Once the two men left Mara leant on the railing as she found it hard to breathe. “I have to do something ...”

Mara thought her ill feeling was the aftermath of the assault, but as the day progressed, the bad feeling in her gut worsened.

She approved a wagon to fetch extra supplies from Corrascon, then tried to bury her foreboding and busy herself with reacquainting herself with the leaders of the various Houses. While she knew some well, she was almost a stranger to those estates further afield.

As expected, they had all received the message for a High Council the day before her father had gone on his hunting trip, and many of the lords and ladies were aggrieved with Lord Blarik for the impromptu appointment.

Just before sitting for dinner, Mara summoned her head guardsman. Even with a herbal remedy from the house apothecarist, this feeling of imminent catastrophe only grew worse. Several times during the afternoon she almost blacked out.

“Trinol, you and your men must leave. You aren’t safe here. I can’t explain it, but feel it in my bones.”

“My Lady. We will not abandon you with this miscreant.”

“Dear Trin, be realistic. You heard what he said last night in my chambers; ‘I can do what I want, where I want and with whoever I want.’ Sounds like a tyrant to me. I don’t know about your men, but you have a family. You will have to think of them first.” She put a hand on his arm. “I would not hold it against you.”

Trinol opened his mouth, but couldn’t bring himself to deny it. He hung his head in shame.

Mara continued, “He has a plan to take control. Very soon, what he says will be indisputable. I fear that with our recent treatment of him, it will not go well.”

“But you—”

“Will be fine. If there has been any successful outcome in this fiasco, it is every noble house in Jaranabi will know of what has gone between Refin and myself. I doubt even he can do anything to hurt me. He will have absolutely no qualms in doing you, your family or your men harm. The best thing he could do is conscript you.”

“You think that’s good?”

“Not at all, but I’m sure there are worse things he could do.”

Trinol took a deep breath. “I swore and oath to your father, as did my men, to defend this family and this house.”

“Then I formally rescind you and your men from the oath. You are free to go to your family and get as far away from here as you can. Take twenty of your married men with you. If anyone asks, tell them you are retrieving the remains of the hunting party. Once you’re clear of the estate, scatter. Go to your loved ones and get away. There are at least five noble houses who would take you in.”

“I could not possibly—”

“You can and you will! When you took the hand of your loved one in marriage, did you not swear to provide for her; to defend her?”

“I did, but—”

“But nothing. Go to them. They are now your priority. They should have been from the start. What do you think will happen to them when you are not there? Maybe not by Refin’s hands, but his thugs are no doubt just as violent and dishonourable as he is...probably in their job description.”

Trinol looked at her pleadingly. “You must come with us! Hide in the wagon until its safe.”

She saw the anguish in his eyes.

Her mind cast her back fleetingly over the years he had been there. Like all spoiled brats, she had been childish and teasing—a noble girl having a strong, handsome man watching over her—but he was steadfast and true. Laughed at her jokes, acted surprised when she tried to scare him...and now she was sending him away.

“My Lady?... Mara.”

The use of her name broke her reverie. “I can’t leave. There’s a banquet shortly and I need to be here to allay any suspicion. House guards going out to retrieve their Lord’s remains is quite plausible.”

She walked along the path a few more steps. “There is a drawback though. A handful of guards must remain, patrolling the grounds as per normal.”

“I will ask for volunteers.”

Mara nodded. “Go and tell your men. Head south. Most of House Olber allies are down that way, and it is further away from whatever he has planned in the north.”

“We are not afraid of fighting!”

“Of course you aren’t but this is Blarik being a tyrant. There is no pride or glory in playing his game.”

“Be well.” She grasped his hand briefly as the dinner bell rang out across the garden, then turned and strode into the palace.

#

After dinner, four house guards escorted the guests to the ballroom where the intrepid seneschal managed to get the staff to set the room up in time for the meeting. She was ushering her staff down a side passage when the dignitaries came up the main stairs from the dining hall.

Madam Krishly waited, curtsying at their arrival.

“You have my undying thanks,” Mara whispered to her as she passed, noting the beads of perspiration on the stout woman.

Once everyone had filed into the large room the guards closed the double doors and took up their positions in the hallway.

Inside the ballroom, several tables had been arranged into a rectangle large enough to comfortably fit the dozen councillors with a couple of chairs placed behind for any retainers if the various lords and ladies brought them.

As hostess, Mara was to the right and slightly behind the Chair.

Lord Refin Blarik strode in to a chair at the large table but, not being a member of the council, was ushered to the side to a plush chair with a side table.

Lord Harrod Trallko lightly tapped the gavel until everyone was silent. “As designated chairman, I officially open the High Council and on behalf of our hostess, Lady Mara Olber, I welcome you all.”

A thin, balding man spoke up from the far end of the room. “Blarik, what’s the meaning of this? Why have we all been summoned at such short notice?”

“Lord Phillit,” Harrod spoke up. “All in good time.” He turned to the ashen face of Mara. “Lady Olber, it would be remiss if I as Chair did not commiserate formally to you on behalf of the full Council the sadness we all feel to hear the tragic news of High Lord Olber. It has come as a shock to all of us. He will be sorely missed. Would you care to say a few words before we begin? I can understand if not ...”

Mara had sat in on a couple of these meetings in the past, and had a fair idea of what to expect. Her father generally said a few pleasantries before the real discussion began.

“Thank you, Lord Trallko.” Mara nodded and stood to address the assembled dignitaries. “And thank you all for your kind consideration. Once High Lord Olber’s remains, and that of his colleagues are returned, we will arrange for a formal burial service.” Her voice broke slightly and she paused for a sip of water before continuing.

Those seated around the table waited graciously for her to resume.

She cleared her throat. “As you would have known from our discussions earlier today, I too was caught unaware of this council until the first carriage showed up. I can only hope that after your days of travel the suites are acceptable. Regardless of the reasons, or the sad tidings, I am so glad you have all made the journey. And I’m looking forward to getting to know you all. Thank you again.” She nodded and resumed her seat.

Nods all around and a soft tapping of glasses to indicate their appreciation.

Harrod stood. “Now, to business. Lord Blarik, please address the council.”

“A point of order.” Froshingha spoke before Blarik moved.

The Chair laid down his gavel and sat. “The council recognises Master Druon Froshingha, Advisor to House Olber. We would be pleased to hear it.”

“The *full* council has not yet convened.”

The seated nobles looked around in confusion.

“What do you mean?” Lady Laskar questioned. “We are all the nobles on the council.”

“With our recent tragic loss, and the weariness of your travels, it is understandable no one has mentioned there is still one position yet to be taken.”

Lord Phillit leant across to Lady Hommin. “Poor man has gone mad in his grief,” he muttered.

Harrod tapped the gavel for silence. “Froshingha, I have no doubt you’re extremely good at what you do, but I’m afraid High Lord Olber is dead, so his seat will remain vacant until another noble takes it.”

“There is one other ...” He looked pointedly at Mara.

She spat her wine. *Me?*

“Lady Olber,” Froshingha continued, “you are the next-in-line as head of Olber House, therefore you’re also next-in-line to take your father’s seat. Bylaw seventy-three, paragraph six: ‘In the event of death, the oldest legitimate offspring is permitted to carry out the duties of their predecessor if agreed to by the Council.’ Lady Olber, the last seat on the council is yours if the remainder of the council agrees.”

Mara’s face paled as she glanced at the nodding heads.

Refin knocked his chair over as he jumped up in protest. “This is preposterous! I’ve never heard such shite! You can’t seriously be thinking this child can take the place of an adult?”

“While there could be an argument put forward if the next-in-line was a juvenile, in this case Mara is the requisite age,” the advisor replied.

“I’ll take the seat, then,” Refin offered. “Pertram was my brother-in-law. I—”

“Refin, you’re not directly related to Pertram, and if I am correct, you aren’t, in fact, noble born,” Froshingha said.

“What? I am a Lord—”

Lord Trallko intervened. “Refin, how can I say this...I believe the term is *honorary*. High Lord Olber granted it to you after he married your sister, Larina.” Harrod looked to the advisor. “Do the bylaws mention anything about *honorary* nobles on the council?”

“It does not, my lord,” Froshingha answered.

“Ah then. There you have it, Refin. Mara is entitled to it and you are not.” He turned to Mara. “As the oldest legitimate offspring of Pertram and Larina Olber, do you Mara Olber, consent to continue the duties of your father on this council?”

Mara went from pale face in shock to the red face of someone now under the scrutiny of the most powerful houses in all of Jaranabi. “I—I do so consent to take up the duties of Lord Olber.”

“Preposterous!” Refin repeated, but his complaining was drowned out by the clapping and foot-stamping of the others gathered around the table.

“Due to the unusual circumstances of a new member joining us, we shall take a short break and reconvene in thirty-minutes.” Lord Trallko banged the gavel.

Refin pushed his chair back and stormed out of the room. Some of the guests began softly chattering among themselves at Refin’s sudden departure and stealing glances at Mara. Several rose and approached Mara to officially congratulate her.

#

Once the council reconvened, Blarik placed his wine glass down, stood and approached the table to the designated position for supplicants. His manner now was completely opposite to the bluster and cursing a short time ago.

Mara was suspicious of the sudden change in his demeanour. *He’s up to something.*

“Apologies and all that for the short notice. Under normal circumstances, there would have been more time, but I deemed the requirement for the impromptu summons appropriate with the imminent breach of our northern borders. It could lead to all-out war.”

“*You* deemed? Is this that fracas with Klarget? This happens so regularly—” Lord Trallko said.

“This one is different—or looks to be.”

“So, you’re saying it isn’t? What happened to the prospect of war your message purported?”

“The recent information from my network of agents indicates a larger build-up of troops than previous years.”

Lord Trallko sighed. “And besides calling us here, what other actions have you taken?”

“Where possible, I have also increased what troops I could—”

“Did High Lord Olber grant you that authority, or did you do it on your own?” Lord Phillit asked.

Without hesitation Lord Blarik replied, “High Lord Olber did suggest I could if I deemed it necessary.”

“With no oversight? He allowed you to command our troops?” Harrod frowned.

“He did. Yes.”

“He did no such thing!” Mara spoke up then turned to the Chair. “I was seeing to my horse Sleena in the stables the night before father went hunting. I overheard father and uncle Refin talking. When my uncle suggested to increase the troops in the north, my father absolutely refused. He wanted more precise information, stating that *our* increased troops could be seen as a threat to Klarget. Lord Blarik is lying.” She turned defiantly to her uncle.

“Careful, Mara, of what you accuse me of,” Refin replied in his nasal voice.

“Sorry uncle. It isn’t as if I’ve accused you of attempted rape or anything. We know how that goes from all the other accusations.” She made a point of touching her bruised cheek as she spoke. “Isn’t that right, Lady Hommin?”

“Nothing was ever proven!” Refin’s face reddened with rage.

Esbeth Hommin, a striking lady in blue at the far end blanched at her name. Her eyes darted from Refin, then to Mara and back to Refin. “My dear...I am at a loss to what you say,” Esbeth muttered meekly.

“I understand all too well. It’s probably best to forget about it. I’m sure Gracin and her daughter agrees with you.” Mara looked pointedly at Lady Kindair two seats away.

“This is preposterous.” Her uncle slammed his fist down on the table making everyone jump. “If you have something to accuse me of, say it plainly.”

“My father advises me of every nuance of the nation. If there was imminent war with anyone, it wasn’t disclosed. If you knew of this when you arrived here yesterday—before you indulged in our wine cellar—you have failed in your duties as spymaster to inform your superior of pertinent security information.”

“You? My *superior*? Preposterous.”

“I am the next in line—”

“You are just a girl,” he sneered.

“And you are a fat, lecherous drunk.”

“Perhaps—” Lord Phillit started.

“Perhaps what?” Mara turned. “Lord Phillit, are you coming to his defence? How did you feel when this man had his way with your wife last spring?” Mara looked around at them all. “Is there any woman at this table he hasn’t assaulted, or attempted to assault?”

Half the women looked into their laps. Half the men looked shocked and outraged.

“Anyone wonder why my face is swollen and bruised? Or more pointedly, why there are gouges down Refin’s face, or why he has a broken nose?”

“That’s enough!” Refin jumped up, enraged.

“Or what? Going to grope my breasts again? See what I can break the next time. Careful, there are more witnesses. Or, let me guess, you’ll threaten them? Dare I wonder what information a spymaster would have on other Lords and Ladies for them to all *forsake their sworn fealty* to this house?”

“Guards!” Refin shouted.

“You forget my men ousted your guards last night after you broke into my chambers. This is *my* house, what I say goes.” She knew this was sounding childish, but was angry her uncle was casting her father in such a bad light, just as Froshingha suggested might happen. “Interesting that you knew it was rockions before anyone else did? What say you to that?”

“My agents—”

“Cannot predict the future.”

Refin took a deep breath to control his anger. “Lady Olber is obviously distraught. It’s a shame High Lord Olber isn’t here to preside over this council. With his passing, besides discussing what to do regarding the hostilities of Klarget, we now have to vote for a new leader. I will put myself forward to carry out this duty.”

“I’m the next in line,” Mara stated. “There should be no dispute whatsoever.”

“And you have *so much* experience in war?”

“Do you? Is that not why we have military advisors? I’ll be following the guidance of our experts. Would you not follow the very same advice?”

The crack of a gavel hitting the sound block resonated loudly. Lord Trallko stood up in exasperation. “Can we kindly dispense with this bickering? I’m sure I speak for all of my fellow councillors when I say that after the summons and several days on the road, none of us are in the mood to listen to your family squabbles.

“Lady Olber, the passing of your father is truly a devastating blow to all of Jaranabi. I am certain the news of his death will sadden every citizen throughout the land. You also raise some interesting points, as well as some serious accusations.”

“All unfounded—” the spymaster spluttered.

“Refin, I was talking about the rockions.” Lord Trallko shook his head with a wry grin. “However, you seem to forget your place, and to whom you are addressing. We *know* all too well the many *many* accusations of your impropriety.”

“Harrod, you know very well I was acquitted of all charges!” Refin fumed.

“*We* are the Council, Refin. You aren’t, but I’m sure as spymaster you’d be aware we are privy to much of the information the rest of our citizens are not. Your *acquittal* has nothing to do with your supposed innocence—and has more to do with the lack of spines of our judiciary. But, enough of that. I am simply saying you are wasting your breath trying to convince any of us you haven’t assaulted dozens of women across the land. We know the truth.” He looked around at the nodding heads of the women present. “Lady Olber, you have our deepest sympathies for the trauma you have recently experienced.”

“I too would like to know how Refin knew the manner of Pertram’s passing before anyone else,” Esbeth spoke up.

“I want to hear more about the broken nose. Looks painful.” Gracin winked as she caught Mara’s eye.

“What we need to do now as a priority is to determine our actions if there *is* a threat to our north,” the Chair stated. “And, sad as it is to say, we must consider and vote on a new head-of state to guide us through this dilemma.”

Refin stood, but before he could say anything Lord Trallko continued. “Yes, yes Refin. You want the job, and yes, Mara is a strong contender too. She’s not lying when she says whoever leads will be following the advice of our military leaders. Despite her young age, this is a sign of wisdom.”

“Bah,” Refin spat. “Someone else’s wisdom, no doubt.”

“Of course, Refin knows *so* much already, he’d never lower himself to follow the advice of those more experienced.” Lord Phillit chuckled.

“I’m sure I heard something about a vote being a priority in that drivel. Can we get on with it?” Refin pressured.

“It will be a relief. Unless there’s disagreement, I believe we can dispense with any further discussion on the matter and get down to voting. All those in favour of Refin—a commoner of ill repute—taking the seat of High Lord, raise your hand.”

Many eyes looked around the table, eagerly counting the numbers.

“All those in favour of Lady Mara taking the seat of High Lady in place of her recently deceased father, raise your hand.”

Again, the earnest counting. Heads bent together to converse.

“It seems we have a new ruler; eight to four in favour of the incumbent. Congratulations Lady Olber.”

Master Froshingha approached the table, applauding and waited to be recognised.

“Froshingha, your counsel, if you would,” Harrod said.

“In the matter of a new ruler, there should be an official swearing in ceremony.”

Lord Trallko stood. “Excellent. We shall resume this council tomorrow morning with our scribes. We will then formally accept and acknowledge Lady Mara Olber as the new legitimate ruler of Jaranabi.” He ended the session with the strike of his gavel.

Mara buckled over. The pangs of foreboding—troubling her all day—worsened suddenly.

“You cretins.” Blarik jumped up and pushed Froshingha to the floor. “None of you have any idea what’s going on. Foolishly, I tried it your way. Now it’s my turn.” With an evil grin Lord Refin Blarik retrieved from his pocket an usual looking device resembling a whistle. He placed it to his lips and blew.

###

CHAPTER 3

Nothing was heard from the whistle, but moments later, the balcony doors burst open and three robed men entered.

“Blarik! What is this outrage?” Harrod spluttered in disbelief.

Many of the councillors rose to their feet in shock and outrage of the intrusion. Mara remained seated, sullen and hunched over fighting back the nausea that was rising like a black tide.

“This farce is coming to an end. I’d like you to meet my elementalers.” He looked around with a smug look on his face. “With an eight-to-four vote, it seems many of you *nobles* have not learnt your lessons.” He turned to Master Froshingha. “You, sir, have a brain in your head and if you had an array of agents like I do, could be my equal. We can’t have that.” He turned to his elementalers. “End him, now.”

As the lead magyker made a hand gesture the advisor was lifted off the floor and hurled into the wall. There was a snapping sound as his head twisted sharply.

Gasps, cries and moans of disbelief echoed around the large room.

The floor and walls began shaking with another ground tremor. The ballroom erupted with yells and screams as the council panicked. Mara stumbled around the table to the body of her advisor, but clearly his neck was broken.

“Will you be still!” Blarik thundered at the cowering nobles. “This comes down to you dismal lot. How easy it seems for you all to forget who really pulls the strings around here. I don’t need to be noble born to be in charge; I just need to do what you are unprepared to do.” He surveyed the cowering group in front of him. “You want to make rules, yet you can’t stomach seeing a corpse or two. Is this what we’ve become? How pathetic.

“There *will* be war. Someone needs to put a stop to Klarget hounding our borders. Pertram wouldn’t listen, so now he’s out of the way, things will change. To aid in the war effort, your estate taxes will increase by fifteen percent and I will expect a third of your guards to be reassigned to help fight for our nation. You have two weeks to comply, otherwise my elementalers will be paying a visit.”

The head mage cleared his throat.

“Ah, yes. This localised ground shake and cloudless thunder confirms our suspicions. There’s another elementaler around here. Who is it? He can be of great benefit to all of Jaranabi.”

The white-faced councillors stared at him; confusion etched on their faces.

“Tell me now! He can’t hide forever, and if my men have to search every tent and carriage to find him, we will...”

“N-none of us has a mage,” Lord Trallko stammered. “You know it is forbid—”

“Pahg to your pathetic rules. I will ask one more time, where is this other mage?” As he said this, two House Olber guards burst through the double-doors to the hall to investigate the noise and screams.

No sooner had they entered when several of Blarik’s men raced in behind them. The House Olber guards turned. With weapons drawn, they didn’t hesitate to defend the council members, but being outnumbered, the sword fight was quick and bloody.

Some of the blood spray reached Mara, smattering across her hair, shoulders and back. She recognised the face of one of her guards as he dropped to the floor and died in front of her. His sword clattered to the floor a couple of feet away.

Striding away from the melee, Blarik continued addressing the nobles. “This will not go well for any of you. When I find out who is hiding this rogue elementaler, I will confiscate your holdings and put you out on the street! And, I can find some use for your children too if they are suitable for my needs.” He glared at them for another moment before addressing the mages. “Grab her.” Blarik pointed to Mara kneeling by the head advisor’s body and reaching for the sword. “Bind her tightly. She’s coming with us. I believe I have an even better use for her.” Blarik stormed out, not waiting for their response.

The mage behind the leader stepped forward promptly. With a chant and a hand-twisting gesture, Mara found herself constricted of movement; bound but without rope. The sword ripped from her hand. He loomed over her checking she was unable to move. He had a manic gleam in his eye, as though looking through her.

Unseen forces lifted her off the floor. The nobles gasped as she was then directed towards the balcony.

“Get yer filthy heads down,” the mage barked.

A few of the nobles wept, some turned their heads. Ladies Gracin and Hommin continued to stare defiantly, and were kicked in the stomach by the head mage’s underlings for their dissent.

Out in the cooler air, Mara floated over the railings to the courtyard and from there into the back of a wagon. Evidently, Balrik's men had quietly taken control of the grounds over dinner and the council meeting. The few guards of House Olber who remained behind were against a wall, on their knees with Blarik's men standing over them.

Trinol was nowhere to be seen, and Mara was relieved he had taken her advice and left with his other men. She was taken to a wagon.

"Tie this one up, secure, mind. She feels...slippery." The mage cast his crazy eyes over her as she was lifted into the back. "Make sure it's tight. There's something untrusting about her. I'll come back and check and if I'm not satisfied, I will chew your fingers off one joint at a time."

"Y-yes yes, my lord." The guard cowered, staring at his feet.

"Pahg. I'm not a lord." The mage smacked the guard in the face. "Do I look noble to you?"

"No, my..." He shook his head vehemently. With shaking hands, the young guard proceeded to wrap a length of rope around her and her arms, then her ankles. The harsh rope abraded her skin, making her grimace.

When she saw the sly grin on the mage's face at her pain she forced herself to push through it, even managing a smile. "All you oh-so-powerful mages scared of a girl. How brave and manly you must think you are."

"Pahg." He spat. "If only you knew the power I wield."

"I'm not convinced." Mara smirked. "All I'm hearing is a mad-man gloating. You're even scared of a fat old man."

A dark look replaced the smile. His hand rose and it looked like he was about to chant, but then one of his colleagues called for him.

"Perhaps another time." He whirled around and stomped away.

"Maybe after you find your balls," she muttered.

Finished with the task, the guard was about to leave her.

"At least he didn't bite off your fingers." Mara tried to sound meek and humble to take any advantage she could get. "Could you at least have the courtesy to sit a young girl up?"

He was not much older than her, but after a slight hesitation, grabbed her shoulders and turned her so she was facing the rear.

"Thank you."

He nodded shyly then jumped off the wagon. “You’re very brave,” he mumbled and left before she replied.

“Not brave enough, it would seem,” she muttered to herself. “Just angry and stupid”

To the side of the courtyard, she saw the mages climb into another wagon with heavy metal bars, similar to the ones she’d seen prisoners in. She had heard these elementalers were insane, and judging from what she had seen, they were heading that way. The stronger they were, the crazier they became. They say it had something to do with controlling the elements through mere flesh and blood; it just wasn’t supposed to happen.

Apparently, there were women elementalers—witches—but they were rare and could only work through the water element, whereas men used earth, fire and air. The story went on that men were far stronger elementalers despite the drawback of insanity simply because of the sheer power they controlled and the massive damage they could inflict. A powerful elementaler could turn the outcome of war...if he didn’t lose his mind first.

And Blarik had at least three.

Some surmised perhaps this was why some men were so ill-tempered and angry, that they all had some unnatural connection to these elements and therefore more prone to acts of violence and madness.

Even though young, Mara didn’t really believe that nonsense. All people could be violent given the right prompting or stimulus. Had no one seen a female cat or dog defend their young? She’d even seen a sheep front a wolf—admittedly futile—in defence of her lamb.

Did she, a mere slip of a girl, not rake her nails down her uncle’s face or break his nose? These thoughts drifted through her hazed mind. She noticed the thunder and ground shaking had stopped and wondered if this meant the rogue mage had been caught.

Just before the wagons pulled out, her uncle came past with a rotund woman and another burly guard.

“Dose her,” he ordered. “Make it strong. She deserves it.”

“But she’s already bound—”

“Do it!” he bellowed and stormed off to deal with his mages who seemed to be causing a rukus inside their cage.

The guard pinched her jaw forcing it open and the woman poured some vile concoction down her throat. Mara spat it out and got a stinging slap for her efforts. Several more beatings were required before a sufficient amount of whatever it was took effect.

As the world around her grew foggy, she heard more than saw Duyma and Sleena, along with the other horses, being led out of the stables and tethered to other wagons.

At least they won't be left and forgotten.

There was a jolt, then her wagon moved off over the cobblestones. By the time it went through the main gate, her head dropped.

#

Mara awoke to soft music and the sound of trickling water overlaying indistinct chatter. When she opened her eyes, everything was hazy and her head had a dull ache. Then the nausea hit her and she barely had time to roll over and vomit on the marble tiles. As if from a long way away came the sound of approaching footsteps.

She was on a bed. It was very comfortable, as good a quality as those back home. Once her eyes focused, she saw the room she was in was a reasonable size.

So, whose bedroom is this? Where am I?

The owner of the scurrying sandalled footsteps came into view. A woman about twice her age knelt with several cloths and a bowl of water to wipe up the bile on the floor.

“Oh. Sorry. I’ll do that,” Mara croaked reaching forward.

“Not at all, my Lady. If the Lord heard or saw you gettin’ sullied over menial duties, he’ll have my tongue.”

“Where am I? Who is this lord?”

“Lord Blarik, my lady. This is his estate and you’re in his harem.”

“Harem?” She went cold despite the warmth. “Not likely. I am not going to be his concubine!”

“Oh, my lady, no.” The woman tittered. “It is nothin’ like that, I can assure you.”

“Then why have me here at all?” Mara sat up to take in the place fully. “This is some mistake.”

“Be gone, Zelni. We will take it from here.”

Mara looked up at the owner of the new voice. Three young women—the source of the chatter—now filled her doorway.

“Yes, of course, my Lady.” Zelni bobbed her head, grabbed her bowl and cloths and backed away quickly. The girls moved in and to the side to allow Zelni to depart, her footsteps—punctuated when she went from tiles to rugs and back—receded.

The other room must be large.

“I see you’re alive. It looked pretty unclear whether you’d make it when you arrived earlier this morning. We were wondering when we’d have to call in the grave diggers. I’m Shayr, and this is Leesa. And that’s Florin,” she added as an afterthought.

“Mara,” she introduced herself, looking at them. She had rarely seen such elegance and beauty before. Certainly nothing she’d have considered from Blarik’s residence, then again, she hardly gave her uncle or his residence a second thought.

While the clothing they each wore was similar in make, each was slightly different in colour and patterns. All were lacey see-through and looked to be top quality, and clung to accentuate every curve. *Only a man would come up with this.*

These women were about her height, but Shayr was a tad taller with brown hair and eyes, with a light tan to her perfect skin. Now that her mind was more coherent, she did notice a difference in Shayr’s nightgown to that of the others. As if see-through wasn’t enough, Shayr had a much lower cut, exposing much more of her ample cleavage.

She definitely loves to flaunt it. Mara looked down at her own attire in surprise. It was similar to that of the other girls, and just as see-through. She had to admit, it felt like being enveloped by a cool spring evening.

“You looked like death warmed up on your arrival,” Shayr continued. “We had to wash you. Your clothes were covered in blood, but not yours it seems.” She sounded disappointed.

“And a healer came in to make certain you were not injured in anyway.” Florin was looking at the bruising on Mara’s cheek.

“Oh, but the healer only saw to you after he saw to Lord Blarik. He was injured in some melee at the council.” Leesa looked surprised at Mara’s deep laugh.

“Utter crap. I did that when tried to...when he was drunk.” She used her elbows to crawl back into a sitting position. “Refin is not a fighter by any measure if I can break his fat nose.”

“You should not be so forward using his name,” Leesa admonished. “It’s not right.”

“He’s a drunk, a lecherous bully and my uncle. I’ll call him what I like.”

The three girls looked shocked at her outburst.

“You’re his *niece*?” Shayr asked. “That explains it!”

“Explains what?” Mara asked.

“Um...explains why you talk about him that way, because he’s family and you know him.”

Seems I don't really know him at all. Mara shrugged, looking glum. The trauma of last night returning. *Her assault, Froshingha dead...her guards dead...captured.* “Was there anything else heard about last night?”

“I overheard some of the guards talking...saying Lord Blarik had to deal harshly with the council and that House Olber was no...more.” Florin was slow to realise who she was talking too.

“What!” Mara cried out.

“With High Lord Olber dead and no one to take his place, the Council chose Blarik as the new High Lord,” Florin continued.

“They did no such thing!” Mara fumed. “Even our councillors aren’t that stupid.”

The women backed away from her as she sat up abruptly.

Mara’s head spun and she paused until the world became stationary. “I was next-in-line for the high seat. Blarik threatened them if they didn’t accept him. And now he’s imprisoned me here for what? To be another conquest for his depraved debauchery? Unlike some, I will not be so compliant.” Mara attempted to stand up but promptly fell back onto the bed.

Shayr snorted, barely trying to hide it.

Bitch. “I need to get out of here.” She tried to stand again and had to reach for the bedhead before she lost her balance. When the floor stabilised, she walked slowly through her door and into the larger room. The three girls moved back, out of her way.

As Mara thought, it was a large expanse of white tiles scattered with rugs, and furnished with lounges of various shapes and sizes. By the fountain was a glass-topped table laden with fresh fruit.

After a brief pause to take the plush new surroundings in, she made her way towards the billowing curtains, noting how cool the tiled floor was with her bare feet. The opening turned out to be floor-to-ceiling glass doors. The harem was on the ground floor and overlooked a large, ornate and well-maintained garden. She could smell the roses and daphne and inhaled their scent deeply.

“It won’t be that easy unless you can fly.” Shayr shook her head. The girls had followed and now stood behind her. “We might be on the ground floor, but the garden walls are high and there is no exit.”

Mara turned and, having regained her confidence in walking, trudged across the large room to the double entrance doors. They were locked. “Well...shit!”

“Why would you even want to leave here?” Florin grabbed for a handful of grapes as she followed and popped one into her mouth.

“Are you deaf?” Mara turned to glare at her. “Because, I’m a prisoner and my uncle has kidnapped me. I have my own house to take care of.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” The young girl stepped back, looking contrite at the outburst. “We are well-cared for here. As far as being a prisoner goes, it could be far worse.”

“Far worse than being a whore for a fat drunk and his cutthroats?”

Shayr and Leesa went red with anger.

“How dare you. We are not *whores!*” Shayr snapped. Her nostrils flared when angry.

“Oh, so you can say no to who fucks you and when?” Mara retorted.

“I’ve had enough of this deranged brat.” Shayr turned and stormed off. “We’ll need an animal trainer to beat some sense into her before she’s any use to anyone. I for one will not be training her.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘no’.” Mara hated this place already, and had abused the first people to show her the slightest bit of friendship. She swore under her breath and plonked herself on the nearest lounge, grateful the cool breeze still reached her. Her head still ached so she brought her hands up and massaged her temples. “What training is she on about?” she asked eventually, seeing Florin was still lingering.

“I shouldn’t spread gossip.” Florin paused ever so briefly. “Grape?” She held out some grapes for Mara, who accepted and nibbled them. Smiling, Florin continued, “But if truth be told, there are great plans for you. I hear you are now betrothed to a very important man and must be taught the wiles of men so as to please him.”

“Betrothed? I’m not marrying anyone! And what great man? There are none left in all Jaranabi.” *Surely, they don’t expect her to marry her uncle!*

“A foreigner and a great man, from what I hear.”

“If he’s so great, let him have Shayr—”

“He was going too, but since you arrived, Blarik changed it.”

“Overnight? Why so quickly?”

“I cannot say, Mara.” Florin looked lost now all the gossip had been told. “This foreigner is arriving in a few weeks. Perhaps I will overhear more later.”

Pillow talk, more like it. “Thank you, Florin, is it? I—I did not mean what I said before, or to snap. I was angry and confused.” *Still am.* Mara took the time to look at her properly. The young girl was gorgeous. Maybe a year younger, about seventeen, and shorter with shining green eyes, fair hair and a sprinkling of freckles across her slightly upturned nose.

“You mean when you called us whores?” Florin put a shy smile on her face at the scrutiny. “I know I’m not the smartest girl here, but you are right. It *is* sort of what we are. Some of the others have airs—hoping for a life out of their reach. For me, this is what it is. What I do know is, I’m far better off in here than out there. If my body is the only skill I have then I will use it for as long as I can. But it’s also a school and they teach us new things—other than whoring—every day.”

Mara looked at the girl for a moment, thinking she had mistaken her youthful appearance. “Who said you weren’t smart? If we have a place in the world, knowing it is half the battle. I’ve only been here a very short time, but your wisdom might be greater than many of those already here. Far more than some of the other nobles I’ve met.”

Florin blushed at the compliment. “I should go back to the lessons. This one is history...but we can chat more later if you like?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Florin smiled and darted off.

It’s not like I’m going anywhere soon. Mara rested more, ate sparingly from the sumptuous array of food on the table, but her mind was in turmoil. Kidnapped by her uncle and now apparently destined to marry a complete stranger.

Perhaps uncle is securing treaties with bordering countries to keep the peace? She wondered. If he has a war to the north, he doesn’t need threats on other flanks.

Overwhelmed by the sudden turn of events, Mara sobbed for her loss; the loss of her life and her house, losing her friends and her family. She was not close to her father, but since her mother passed in a difficult labour—and losing the baby, a son—he was a changed man. Not neglectful or anything, just...different. They grew apart: she kept to herself, read, rode Seleena more often. Pertram—High Lord Olber—buried himself in running the country or hunting.

And I haven't even mourned for him yet.

###

CHAPTER 4

Mara woke early. She grabbed some fruit and went to the garden. It was a clear sky and promised to be a warm day. Walking to the far end of the garden she turned to study the mansion's roofline, wondering if she could work out from what she knew how to get to the other parts of the large house.

Their dormitory, dining hall and baths were all situated in the west wing, which was all one level, but the other sections were multi-level. Maybe further investigation of the wall cavities was needed. Then there was the meal hall. She rarely saw the cooks, but there must be access to the kitchens. *And from there...who knew?*

This garden provided free access to outside. The only other way out was when some of the other senior girls were escorted to meet a client, or carry out duties for the seneschal. Not likely something they would be allowing her to do any time soon.

Her contemplation was interrupted when she heard heavy breathing from behind a hedge of roses. She ventured nearer to investigate. *This is a spy-school, after all.*

Mara was surprised to see Florin lying on the ground, panting.

"What *are* you doing?" she asked, moving around the foliage. Then her thoughts grew darker. "Did someone hurt you? Are you injured?"

Florin squinted in the morning sun, her grimace turning into a smile. "Morning. It's called exercise to keep fit and strong. Haven't you ever seen soldiers and guards doing it?"

Mara breathed in relief. She was beginning to like the young girl, though she did some strange things. "Well, of course, but why you? Here and now?"

"The grass is soft, it's quiet here and later will be too hot. And, I'm doing it so I don't get soft and flabby, like you."

Mara looked down at herself, suddenly self-conscious. "I am not!"

"No, you're great, but what do we do all day? Sit around, study, eat and gossip. Pretty soon, that tummy won't be flat and you'll lose the energy to do anything. And if there's one thing I've heard about whoring, we need lots of energy. And flexibility. Men love energetic and flexible women."

"And you are *so* well-versed in that aspect?" Mara sat down on the soft lawn.

“Be nice,” Florin pouted. “I could same the same for you.”

“Sorry.” Mara offered some grapes. “You know I hate what this place is.”

“A whorehouse.” Florin nodded and continued with her sit-ups.

Mara watched for a while.

“Wouldn’t it be easier without the nightie?”

“You trying...to get...me naked?” she asked during each sit-up.

Mara choked on her grapes, laughing. “Sorry to disappoint. Not at all, it just looks awkward.”

“Yes, but the lawn is very itchy. And the grass blades get into areas grass shouldn’t ever go.” Florin rolled over to stretch and lowered her voice. “You should do it too. If you’re going to escape from here, you’ll need to be fit and strong. Sure, we don’t know how long it will be, but you should start. The sooner the better. I’ll show you. We can push each other to do more.”

Mara swallowed the last grape. “Why not.” And lay down beside her.

Florin showed her the way she was taught to position herself.

“Hands can go on your thighs or chest at first. When it gets easier, stretch them above your head for more of a challenge. Bend your knees...so. Try not to lift your feet when you rise.”

After a few minutes getting tangled in her light gown, Mara got up, frustrated. “I’ll be back in a minute.” When she returned, she had a rug roughly rolled.

After shaking it out flat, there was no risk of the itching of the grass.

Mara stripped, as did Florin. The exercises were much easier without the tangles.

#

As the days progressed, Mara got into a routine, exercising before breakfast, sitting in on a few lessons ranging from geography, history, and the subtle differences of each country. She knew most of the information—these classes were geared for the commoners off the street without a formal education, but there were the occasional snippets she had either simply forgotten or wasn’t included in the lesson.

During the lessons, she counted about twenty women, most she hadn’t met previously ranging in age from hers to the mid-twenties—the age her mother was when she passed. Florin

was the youngest. The students were housed in other dormitories but all came together for meals, served in a large hall.

Reluctant as she was to admit it, her uncle certainly did not scrimp on the food or the amenities for his...*harem*. As she met some of the other women, most had the same story as each other; passed on from low or poor families who couldn't afford the burden of an extra mouth, or were widowed. With no other prospects for anything more than a meagre living, this was a better life for them. There were no other nobles among them.

Why would there be? "I can't believe he has this huge estate." Mara made an attempt to converse with the other girls sitting around the table for lunch.

"You know he has another house?" Florin slipped into the chair beside her, her hair still damp. Sweat beaded off her brow as she reached for the bread rolls.

"He what?" Mara dropped the food from her fork before it reached her mouth.

"He has large tracts of land. There is a much smaller house closer to the main road."

"Didn't any of you *nobles* ever visit him?" Shayr interjected. Like Florin, she had just arrived and pushed in, opposite to where Mara was sitting. "I thought you noble houses stuck together in all things?"

"Ah well, you see, your boss isn't noble born. He married into it and is just a commoner." Mara was at a loss. *Surely, father must have visited.*

Shayr sniggered and shook her head. "The highborn aren't much better it seems," she muttered.

"Maybe he's out so often, reporting to the main Houses, no one needs to come here as they would have only recently met or been updated," Florin suggested.

"If these noble houses were so interested in matters of state, maybe they should get off their arses and do their own snooping," Shayr retorted.

Shayr's snide tone wasn't lost on Mara or the other girls from the way they suddenly studied their bowls, but she chose to ignore it. *No sense in causing more friction.*

"Perhaps he met them at this other house," Mara answered Florin. The girl was the more amiable and likeable of all the girls she met so far. She changed the subject. "Why does he have a harem in the first place?"

Shayr scoffed. "Obviously, so he can play with us *whores*."

Again, Mara refused to take the bait. After the first encounter, there had been nothing but animosity between them, and Shayr seemed to be itching for a fight and spreading dissent among the other girls.

“We do get a lot of foreign visitors,” Florin spoke to fill the growing silence. “And lots of the girls go away for weeks, even months until they graduate, then they get a permanent posting.”

“They do? To where?”

“Everywhere. While it is a harem, it’s also a training school for information gathering.”

“You’re his *spy network*?”

“Some of us. I heard there’s a training school for males nearby. We learn about the details of other countries and important people. When we go out to work, we listen. Knowing a bit about what they talk about helps put pieces together.”

“Like a puzzle game?” Mara considered.

“I guess. We were poor, so I’m not sure what you mean. We didn’t have games.”

Shayr caught her eye. “It’s all nobles are good for, to play games.”

As Mara finished her meal and was about to excuse herself, the double doors opened.

A horn was blown as a subdued fanfare for the seneschal’s imminent arrival.

“Quickly, everyone line up,” Shayr ordered. “Leave your meals and move!”

Those girls having experienced this before were already on their feet, but a few others, Mara and Florin included, were caught unawares.

“Do I have to come around their and drag you myself—” Shayr was already on the move towards them.

Mara was on her feet as it was, so was beside Florin when the younger girl pushed her chair back.

“I’m coming. No need to get your nethers in a knot,” Florin replied.

“You little—” Shayr’s arm swung, but Mara intervened, blocking her slap.

“Good leadership doesn’t resort to violence for the most trivial of matters. It’s the refuge of bullies and those with insecurities. It might be prudent to know that for future reference.”

“Your seneschal visit is not a trivial matter.”

Mara shrugged. “It is to me. And he’s not *my* seneschal.”

The sound of several sandals scuffing the floor tiles came to the ears.

“We’ll discuss this later.” Shayr raced away to take her position by the door.

“Whenever you feel you need to vent, I’ll be here,” she called after her.

Florin was flustered. “Th-thank you for that.”

“I abhor bullies. If it’s the one thing that irks me, it’s them. We better go, though.” She followed the last of the girls to the line. Whispering over her shoulder she continued, “Don’t tell anyone this, but while I have my point of view, if I’m a guest here—even if under duress—I should show some respect.”

Just as she positioned herself next to Florin at the end of the line-up, the seneschal entered with his small retinue. All were eunuchs. Each one was chubby, and bald, but the master had a dark tan and his juniors were both fair-skinned. When they got closer, she noticed the seneschal had many tattoos covering nearly his whole body—hard to see against his dark skin.

Different coloured tunics denoted rank. The master’s was a dark blue and his two underlings wore blue pastel robes.

“Ladies, ladies. So very lovely to see you all again. Many thanks for your service, and well done so far on the progress of your training. Applause all round.” He started clapping at them, his many wrist bands jangled.

Everyone took the hint and applauded too. When he stopped, they stopped.

“I’m here this day for a couple of reasons. First and foremost is to congratulate our star pupil.” He beamed at Shayr. “Please, Shayr Reguk from Slamand, step forward.”

Shayr beamed at the adulation. She stepped forward proudly to the applause of the other students—some were more enthusiastic than others.

Mara clapped and said to Florin through the side of her mouth, “Make a mental note of her followers. I have little doubt that, as her friends and confidants, anything you say or do will get to Shayr’s ears as quickly as a rash goes through a brothel.”

Florin struggled not to laugh, but her smiling face could readily be assumed as support for Shayr. “I’ve already worked that out.” she whispered back.

“Now, now ladies, there have been some recent and drastic developments, because of this Shayr will soon head north, and with guidance, I am confident she will learn all she needs to become a House Mistress.”

A small number of cheers arose at this news. Shayr nodded in acknowledgement, but she sent dagger glances towards Mara.

“So, moving on to our new girl. For those that haven’t met her, allow me the privilege of introducing Mara Olber from House Olber who has joined us under tragic circumstances for a very special assignment. She is to remain pure and therefore excused from several lessons—physical lessons specifically—though is to attend as many theory lessons as possible in the short time she remains with us,” the seneschal extolled. “Mara dear, I am Ont’eba Quillin and the administrator of this institution and I’m sorry to hear of your recent loss. I met High Lord Olber only once, but it is an occasion I will never forget. He treated me with dignity. Please do not hesitate to reach out to me. I am busy and away a lot, but will endeavour to look after you the best I can.”

He has absolutely no idea... “It is my pleasure to meet you, Master Quillin.” Mara bowed as to an equal. She felt the brimming of tears and blinked rapidly and continued. “I can’t thank you enough for the respect you have shown. Rest assured; as the new head of House Olber, you will be remembered for your consideration.” *Pure? That’s what they call ‘keep her virgin’?*

Some of the girls chatted softly when she said this, but senior girls shushed them.

Ont’eba beamed at her words, then addressed the ladies, “High Lord Blarik will be visiting us in the near future to enlighten us further closer to the date her special assignment. I understand it’s an extremely honourable role as befitting the head of an esteemed noble house and I for one am so proud this institution has a role to play in its future.

“Now, to other matters.” Pleasantries aside, the seneschal became more officious. “A list of the postings for the next graduates will be placed on the noticeboard shortly. This is, of course, assuming those soon to graduate continue with their impressive results.”

He moved along the line and spoke briefly to each girl before departing. The doors locked as the last of his retinue closed the doors.

Shayr extricated herself from some of the women and came over to Florin. Mara watched her every move, ready to intervene.

“Since you’re the junior girl here, I’m passing on the task of guiding our *very important* noble in all matters of the school. Her actions and behaviour are now your responsibility. Do you think you are ready?”

“I will do my best.”

“You better.” Shayr flounced off with a number of girls in her wake.

Florin looked cheekily at Mara. “If you’re not doing anything, Lady Olber of House Olber, I better start showing you around. This place is full of secrets.”

“Oh, I better check my agenda and see what my staff has arranged for my day.”

Florin stuck out her tongue. “Let’s go then, before your staff finds you.” The young girl grabbed her hand and pulled her towards another door.

“Ont’eba Quillin, what’s his story?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, being a eunuch for starters, black, and all those tattoos.”

“I hear he’s from the Farquo Islands. The eunuch part is obvious, can you imagine having a hotblooded male in charge of a harem. The women in here are all so gorgeous, as are you, of course. It would be very tempting for a man to take advantage, or even the girls to take some advantage. It is what we’re training for...”

“Why not a woman?”

“Jealousy perhaps? Some women can be bitchy and also just as guilty of taking advantage a situation. Can you imagine what this place would be like if someone like Shayr was in charge?”

“Excellent points. And I guess depending on what age he was before the castration, a eunuch might have the tastes of a male, but the inability to act on it. So, he could be a fair adjudicator in all respects.”

“I don’t know that word, but I think I know what you mean.”

The pair stopped by a large indoor palm which obscured a corner of a wall where a large tapestry of a mountain range ended. The young girl reached in and pressed a tile in the corner. There was a soft clunk as an unseen mechanism released, and part of the wood panelling sprang open slightly. Pushing it in revealed a dark, narrow cavity.

“I hope you’re not scared of the dark or tight spaces.” She stepped in and motioned Mara to follow and close the door. Once closed, they were in total darkness. It was warm, and musty.

Mara felt something brush against her briefly before a smooth, soft hand held hers.

“This can be one of the more interesting lessons,” Florin whispered.

Mara was gently pulled along the narrow fissure. After several minutes her eyes adjusted to the dark interior. It was then she noticed the spots of light in the walls. The place was riddled with peepholes. There was barely a room that didn’t have some access, whether it was only a peephole or a secret door. Every now and then Florin shushed her to silence, and pointed to a spot of light in the wall.

“Remember, why you’re here?” Florin leant forward, close enough for Mara to feel her breath on her neck and whispered softly.

Her breath was refreshing, with a subtle minty aroma. The closeness of her companion wasn’t lost on her either, but considering the cramped conditions, wasn’t surprising.

“If you’re to learn the wiles of men to please them,” Florin continued. “This is the only way I can imagine for you to learn about these things without actually doing them. *Doing* it is one thing, but seeing how others do it beforehand is surely the best idea.”

“A voyeur’s wet dream.” Mara put her eye to the hole. In the next room was a dark man and a woman she’d not met in the throes of their passion. “And what have you done?” she asked the girl.

“Oh, these are things one shouldn’t ask a lady,” Florin softly breathed.

“That’s why I’m asking *you*.” Mara squeezed her hand, indicating it was in jest.

Florin’s voice sounded husky in the dark. “Maybe I’ll show you.”

After the hour-long excursion through the walls, the pair emerged covered in dust and webs. With little airflow, the crawlspaces were warm and musty. Their nightgowns were damp with sweat, making them uncomfortable to wear.

“Time for a mineral spa.” Florin led her to a larger washroom adjacent to the main hall.

This bathing area was warm and humid, despite the large openings in the roof letting the fresh air in and hot air out. Along the far wall was a terraced indoor garden and fernery. The opposite wall had another exit. There were a couple of other bathers using the facility, some relaxing and others swimming.

“Where does that lead?” Mara indicated the other door.

“It’s one of the accesses to other dormitories. This bathhouse connects to them all.”

“Does it now...”

“There’s no escaping that way either. All the dormitories are basically the same.”

“I wasn’t really expecting it to be that easy.” Mara shrugged, turning back to examine the large room. While there were floor tiles around the perimeter, the bath itself was really a natural rockpool.

“There’s a hot spring underneath us,” Florin explained.

“You should have shown me this earlier, all I’ve had is a basin in the room.”

“Blame Shayr, but now I’m your guide, what I say goes.”

“Yes ma’am.” Mara curtsied. “Maybe this is why Blarik has this house here. Hot water at your beck and call would be very handy.”

“Perhaps. I’m not arguing.” Florin peeled off her grimy nightgown and tossed the dirty garment into the corner. Then stepped lightly across the tiles and, with a satisfied growl, lowered herself into the steaming pool.

Mara hesitated a moment.

“Not going shy on me, are you?” Florin grinned cheekily from the water.

Mara shook her head. “No. That’s not it...” With a sigh, she shrugged out of silk nightgown and it joined Florin’s and stepped cautiously into the pool, feeling the uneven floor with her feet. She stayed close to the side.

“I can see why they chose you over Shayr.” Florin admired Mara as she stepped into the water and joined her. “Shayr’s attractive—at least on the outside—all the curves in the right places—but you’re stunning.”

“As are you.” Now she had found level ground, Mara ducked underwater to cover her embarrassment. “But I’ll not be anyone’s wh—concubine,” she continued when she surfaced.

“But your betroth—”

“Florin, you want this, you chose it, and I respect the fact you know where you want to be, but it’s not for me. I need to get out.”

“I—I can—”

“Help? You can’t! I won’t let you. You’ll get into trouble and I don’t want that to happen. Not because of me.”

“If you say so.” With her hair flowing behind, Florin swam breast-stroke slowly along the pool’s edge where she saw a tray of sponges and washcloths.

“I do. And stop thinking about it,” Mara chastised. “I have a few weeks. You continue showing me around the estate, and I will take it from there. With all these secret passages, there *must* be a way out.”

“Deal. I mean, I’d rather your company—everyone else is too serious.” Florin stopped in front of her and offered her a sponge. “But if you do have to leave, I’d prefer you to go where you want. It’s much safer south and I hear women on the run go to The Craggs.”

“The Craggs?”

“You can’t be considering going back to your estate?”

“I’m not.” Mara waded around, relishing the flow of water across her body. She began washing herself with the sponge. “I’ve heard of The Craggs. Full of witches, and where women go to kill themselves. Must be a sad place.”

“They do no such thing! At least, not according to Samanka, our cartographer. He says there’s a small community there, with pirates. Of course, you could ask our seneschal. I hear he was a pirate.”

“Really? A pirate without testicles? Is that a thing?”

“Perhaps the Red Sails caught him.”

“Red Sails?” *Why does that sound familiar?*

“They come from The Craggs too. If they cross any male pirates, they castrate them.”

“Ouch. You serious?” Mara couldn’t keep the incredulity from her voice.

“It’s true,” Florin said, splashing her. “I’ve seen them.”

“The Red Sails or pirate testicles?” Mara asked with a cheeky grin.

Florin laughed out loud. Her laugh echoed around the room causing the other girls to turn and look. “The Red Sails,” she said when she could speak.

“I remember now. It was several years ago. I snuck into my father’s study when he was conducting trade talks. One of the topics was pirates and how they were becoming more of a nuisance. Our fleet is small, lacking resources to cover both the north and southern shores.”

“It’s mostly barren cliffs down south anyway.”

“Geography 101?”

“That, plus I came from a southern coastal village. Fishing boats tend to get damaged a lot along rugged cliffs, so we use nets or dive for various shellfish along the shore. Sometimes, depending on weather, I’ve seen red sails going along the coast. That must be them.”

“Well,” Mara continued, “there was an idea to seek volunteers to police the southern area. It was laughed at, until they received an offer from a new community, supposedly a women’s refuge, desperate for funding—”

“Must be The Craggs.”

“Seems likely. It was decided a small allowance would be paid just to support the refuge, but there would be more if they could do something about the pirates. They could also keep fifty

percent of the haul. But it wasn't expected they'd amount to anything. Women pirate-hunters? Unheard of."

"So, we *do* have pirates without testicles." Florin giggled at her joke.

Mara laughed with her. "Privateers is what we call those with valid authorisation."

"How about Sea Witches. Sea Bitches is better."

"Somehow, I don't think they'd take too kindly to hear either of those terms." Mara threw a wet sponge at her, laughed and pushed back, heading to the other end of the pool.

"It gets hotter that end." Florin warned and began swimming after her. "And deeper."

Mara stopped and started to turn. *What was I thinking?* The water here was up to her neck already.

"Come on," Florin encouraged. "It's not really too hot."

"No. I-I don't know how to swim."

"You can't?" Florin was beside her again.

"I've never needed too."

"Ever?" Florin looked surprised. "What about rivers?"

"If I'm crossing, it's either on a ferry or horseback."

"I learnt to swim before I could run. I was good at diving too."

"Really? I didn't really think a 'bath' would be too deep. If *only* I knew someone with all these worldly skills to teach me. Woe is me. I should just end myself now and be done with this cruel world." *Some days, she thought about it too.*

"I think you're toying with me."

"Do you?"

"I don't mind. It's better than the alternative."

"Which is what, treating you like a decent person?"

"That would be nice. No, I meant being ignored. Until you arrived, I've been ignored by nearly everyone."

"Likewise. I suspect Shayr is using her influence—no one's tried to get to know me, except for you."

"Are you with me because there's no one else? Perhaps you think I'm a burden."

It was only for a second, but she almost pouted. Mara had to give it to her, Florin could come across as a mature young woman. Bubbly, confident and perhaps overly forward in many

respects, but in times like this, when she felt betrayed or used, she could easily revert to the sad, lonely child she once was.

“Not at all.” Mara reached out and placed her hands on her shoulders. “You’re lovely, easy to talk with, intelligent and helpful...and you’ve been assigned by that she-devil to teach me all you know. From the sounds of it, I’m here for only a short time while you’ll be here until you graduate. Shayr could make things difficult for you when I leave.”

“She does that anyway.”

“Not while I’m here, she won’t.”

Florin moved closer and lowered her voice. “You could help me in my lessons, then perhaps I can leave sooner.”

“Sure. But I’m the new girl, remember?”

“Yes, but you’re a noble and much older. That has to account for something.”

“Oh, *much* older, am I?” Mara chuckled and pushed her underwater.

Florin surfaced, laughing. “Okay, okay. Maybe not so old.” She kicked away towards the deeper end. “Now I’m going to teach you to swim.”

###

CHAPTER 5

“These are some very important tools of the trade,” Shayr was speaking to the new girls. Dozens of jars, vials and tubes were laid out on a long trestle covered in an embroidered cloth. “Some are plain and simple; some are more exotic and potent. What you use depends on the client, the situation and potential gain. Remember, your body is also a tool. Sex is the work—some might need to work harder—but the goal is to get all the information we can with the client oblivious to it.”

“This one here is particularly effective.” Shayr picked up a black vial and walked down the line, allowing the trainees to sniff it. “We call it *Beast*, as it really gets a man wild. And talkative.”

“Where does it come from?” The woman next to Mara sniffed it and quickly pulled her nose away, screwing up her nose.

Shayr bypassed Mara. “You won’t be needing it,” she muttered, and moved on down the line.

The pungent musk and nutmeg odour were still potent enough for her to smell it from a distance.

“It comes from female rockions,” Shayr informed them.

“Are rockions even real?” someone further down the line asked.

“They most definitely are. This comes from the glands of the bitches. You’ve seen Col? All gangly legs and unruly hair? He’s our rockion trainer and with the help of our mages, can collect some, but only a couple of times a year.”

“What mages?”

“We have rockions here?”

“Yes, I just said so, didn’t I!” Shayr retorted testily at all the questions.

Not trusting Shayr to give a straight answer Mara turned to Florin. “Where are these mages and rockions?”

“I don’t know. Do you know about them?”

“Three of them came into a council meeting and killed my advisor and guards.” Mara went quiet as the scene unfolded in her mind. She shook her head. “And Blarik has a rockion trainer too?”

“Because Lord Blarik has three rockions—”

“He what?”

“He has three now. I heard one of the males escaped, but he still has one male for mating.”

That’s very interesting.

“Are you two paying attention?” Shayr snapped. “We’ll be discussing poisons next and there will be a test. If you make a mistake, Mara, it could be the end of you, or your little friend.”

You wish. “I think she’s jealous,” Mara whispered to Florin as she assumed a chastised look.

#

Florin came in, covered in dust. “I can understand why Shayr is so vexed.”

Mara looked her over, noting the dust and sweat. “Passage peeping again?”

“A girls got to learn somehow.” She nodded, flushed. “There’s a Dran’ali merchant visiting, staying over with the boys.”

“That’s right, there’s a male school equivalent isn’t there.”

“Yes, and since we are all trainees, part of the study program is to work together. Boy seduces girl, and vice versa. They’re tested, putting their wits against each other.”

“And this news?”

“Apparently there was a Dran’ali horse trader visiting Blarik recently.”

“Visiting the other residence? And?”

“Dran’ali laws forbid certain activities, so Blarik offered the trader use of the male facilities with a senior student.”

“Oh. Right. They do that too, don’t they.”

Florin grinned and rolled her eyes. “You think it’s only the girls that get together?”

“I’ve not had as much exposure as others to this side of life. I didn’t really think on it at all until now. So... this visiting trader, how do *you* know?”

“Jofine was scheduled to work with a male student. He was nervous, or maybe that was the act...anyway, he needed a lot of work, so Jofine used that rockion lotion. He was blabbering in a few minutes. The trader was here in preparation for the betrothal ceremony.”

“I’m betrothed to a horse trader?” Though Mara wanted no part of it, she was still put out how low her importance had become.

“No. Not the trader, silly. The man from the east you’re betrothed to is none other than Urgad Hakower—”

“The ruler of Dran’ali?”

“You know about him?” Florin looked crestfallen that her news wasn’t as much a surprise as she thought.

“Only by eavesdropping when my father has visitors. But please, tell me what your snooping uncovered.”

“That’s it. If he’s an Overlord, does that make you a queen—assuming that’s what the wife of an Overlord is called?”

“Assuming those barbarians know what a queen is,” Mara said.

“I hear he can be quite forceful. Shayr prefers it that way.”

“Yes, but it won’t be Shayr, will it!”

#

Mara was reading through some notes on a lounge by the fountain, when Florin meandered through the room, heading to her rooms but turned upon seeing Mara. She looked tense, like one does after receiving bad news. The young girl leaned in close. “Mara, can I have a quiet chat?”

“Of course, Florin. It’s a lovely day, may as well enjoy it.” Mara walked casually outside to enjoy the fresh air and sunshine with the bubbly girl. They wandered in a relaxed manner around the edge of the long, shallow water garden full of lily pads. Every now and then the flash of orange from a goldfish could be seen. They passed a small group of ladies also out enjoying the sun and air. After a brief exchange of pleasantries, they parted.

“Do you think we’re friends?” Florin asked abruptly when they were at the far end of the pond.

“I thought we were.” Mara searched her face, her eyes tracing over her smooth skin, trying to fathom what was wrong. “I know it’s been less than two weeks; you’ve been nothing but helpful and approachable since I arrived.”

Florin blushed. “I know some people better than others; you I hardly know, but I’ve spent more time over the last few days with you than I have with anyone else. You are easy to talk to. Thank you.”

“No one should have to thank anyone for friendship. There are no set conditions.”

Florin nodded, looking relieved. She spoke softly. “Shayr is up to something.”

“Shayr is always up to something.” Mara shrugged.

“A scorpion has claws and a tail. If she is openly offering you help, watch out for her sting.”

“It isn’t hard to see the animosity there.” Mara slowly nodded.

“Remember I said when you first arrived, she was selected to be this Overlord’s queen until you came along. She wants you gone so she can take that place again.”

“I do remember, and she can have it.”

Florin looked around then kept moving. “She’s all talk and won’t do anything herself, but there are plenty of guards who would readily do her bidding for a few hours of play. Men always underestimate women. Since they’re stringer than us, they think they are in control, but in the heat of sex, they are the weaker ones. Two heads, but only enough blood for one.”

Mara sniggered at this description, which set Florin to giggling.

By the wall, they reached an alcove with daphne and shrubs surrounding a bench. Florin gathered her silk nightgown and sat, inviting Mara to join her. From her coiffed hair she extracted a hairpin. “If you ever need to, when a man is *busy* with you, push this into his ear.” She handed Mara the pin. “Do it quickly, do it hard and push it all the way.”

Mara held the hairpin, not dissimilar to the ones she already had. “I do know what a hairpin is.” She handed it back.

“They need to be distracted.” Florin replaced the pin then reached out and gently stroked Mara’s brow, brushing strands of her black hair away from her blue eyes, slowly running her fingers to the back of her head, drawing her nearer. “It might be during a kiss.” Florin’s whisper was sultry, her scent rivalled that of the daphne. “Or anything really, as long as you can reach the side of his head, then slide it into his ear while his mind is on other things.”

Their lips touched and Mara’s heart thumped in her breast when she felt the warm moisture of the young girl’s tongue gently probing. A moment later she flinched sideways when she felt a wet finger in her ear.

“Just like that.” Florin giggled, her green eyes shining with mirth.

Mara laughed with her, feeling her face reddening. “What are you up too, young lady?”

“Apart from giving you pointers on how to kill a man? I’m practicing flirting. There’s no man about, and I’ll need to be able to do both.”

“I see.” Mara smiled. “Homework? Extra-curricular activities?”

“You don’t mind, do you?” The girl suddenly looked worried.

“The flirting?” Mara laughed lightly. “Florin, if I did, I would have stopped you the first time.”

“First time?”

“Brushing against me in the secret passages, always leaning close to whisper, taking every chance to hold hands or touching when you can. It all adds up.”

“How embarrassing.” Florin’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. “Am I that obvious? I’ll be hopeless as a spy.”

“Not at all. And I’m flattered. I’ve always assumed I’d find some fine man somewhere. I’ve not given this situation much consideration... until now. Besides, you’re helping me study, so how can I not reciprocate?”

“I think I know what you mean.” She blushed again, her eyes searching Mara’s face. “Well, how was it, then?”

“That was...”

“Fun.” Florin reached for her hand.

“Yes, and wet.”

“The kiss?”

Mara playfully slapped her, laughing. “No. Your finger.”

“Oh. Good. I thought I was losing my touch.”

Mara knew her cheeks were glowing. “No...not at all.”

Florin took a breath and moved closer, about to say something, but the dinner bell tolled. “Shall we?” she said instead.

Mara stood releasing her hand. “I think it best, yes. Lesson over.”

One of the eunuch underlings rapped gently on Mara's door. "High Lord Blarik has sent me to escort you to his dining hall," he said when she answered.

Mara went white, and her breath caught. "Do I need to bring anything?" *A knife, or chastity belt...*

"No. Just yourself. Shall we?"

"Just a moment." She turned back into the room. She was no prude; if you were, you wouldn't ever leave the room with the skimpy, body-hugging see-through nightgowns you had to wear. But this was her uncle, and a lecherous pervert. She reached into her closet and pulled on her two other gowns. The triple layers were sufficient to prevent light penetration, but they were still light-weight enough to hug her curves. The only other option was the drapes.

Mara was looking at the get up in a cheval mirror. "Looks horrible," she muttered. "Just what he deserves."

"Shall we?" the eunuch prompted.

With trepidation, Mara nodded and followed.

The girls lounging in the main room watched, whispering to each other as she passed. Florin was nowhere to be seen. *Passage peeping again, no doubt.*

The normally locked double doors were opened. Two guards stood by to prevent any of the girls leaving. Their hungry eyes soaked in as much as they could of all the nubile flesh in the dormitory before the eunuch passed. Their cue to close and lock the doors.

Mara looked around the new area, trying to place particular features with what she had heard, or seen from her garden studies.

A long, wide corridor went in both directions, marble columns every ten paces or so, and large tapestries in between. At the centre of the mansion a set of stairs with stone balustrades either side led to the upper levels. As they climbed the stairs, they approached a balcony.

There were double doors directly in front the top of the stairs, but they turned to another door two columns to the right. In her estimation, this should overlook the garden. She would have seen these windows from ground level. *Which meant anyone in here could watch over them.*

It suddenly dawned on her she had a eunuch underling all to himself, with no one around, and only a very short time to chat. "Have you been here long, Gamir?" she asked.

"Several years, when I answered the call from Master Quillin."

"Are you from the south? Master Quillin is from the Farquo islands, but surely not you?"

“South-west, actually.”

“Were you a pirate, like Ont’eba was?”

“I was, but as for Master Quillin, I am not at liberty to discuss his background or that of any other person here.”

She shrugged. “A girl has to ask.”

“Indeed.”

“And...” she paused considering the delicate question. “Did you come across the Red Sails?”

“We have arrived.” He knocked then opened the door. “My Lord, the Lady Mara Olber.”

They stepped in and the eunuch showed her to the table. There was no chair for her, just the one for her uncle on the far side.

Mara turned to her escort. “Nice to chat, Gamir. Thank you.”

He bowed slightly as he backed out, closing the doors.

Blarik had risen from his chair, with all the pretence of meeting an equal, all smiles and graciousness. The moment Gamir closed the door, her uncle sat, helped himself to a flask of wine and continued eating.

“I see the nose is fixed.” She looked around the room, taking in the four guards several paces away and watching her every move. “I should have gouged your eyes when I had the chance.”

“That’s the difference between you and me, girl. If I see an opportunity to better myself or remove an enemy. I do it.” He cast his eyes over her, clearly disappointed she chose to wear multiple layers.

“You? You’d have difficulty tossing a salad.” She tried hard to keep amusement of seeing his disappointment from her tone.

“You’ve learnt nothing here. Still an impudent little shrew.”

“Rape and kidnapping tend to have that effect on people. And I have learnt some things; I know now you had my father assassinated with your rabid pets. I will kill you for that.”

Blarik’s belly laugh was spontaneous and loud. Once he stopped chuckling, he poured more wine and continued feeding his face, talking between chews. “The official story is your father was killed by rockions. Nothing to do with me.”

Bastard. “It was your rockions. Probably the one that *oh so conveniently* escaped...”

She studied the table as she spoke to see what she could reach in the off-chance an opportunity presented itself. It would take the guards only a moment, maybe a few seconds to intervene. Any success would be extremely remote, but she had to try and had nothing to lose.

“I can assure you, there is nothing convenient with rockions roaming free.”

At least he didn't deny it.

“Would you care to know my great plans for you?” He grinned evilly. “I’ve managed to extract a deal from Urgad Hakower, the Overlord of Dran’ali,” he said between mouthfuls of food. “He’ll be here in a week and bringing with him one hundred of his fine horses, for you, his new bride.

“Like that’s ever going to happen!” she scoffed. Having already heard the news, if he thought he’d shock her, it failed from the scowl on his face.

“It is, and it will!” Blarik slammed his fist on the table. “Quit acting like you have any say in this. You’re lucky I’ve made this deal, otherwise you’d be thrown to the men for their entertainment. With his downpayment, the two hundred more after the wedding, and a promise to continue this every year as long as you produce him sons.”

“Keep having these delusions if it makes you feel better,” she muttered. “Procreating another generation of barbarian horse-herders is not on my agenda. Seeing you rot in your grave is, though.”

Her uncle spoke over her, ignoring her. “With this arrangement, I will soon have the beginnings of a magnificent cavalry. This will secure the borders for generations.”

“Which wouldn’t be needed if little men with delusions of grandeur stopped having pissing contests.”

“My dear girl. All of Jaranabi will benefit from your sacrifice.”

“Sacrifice? I don’t see *you* making any sacrifices.” She waved her arms to encompass the estate. “This opulence doesn’t come from the allowances the ruling houses provide. You’re just a corrupt, obese parasite milking the country for yourself. If you make me do this, I can guarantee you he’ll be dead in a month.”

Blarik beamed. “And Jaranabi will rejoice with that outcome as well. We win either way.”

“So, you need me? Why not Shayr?”

“I am disappointed in you. I took you for someone with a semblance of intelligence. Have you not realised you are pivotal in this? Shayr is tall, cunning and deliciously voluptuous, other

than that, she is nothing. You were a High Lord's daughter. Your oh-so-precious noble blood is what separates you from the rest of the trash. And, of course, your precious virginity. It means so much to these backward horse clans."

So, he dare not kill me, and my virtue needs to remain intact. "Good. I just wanted to be sure." Mara leapt across the table, displacing the food and wine in all directions. She was going for a knife, but a broken wine glass presented itself. She snatched it and thrust it at his neck.

Blarik was caught off guard. He pushed back clumsily to avoid her wild swing. His chair overbalanced and he fell back with a cry, cracking his head on the tiles. He didn't move.

Her progress was hampered by the spilled food; her hand slipped on the spilt bechamel sauce and she found little purchase on the smooth tablecloth. But he was on the floor, motionless. Eager to take advantage of the situation, she tried again.

But it took too long. As she slid off the table the guards pounced on her and dragged her away from where their lord lay. The glass was knocked away so she lashed out with her feet and fists, scoring hits but only bruising herself. The head guard pulled her head back by her hair and punched her with his gauntleted fist, bloodying and bruising her face immediately.

"Get the healer for the High Lord," he ordered. "Take the wench to her quarters," he told another, pushing her roughly to him.

Mara shrieked both in pain and fury in having missed her opportunity. Her eyes teared up and she felt the tang of blood in her mouth.

An older guard grabbed her by the upper arm and forcibly removed her from the dining hall. She stumbled, trying to keep up. They were halfway along the corridor heading towards the stairs when the nausea hit. Mara tried to warn him, but he ignored her. She reached for the balustrade for balance. He jerked her back, his other hand ready to slap her. She deliberately vomited over him.

"Bitch." He swore and slammed her into the railing, twisting her arm behind her. "Such a pretty little vixen. Think you're so high and mighty that nothing can happen to you?"

"I do," she croaked. When the threat of darkness diminished, she laughed feeling his hands lifting up the back of her nightgown, his boots pushing her feet apart. Her anger and disappointment at her failure drove her out of her mind. To consider desperate acts...

The balustrade cracked and trembled.

Pretty weak masonry.

Unused to having to find his way through several layers of clothing, the guard was having difficulties. She laughed at him. More blood dripped from her nose and mouth.

“Do what you want. Show me how much of a big brave man you are. I dare you,” she invited with a passion borne from despair. Her whole head throbbed; her nose was definitely broken and was getting clogged. She had difficulty breathing so she blew it as best she could, but nearly blacked out with the pain. She would have fallen if the guard wasn’t leaning against her.

Her blood had sprayed across the balustrade and tiled floor below, but she could breathe better now. “You’ll be doing me a favour,” she continued her insane bluff. “But know this; your pretty little vixen is promised to Urgad Hakower, brutal Overlord of Dran’ali. I can guarantee your captain is a dead man walking and if you do me harm, I will ensure Urgad will have your head as well as Blarik’s. Seeing your ugly head on a pike will bring much joy to my heart. So please, do your worst. I look forward to it. I’m trained to help you if you need it.”

His groping stopped and he swore, stepping back. “You’ll get what’s coming to you, crazy trull.”

“I’m sure it will, but not from the likes of you. Now, get your small mind out of my pants and get me back to my quarters.”

With the rattling of the keys in the door, everyone who was in the room all looked up expectantly. There were cries of shock and astonishment when she walked in. The front of her nightgown was lathered with her blood, making it cling even more.

Even Shayr blanched at what she saw. She jumped up and raced across the room, as did the others, taking her from the guard and helping her to a lounge. A couple of girls fetched damp cloths to swab gently at the blood covering her face and neck. They crowded around, all asking questions and swearing at the guard.

“Thank you. We can manage...” Mora and Rhian, two of the slightly older women, were very gentle and attentive.

“Be still. We’ve done this before,” Mora said with confidence.

“Who did this?” Rhian checked her for any other wounds, and looked confused about the multiple layers of clothing.

Many pairs of eyes turned accusingly at the guard who was hurriedly backing away.

“It wasn’t—”

“Not so fast, Kips,” Shayr called to him. “Go and fetch Corum the healer, immediately!”

“I don’t answer to the likes of you!” Kips spat.

“You will, or I’ll personally inform Master Quillin what you did to this wretched girl.”

“Me?” he yelped. “I didn—”

“I don’t give a damn. It’s what I will be telling him. Who do you think he’s going to believe?” Shayr advanced on him, eyes blazing. “You’re wasting time. I have a mind to get Vern to visit you too later.”

At the mention of Vern’s name, he stiffened. “You’re nothing but a bitch, just like all of them.”

Shayr stormed towards him. “Yes, but *this* bitch is going to have your tiny balls in a jar by my bed tonight if I have to tell you again!”

Some of the girls giggled at the heated conversation and the look of his face.

Kimps backed away and slammed the doors. His boots could be heard quickly receding.

With the doors closed and entertainment finished, they turned back to Mara, looking serious when one of their own—even if she was a noble born brat—was treated in this way.

“Thank you for that, Shayr.” Mara couldn’t believe she was saying those words to her.

Shayr looked with distaste at her bloodied features. “Think nothing of it. I’m sure you’d do the same for me.”

Mara nodded. The words were said, but she heard no empathy behind them. She wriggled back against the cushions when one of the girls put a blanket down to prevent any blood spilling onto the fabric.

“Besides,” Shayr continued. “The eunuch would have my tits if anything happened to you in here.”

“He’d need a very big jar, though,” Amba joked, laughing with the others.

Mora and Rhian rinsed the bloodied cloths in a bowl then continued their treatment. “Could you fetch another fresh bowl, please Amba?” Mora asked.

The dark girl nodded and dashed away.

Corum the healer arrived shortly after. She looked aghast at the brutal injury and quickly examined her. With curt instructions, Mara was then escorted to her room where she spent hours administering to the wounds. Balms and poultices were concocted quickly and efficiently from her bags. If anything was needed, a quick summons was all it took to remedy that.

“How is Blarik?” Mara asked, hoping for the worst.

“He will recover, but will have a bad headache for a few days. You, however, need more attention.”

“Is it that serious?”

“The injury, yes. You’re lucky the nasal bone didn’t get pushed back into the brain. But also, Master Quillin will no doubt hear of this and will want to check. The better you look when that happens, the better the outcome will be for all, including me.” She laid a cool, aromatic poultice across her face. “It is very lucky you have strong bones and good skin.”

“Do you know what happened to Blarik?” It hurt to talk, but it hurt just as much being quiet, but she wanted to know the outcome of her futile attempt of ending him. “What did they say?”

“The guards were reluctant to say anything, but I can only assume he got too drunk again and fell.”

No doubt too embarrassed to admit I did that, under their watch!

“Dare I ask how your injuries occurred.”

“A guard punched my face.”

“Did he now?” Corum raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Considering who you are, and your imminent future, he should have known better. What a fool.”

“You’d think,” Mara agreed. “But guards aren’t known for their overabundance of intelligence.” Her mind fleetingly recalled her personal guard. *My Trinol was an exception.*

“This is true.” Corum busied herself with her bag for a few minutes.

“Mind you, I was just as stupid trying to attack armour barehanded and in sandals.”

“Also true. I want you to drink this. It is horribly foul, but will help in your recovery, I can assure you.”

Even with her clogged senses, Mara knew immediately the foulness was underestimated. She took a ragged breath and upended the fluid quickly and swallowed before she gagged. Even the effort of drinking caused pain.

“Good girl. Now rest. I’ll be back in a couple of hours to change the poultice. Try to keep as immobile as you can.” Corum gathered her materials and left.

Florin came rushing in, bursting into tears the moment she saw Mara’s bandaged face.

“It’s okay, Florin. You should see the other guy.” Mara’s voice sounded muffled through the bandage.

Florin dropped to her knees and gave her a gentle hug. When she wiped her tears, she looked at the large poultice covering her face, at a loss for words tears brimming again.

“Yes, it’s painful. I probably deserved it, but I was this close to slicing Blarik’s neck.” She held two fingers close together. “The fat bastard fell back and concussed himself instead.”

“Why did he want to see you?” Florin wasn’t reassured by her words. “Has anything changed?”

“No. He wanted to gloat about his glorious plans for me. If you hadn’t told me the gossip already, it may have worked and he would have seen the look of horror on my face. But he was sorely put out when I didn’t flinch. That disappointment was worth it all. The concussion was a bonus.”

Florin’s tears gradually dried up. “Glad I could help.”

Mara reached out for her hand and held it in both hers. “Girl, you’ve been nothing but a help since the day I arrived at this cursed place. In fact, if not for our exercising, I doubt I could have jumped onto the table to stab him. So, I have you to thank for that as well.”

Florin got up and moved a small chair over to sit more comfortably.

“There is a drawback to this poultice, though.” Mara tried to grin, but the effort caused tears. “No more exercise for a while, and looks like I’ll be having soup for a few days.”

Florin smiled wanly. “I thought you were going to say no more kissing.”

“Ah well, you may kiss my hand. I am noble born, don’t you know?”

“Oh yes, my lady. You know by now I’d be happy to kiss any—”

A knock at the door stopped the chatter. They looked up to see Shayr looming in the entrance.

“Master Quillin is here,” she said in annoyance. “Begone, Florin.”

With a nervous smile, the young girl got up and ducked through the door.

Moments later, the seneschal came in, his sandals slapping the tiles. He paused at the threshold; his eyes widened when he saw her face. He opened his mouth, but Mara beat him to it, surprised seeing the genuine concern in his eyes.

“Master Quillin. It looks worse than what it is, truly. With Shayr’s insistence, Corum came to see to me almost immediately. I apologise for bringing this problem to your door.”

The master turned. “Scoot.” He shooed Shayr and the gathering of prying eyes and ears away, and pushed the door closed before coming to the bedside.

Mara saw the dark look on Shayr’s face as the door shut. It brought a grin—as well as pain and tears—to her face. Dismissed in much the same way as she had dismissed Florin.

The teacher’s pet student sent away like a stray dog.

“What? Nonsense, child.” Quillin sat on the chair Florin used minutes earlier. “I seemed to have been remiss in my duties. I should have seen this coming. It pleases me Corum saw to you; she is a fine healer indeed. Tell me everything.”

Mara wriggled to a half-sitting position. The seneschal even got up to adjust her pillows for her. “Thank you, Master Quillin—”

“Please, call me Onty when no one is around.”

“Thank you, Onty. Do you know the real circumstances leading up to my arrival?”

“To marry—”

“Forgive me, but before that. How I came to be here in the first place, that night after the meeting of the council?”

He shook his head. “Only what High Lord Blarik told me.”

Mara nodded, not surprised in the slightest he’d make some story up. “I guess since he’s spymaster, you’d have to believe everything he said.”

Ont’eba looked apologetic. “Technically speaking, it is a joint effort.”

“Blarik has been passing himself off as spymaster for years.”

“Yes dear, he does go on about it. My fault entirely. I am, for various reasons, reticent to be so public about my function.”

“I think I understand. He’s the face—regrettably—and you’re the brains.”

“Well... brains. That’s a nice way to put it, more a trainer in the art of deception. Hence why I’m here administering the school.”

“And all these trips away?” Mara asked. “Sorry to pry.”

“Recruiting mainly. I travel to various towns and see the calibre of potential trainees. It’s both an exhilarating and depressing role; finding brilliant potential in some, and having to turn away others because they simply won’t make the grade. But I have to be firm. This isn’t simply a refuge or foster home. Everyone here has their skills... but enough of that. You’re saying you are here as a prisoner?”

“What did Blarik tell you?”

“That with the assassination of your father, your life was in peril. You were sent here for safety.”

“Rockions killed father, highly unusual this far away from the Black Hills. And then I hear Blarik has rockions—of which one escaped—a convenient story.”

“That would be typical of him.” Ont’eba nodded.

Mara relayed all she knew or suspected of the tragic events leading up to her arrival here.

“And you say this marriage is against your will?” the seneschal asked.

“Definitely, but I don’t see any way out of it. And now, having spoken to you, if I escape, it will look very bad for you and the school. Blarik will be furious. He may not be the sole spymaster, but as High Lord he has control of the military. You wouldn’t be safe. Or...” she considered fleetingly. “Perhaps it best I *do* go. I could escape from Urgad, that way there is no shame or embarrassment to the school.”

“My dear lady, you have been treated so poorly. I am touched you would even consider us over your own wellbeing. No, this will not do. I will have to come up with an alternate plan.”

“You will be putting yourself in danger.”

“I’m used to living in danger. This is no worse a threat.”

Mara considered what he was saying. Her head was aching, and the concoction Corum fed her was making her lethargic, but she had to know...

“Onty, forgive any impropriety, but...”

“How did I become a eunuch?”

She nodded. “I’ve heard rumours...”

“Which any spy can tell you has around ten percent of truth in it. Let me guess, I was a pirate—because of the tattoos—and therefore a eunuch because of what happens to those who cross the Red Sails twice.”

“Sounds like more than ten percent of the rumours I’ve heard.”

“So, as you can see, the dangers of being here in this school is nothing compared to the dangers on the high seas as a pirate.”

“And The Crag? What can you tell me about it?”

“Only a bit, to be honest. So little information comes out of there.”

“You’ve not been there?”

“No, but I can understand our confusion. It is the actual Red Sails that do it, not those in the community.” The seneschal opened up—probably the first time in years—about his previous life. Hearing him relate his story, Mara had a semblance of a plan. She just needed to get out.

“Onty, this injury was a result for what I tried to do. In fact, I probably got away lightly, considering most people attempting to kill a High Lord are executed on the spot. I am safe here. You do not need to put yourself out in any way to help me. In fact, I’d suggest you take a longer absence than normal. That way, if anything should happen while your away, you can’t be held responsible for it.”

“You’re sure? I’d like to help...”

“Can you make Blarik disappear and make me High Lady?”

To his credit, and much to Mara’s surprise, Ont’eba actually paused, giving it thought. “Not before your marriage. And after would be pointless. I can promise you this though, I know how to tweak his ego and will subtly turn my efforts into weakening his base.”

“What about Urgad? I understand he is quite keen and can be violent.”

“He maybe powerful in Dran’ali but over here, I’m not going to lose sleep over a disgruntled horse-herder. Blarik made the overture to him. I’ll let him deal with the fallout.”

“I’m also concerned for Florin. She—*we*—have developed a close relationship. She was alone when I arrived. She’s young and impetuous. I feel she might do something foolish.”

“We’ve all been there. I’m not that old to forget my young and impetuous youth. Let me think on it. I will come up with a plan for her too. And, yes, I’m not ignorant of the animosity Shayr has for Florin because of her association with you.”

“I cannot thank you enough for that and coming to see me.” Mara reached for his delicate hands. *Far too delicate for a pirate.* “Even though it was a fleeting visit, my father thought highly of you. If it means anything to you, so do I.”

“My Lady, you are your father’s blood, without a doubt.” He put a hand on her shoulder. “A truly noble woman with a truly noble heart.”

“You better go before I cry, and crying hurts. I’m honoured to have met you. I hope we can again under better circumstances.”

“The honour is mine. Until that fine day, I wish you calm seas and strong winds, my Lady.” Ont’eba stood and bowed low.

He turned and opened the door, waved briefly, then left.

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CHAPTER 6

As expected, Florin came in shortly after the seneschal left.

“So, what did he say? Are you in trouble? His face remains so bland, you never know his thoughts or moods.” Her worry made her chattier than usual.

“All is well.” Mara considered briefly how much to tell her. “No, I’m not in trouble at all which is quite remarkable. Now,” she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “I’m sure you will keep this to yourself, but Ont’eba and Blarik are both the spymasters, a weird partnership.”

“Is he? I heard... but... it’s so obvious now.”

“And I don’t think Shayr’s going to be a problem for you... later on.”

“You mean after you leave? I understand.” She looked sullen for a moment. “But we had great times, didn’t we?”

“We had and still will. Me leaving isn’t going to happen overnight, and when it does, it isn’t the end of the world.”

Florin nodded; eyes moist. “It pleases me to hear that.”

“Silly. You think I haven’t enjoyed your company? You think I could forget you?”

“Times change. People move on...”

“This is true. Other than heading south, I have no idea when or where I’ll go when I manage to get out of here.”

“You should go to The Craggs.”

“Isn’t that too obvious?”

“Perhaps, but what can they do? No man sets foot in The Craggs without their permission. It’s guarded by a powerful witch.”

“Is it?” Mara never could tell when she was joking. Her young friend has come up with crazy sounding rumours before only to find they were true. “Why would a man want to go there if they castrate them?”

“Now look who’s silly. Not all men, it’s the Red Sails that do that. I’ve heard the community does allow some men there; sons, nephews, some trusted traders.”

“More pillow talk and passage peeping?”

“I heard these stories in my village. I wasn’t born here you know.”

“I know. I’m teasing.”

There was a knock at the door, and the healer entered.

“Time to change that poultice and see how things are going. Florin, dear, if you don’t mind?” Corum held the door open.

“Certainly, Cor.” Florin gave a short wave to Mara then swanned out of the room.

The healer closed the door and sat. “Lie back, dear, and I will put a fresh poultice on.”

Mara settled down onto the bed as asked so Corum could administer to her injury.

“How are you feeling?” the healer asked as she was preparing another poultice. “Have you had a chance to rest?”

“Not with Master Ont’eba visiting. He stayed quite a while, which was very kind of him.”

“It’s the way he is. Busy, absentminded occasionally, but kind when he has to be.” Corum spoke of him fondly. She gently peeled the old poultice off. And gasped.

Mara went cold at her reaction. While always complimented on her supposed beauty, she didn’t give it much thought. But when she saw the look on Corum’s face, she hoped fervently she wasn’t disfigured. “Wh-what is it?”

“My dear... Have you been tested?”

“Tested?” *I’m still a virgin, can’t be that!* “For what?” She started to think of any recent diseases or ailments going around the local villages. “A healer came around for leeching, and several months ago, there was a sickness in—”

“No dear.” Corum chuckled. “For any Talent.”

“Talent? What do you mean?”

“Perhaps your brain has been rattled?” Corum deftly lifted back Mara’s eyelid and studied her eyes. “Hmm... Magyk, my dear. Have you been properly assessed for magyk?”

“Oh.” Mara had to think back. “A year or so ago, I believe. Why? What is it? How is my nose? My face?” *Have I developed a serious case of warts?*

“You tell me.” Corum held up a mirror for her.

Holding her breath, Mara took a quick look. Her face, while still slightly bruised, was healed. “I... it certainly felt a lot better. I thought it was your poultice numbing the pain.”

“I know I make an excellent poultice, but not to heal this fast.”

“Was my injury not as bad as we thought?”

Corum looked doubtful. “You did have very bad swelling. I could tell by the bruising around your eyes your nose was broken, but it was pushed in, not to the side as a normal punch. I was going to give you a sedative and set it once the swelling reduced... but this is nothing short of amazing.”

“I can’t be a magyker. They go crazy.”

“The men do, yes.”

“Don’t the women? I know I’ve attempted some crazy things—like trying to kill Blarik. Am I going mad?”

Again, the healer looked unsure. “Not that I’ve heard of. No. But I have only a little knowledge of it. My talent is so miniscule, but I could never do this.” She examined the face again, then the other injuries. Gone. “Remarkable.”

“Put the poultice on anyway. We can’t let anyone know.”

“But this is absolutely wonderful news!”

“Corum, if Blarik hears about this, he’ll use me for his own ends, the same way he uses those crazy elementalers he drags around with him. Please swear you will not tell anyone.”

The healer sighed. “You are a patient. Of course, I won’t tell. You should get training though. Can be dangerous without it.” She placed the new poultice on, gently lifting her head to wrap the bandage.

“This school—”

“Is not for magyk.”

“Is there one?”

“For men, yes. Women... I have no idea.”

Mara briefly considered how she could possibly get training in a male school. *Now that is completely insane.* She moved away from those thoughts. “What do I do then?”

“Without proper training?” Corum shrugged, considering. “Avoid stressful situations. Relax and keep calm. Anger, fear... are generally the worst states of mind which, so I understand, weakens control—making it easier for whatever it is that allows the magyk to flow to take over.”

“Avoid stressful situations?” *Right.*

“Yes. This what I’ve heard over the years, not from any personal experience. Women mages are extremely rare.”

“But you said you had some magyk...”

“Barely. In my case, it seems to give me a slightly better ability in healing. That’s it. I don’t even know how I do it. I dare say anyone mastering a skill like healing, sword fighting, blacksmithing... they probably all have a touch of magyk, but not enough to be magykers, and not enough to even consider testing.”

“So, perhaps you did in fact do this healing? You said you don’t know how it’s done.”

“Not like this, besides, the poultice alone couldn’t have done it, and I wasn’t here.”

“Onty was.”

Corum was packing her materials away. “He is the most sane and mild-mannered person I’ve met. It is not him.”

“Florin was here for a while...” *And she does do some weird things.* Mara couldn’t bring herself to say that out loud, she had a deep affection for her. “I will speak with her.”

“Mara.” Corum stood with her bag, a cheeky grin creasing her face. “If you don’t know her by now, I dare say you never will.” She smiled. “I can do no more for you, but if you need me for anything else, send for me instantly.”

“You will need to make regular visits, to keep up the pretence.”

“Of course. In that case, I will call in tomorrow; after breakfast and before dinner.”

“Lovely. Thank you so much.”

“A pleasure,” the healer said as she was walking out the door.

#

After the incident with Blarik and the guards, Mara had slowly been included in some of the activities of the other girls.

On the third day after her incident, her remarkable recovery was announced. The rapid healing was explained as the wound looked far worse than reality.

“It was more bruising,” Mara explained to those that asked. “We know the guards are stupid and clumsy, but not so dumb they’d seriously injure any of us. If not Lord Blarik, I’m sure the master would readily deal out punishment.”

Tiffan sat chatting with Amba, Jofine and Leesa. When Mara returned from her bath, she waved her over, offering to try different styles with her hair.

Amba poured her a glass of red wine.

“Sure, why not,” Mara agreed, simply relieved to finally have some acceptance. Not wanting to spoil this new development, she knelt on the rug near the lounge and accepted the wine. “Thank you.”

“You’ve never been to Herith?” Tiffan asked. “It’s in the north. This is the favourite style there.”

“I’ve not travelled all that much.”

The three women, all from the northern regions, started telling her about their towns and what to look for when travelling there.

Shayr sauntered into the lounge, saw Mara with the girls, and wandered over.

What is she conniving now? Jealous I’m being included?

“May I borrow Mara for a moment?” It may have been put as a request, but not going by her I’ll-take-no-nonsense tone. “I need to speak with her.”

Tiffan and the others moved away, and Shayr sat where Tiffan was. “Herith style?” Shayr noted. “It is not quite right. May I?”

Unsure of her motives, Mara nodded, not completely trusting her, but equally not wanting to cause any more animosity between them. Like with the other women, ever since that day, they spoke more, but not what you’d ever call with warmth.

“I’m glad to hear and see you’ve recovered so well.” Shayr started with small talk. “Corum is such a fine healer.”

Her normal retinue wandered in and sat nearby, poured some wine for themselves and started to chat quietly.

After several stern looks from Shayr, the girls took the hint and moved to the far side of the fountain where Tiffan and her friends had congregated.

Shayr moved her lips closer to Mara’s, as if sharing a secret. “My man, Vern, will come and see you tomorrow night,” she whispered. “We’ve arranged a pony in the woods near the back of the compound.”

“That’s good news. Thank you.”

Shayr sat back and kept toying with her hair. “Not at all. Some girls were made to be here; others not. I only want the best for you.” When satisfied with the chosen hair style, Shayr fleetingly kissed Mara lightly on the cheek. “I wish you well,” she said in parting.

Mara stood and moved to a mirror to check this northern style. Perhaps it would take getting used to, but it was not to her liking. Too high and coiled. *Looks like a hive for bees.*

Seeing the other girls still chatting, she went over to thank them for their choice.

They admired her hair and overall look, telling her how her long slim neck was accentuated by this particular style.

“And men just love it.” Tiffan smiled. “You look adorable.”

The others nodded, smiling.

Even though she suspected most of that was tripe, Mara blushed, and wished them all a good night. She went to stand by the window for some fresh air and to let her hair dry as it was still damp from her dip in the pool.

It wasn't too long before she saw Florin walk in. She went straight to the table and gathered a tray and loaded it with food and wine. Seeing Mara by the window, she strode over and stood beside her, resting the tray on the sideboard.

Mara marvelled at how graceful the young girl moved. “You look radiant,” she approved. “Busy night?”

“Not overly, no. But it was surprisingly...fulfilling.” Florin filled her glass from a bottle and drained it.

Mara raised her eyebrows. “Fulfilling? No offence, but that's not a word I would think to hear from you.”

Florin tossed a grape at her then popped one into her own mouth. “No offence taken. I only heard it this afternoon myself.” She giggled.

They laughed a bit longer before Mara shared the news of the planned departure.

At first there was silence. Florin chewed some hard cheese and swallowed it down with more of the red wine. “I don't believe Vern has a horse in the back woods,” she said eventually. “I don't know what they have planned, but you must be prepared for the worst.” She reached for the wine and poured one each.

“I've got some food and clothing.” Mara accepted a glass of wine from her friend. “I'll get more food later. See what else I can scrounge... men's clothing so I can get rid of these stupid silk nightgowns.”

“If I get more *fulfilment* beforehand, I might be able to help there.” Florin winked. “And your hairpins? Have you got them?”

Mara nodded, reaching to the coiled hair. “No. It’s gone! Shayr did my hair when she told me the news.”

“That sly cow took it. She knows all too well its usefulness.” Florin looked around. A couple of girls were chatting here and there, but Shayr was nowhere in sight.

“Here, take mine. I have several and can get more.” Florin put her glass down and then moved to a lounge. “Better kneel here so I can reach properly.”

When Mara was kneeling comfortably on a cushion, Florin deftly rearranged the hair and slid the hairpin home. “Please tell me this hairstyle wasn’t your idea?”

“Hardly. It reminds me of a beehive, but Tiffan offered—a gesture of good will—which I could hardly refuse. Then Shayr took over. Why, don’t you like it?”

“It’s nice... I guess, but only because of that lovely long neck of yours.” On the spur of the moment, she undid the locket from around her neck and leant forward to show it to Mara. “Remember that aphrodisiac called *Beast* that will make any male do a woman’s bidding?”

“I do. Is that what this is?” Mara held the silver locket in her fingers. “Why have you got it?”

“You forgot my *fulfilling* moment already? I took some just in case, but it wasn’t needed after all.” Florin clasped the chain around her friend’s neck.

“I’d not think any man would need it with you administering to them.” *Or woman, for that matter.*

“Oh. Now look who’s flirting... but you say the nicest things.” Florin’s fingers ran lightly across her back and shoulders. “I hope you haven’t forgotten how to use your hairpin as a lockpick.”

“How could I? We went over it and over it.” Mara rolled her eyes.

“You sound like you’re whinging.”

“I am not.”

“That’s what all guilty whingers say. You know, there’s severe punishment for whinging.”

“There *is* no such thing. And I am *not* whinging.”

“Well. I am well-versed in the art of whinging, so I should know, and you are most definitely whinging.”

“Okay, okay, I would *so* hate to argue with a subject-matter expert.” Mara sighed, emptying her glass. There was no table in reach, so she put it to the side of the lounge. “Pray tell, what is the dire punishment of over-whinging.”

“The punishment,” she said in an overly pompous voice, “handed down from generations upon generations of whinger-experts is...a tickle-attack.” Florin grabbed Mara’s waist from behind and drilled her fingers into her ribs.

Mara recoiled, chortling like a child. “I’ve... not been tickled... in years.” She rolled on to the rug, twisting out of reach.

“Then you should get double.” Florin slipped to the floor and straddled her before she could get up. Grabbing her wrists, Florin held them to the floor above Mara’s head.

Mara struggled to breathe, writhing on the floor and her ribs aching from the laughter. Tears of joy trickled from her eyes. “I’m going to miss you.” She looked in wonderment at Florin’s eyes. *So green.*

“And I you.” Florin bent down and kissed her warmly.

When they parted, Mara breathed deeply, watching her. “Are you flirting again as well?”

“Can’t you tell?”

“I wanted to make sure it wasn’t just the wine.”

“I don’t need wine for this.”

When they kissed again, this time there was no pulling away. They paused to catch their breaths, Florin lightly kissed Mara’s cheeks, then nuzzled her neck.

###

CHAPTER 7

Mara jolted awake, fighting a moment of confusion before she vividly recalled the last few hours.

This was not her bed and her arm was draped across Florin's stomach. She gently lifted her arm and wriggled back. Strands of Florin's blonde hair had stuck to her lips, which she had to free or risk waking her. Mara then stealthily climbed off the bed, and quickly searched the floor before finding her nightgown. She shrugged into it quickly, checking to see that Florin wasn't disturbed.

Mara briefly considered pulling the sheet up to cover her, but her eyes drank in the sight of the elegant form bathed in moonlight stretched out on the bed. If there was only one nice aspect of the barred windows that represented their captivity, it was how the shadows accentuated her curves.

A glance out the window showed dawn would soon approach, ~~and she was supposed to be escaping tonight!~~ Even as she stepped towards the door, Mara took one long last look, burning the scene into her mind.

Meeting Florin was the best part of this horrid, despicable place; the only memory she wanted to keep. She had half a mind to ask Florin join her, but...the girl was happy here, and Mara had no idea where she would be in a few hours, and sighed at how unfair life could be. There were also the plans the seneschal had for her. Anything he came up with would far surpass what she could manage while on the run.

They both knew this was going to happen, and no promises were made...or expected.

Quickly and silently on bare feet, she moved through the main hall towards her room. She reached the door just as Shayr opened it.

"What are you doing in there?"

"Looking for you! Where the hell have you been!" she whispered fiercely.

"You said tomorrow night!"

"It's changed. I've had to keep Vern amused for the last few hours."

"No good deed goes unpunished," Mara muttered.

"What?" the tall girl hissed. "I'm trying to help you here."

"And I appreciate it. I'm here now. Where's Vern?"

"Get your stuff. I'll get him." Shayr pushed past her, cursing under her breath.

As soon as her back was turned, Mara went into her room to collect her pack by the door. Wrapped inside was a blade, cheese, cured meat, bread and a small flask of water.

Mara had suggested wearing something more practical to sneak out, but it was discussed wearing anything else would raise suspicions.

“Won’t sneaking around the grounds in the dark raise suspicions?” she had asked Florin.

“In your nightgown, no. In men’s clothes, definitely.” Florin covered her mouth to stifle a laugh. “And here I was thinking I was the slow one. Consider where you are and what we do.”

“Ah.” Mara rolled her eyes. “Whores sneaking around at night from one room to another *is* what we do. So, no suspicions raised.”

Smiling at the conversation, Mara slipped the blade from the pack and strapped it to her thigh, then checked she still had her hairpins. The beehive hairstyle was gone, replaced by a far more practical braid.

“Past time ta go, lovey,” came a soft voice in the dark. “I’m Vern.”

Mara turned, seeing the tall shadow looming behind her. “I remember you.” *And your reek.*

With his short sword strapped so as not to jangle he moved out. Despite his size and armour, Vern stealthily moved out the door, across the floor and out into the garden. He was careful to walk on the grass and not the gravel pathway, but seemed to be oblivious to the bright moonlit night.

Sneaking is one thing; being discreet about it is another, Mara thought.

At the far end of the garden, now in the shadows near the wall, he slowed. “We have a back gate here. Somewhere...” he examined the area. “It’s sort of hidden, mainly used by the gardeners so they don’t go carryin’ stuff through the house.”

“There it is.” Mara pointed.

“Good eyes as well,” Vern moved briskly to the hidden gate while extracting a key. The lock made surprisingly little noise when turned, indicating regular use or maintenance.

He pushed it open, waited for her to step through then pulled it closed behind and turning the key.

“Off we trot.” Vern took the lead.

There was now a cobbled lane paralleling the high garden wall. On the opposite side was the back wall of a large building.

“Those are the stables.” Vern confirmed her thoughts of the smell’s origins. “Guards quarters way down there.” He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. “Pretty handy, when yer think ’bout it.”

Mara smirked at his back. *As if you ever thought about anything other than food and sex.*

She was very familiar with the harem, the adjoining rooms for dinner, bathing and the work cubicles. And, in her short time here after being acquainted with the secret passages, she learnt the general layout of the house...and where the other staff’s chambers were. This part of the estate beyond the walls and billowing curtains was a mystery. Until now.

The smell of the stables lessened and an overriding pungent odour dominated.

“Is there a tannery or abattoir here? Or did something die?”

“Sorta.” Vern answered cryptically.

“Which one?”

“Well, things die ’ere regularly, so I guess yer could call it an...abatwa.”

“And this is the way to the horse? The one you have in the woods?”

The surly creep continued, ignoring her.

May as well talk to the stone walls. She huffed at his non-answer and continued to follow. The lane had opened up into a larger fenced area, like a corral, the silhouettes of other buildings surrounding the small plaza. She stopped dead in her track, hearing the soft rumbling growl somewhere in the darkness to her right. Her hackles rose and goosebumps ran up her back and arms.

Vern turned to look, chuckling at her hesitation. “Thought that might surprise yer.”

Mara nodded, not trusting her voice. After a moment she cleared her throat. “Rockions.”

“You bet. Lovely beasts, brutal too. Like I’sayin’, things die here regular-like. Nothin’ left ta tan.”

Another figure walked out from one of the stone buildings. From the description Shayr had given during the perfume and poison lesson, Mara supposed this gangly man with the long hair to be the rockion trainer.

“Dat you, Vern?” he asked.

“Course ’tis, Col. Who else yer reckon?”

“No one. Just checkin’. Who dat? Brung me a toy?”

“A toy, yeah, but not for yer to play with.”

“Aww.” Col looked over to the enclosure. “Me girls ain’t hungry yet.”

Mara went cold. *Death by rockion. First my father, now me?*

Ready for her to take flight, Vern’s armed whipped out and seized her cruelly by his right arm. His strong fingers digging into her shoulder. “No rush, Col. They can play first.” He knocked her pack out of her hand and pushed her closer to the enclosure built of iron bars rising more than twenty feet. “So can we.”

She wanted to scream, but having heard the occasional woman scream in the night, knew nothing would happen. *And it would probably just amuse these creeps more. Only you can save you.*

Vern held her up against the bars roughly and forced himself on her to prevent any chance of escape.

Her head struck one of the bars. She winced at the pain. “You don’t need to do this!” she whispered intently. “Let me go. I won’t tell Shayr!”

“You ain’t tellin’ no one.” The guard laughed. “Col, get over here and grab her other arm ’n lift it up.” Vern brought her right hand up and held it.

When the trainer came into view and followed the order, the guard tightly grasped both wrists with his one hand.

“I heard she tried ta scratch the boss’s eyes out,” Vern explained.

“Rockions will eat bones n’ all,” Col said beside him, eyes running up and down her figure. “But not clothes.”

Vern looked down. “What a pity. I guess this has to come off, then.” He grabbed her nightgown by the neckline with his free hand and ripped it off. “Can’t leave anythin’ behind, can we. No trace of you passin’.” Leering now, he ran his rough hand over her and found the locket hanging between her breasts. “What ’av we here?”

“They’re called breasts. Among other things Shayr did say you were slow.”

“What else did my lovely say?”

“That was the highlight,” Mara retorted. *Did Shayr really put him up to this? Was she that vindictive to want her dead?*

Only half listening, Vern flicked open the locket and took a whiff of the contents.

“I know it. Called an a-f-r-o-d-i-s-a-c,” Col said proudly. “Dat comes from me girls it do.”

“So, t’is. Reckon this’ll brin’ ’em to ya.” He upended the locket and dribbled it all over her then took a moment to rub it in. “You enjoyin’ this, are ya?”

“Bathing with leeches would be more preferable.”

“You...” It slowly dawns on him she was insulting him. Vern slapped her and dragged her to the enclosure opening. “Let’s hope these ladies take their time with you.”

“This must be Shayr’s idea. I doubt much happens in that filthy little mind.”

I must be going mad, irritating this cretin, but if he gets angry enough to make a mistake... It was a slim chance... but I’ll have zero with those beasts.

“Can I ’ave a turn?” Col asked, licking his lips.

If Vern was about to do anything, Col’s request stopped him.

Vern chuckled, looking at his companion. “Why not. I won’t tell yer bitch, Clare.”

“Aw. She ain’t me wife or nuthin’,” Col mumbled as he approached.

“You ain’t got time for Clare and these beasties anyhow. Here, I’ll hold her still. Be quick.”

Vern pulled her arms up again.

Col hesitated, looking at her and wiping his hands on his shirt. “Look away,” he said to Vern. “Don’t want you watchin’.”

Despite the dire situation, Mara let out a snort.

“Idiot—” Vern vented.

“Close yer eyes,” Col insisted.

“Blow me!” Vern gripped her tightly and turned away. “Get to it. Sun’s arisin’ soon’n we need ta be gone.”

Col, according to Florin and the gossip among the girls, had his ‘difficulties’. He couldn’t get it up, but only used his hands.

Mara groaned as he put his hand between her thighs. The sound encouraged the simple man, but it was his rough fingers that caused her reaction. Judging by his rising enthusiasm, he liked it rough or he thought she was somehow enjoying his attention. Col then tried to kiss her.

Big mistake. Her mind flittered back to what Florin had said. ‘Men think we’re weak, but when it comes to sex, it’s the men who are weak.’ *And some are also particularly stupid.*

Distasteful as it was, Mara made sounds to encourage his kissing. He was lost in the moment, kissing her deeply. *Perfect.*

She clamped her teeth down hard. The welling of his hot blood filled her mouth as she bit off his tongue.

Col's gurgled scream cut through the night. He clutched his face and fell back. He hit the ground and whimpered like a child.

If circumstances were different, she may have sorry for him, but not tonight.

Vern glanced down in shock at the sight.

"Bitch!" He let go her wrists and punched her hard in the stomach.

Air exploded from her with the impact. The tongue and a mouthful of blood gushed over him as she buckled over, gasping. She collapsed to her knees in a daze. It seemed like an eternity before she could breathe again. Her gut hurt, but it was worth it to see Col rolling in pain on the ground, mouth dripping blood down his shirt and neck. Vern stood between them, wiping the blood off his vest, but merely smearing it more.

She tried to move but Vern's boot lashed out and knocked her down.

By the growling in the dark, the smell of gore and the noise must have reached the rockions in their lair.

"Quick, throw me the cage key." Vern motioned to the trainer with his bloodied hand.

Col shook his head, wiping his chin. "-atch," he mumbled, pointing.

"What?"

"On-y an -atch. No key."

Vern looked to the gate, realising it was a simple spring latch mechanism. He then nervously studied the darkness, seeing only shadow. He grabbed her braid and dragged her closer.

Mara reached up and grabbed his hand to lessen the trauma to her scalp.

He paused, checking the immediate area was clear. With a shaking hand smeared with blood, he unlatched the gate, pushed it open and unceremoniously pushed her in before slamming it closed. He stepped back with a white face, hands shaking.

Mara was covered in scratches now after being dragged across the cobbles and dirt. In the dark she stumbled forward onto the rough ground. She fell to the dirt adding scraped palms to her already cuts and bruises. Breathing hard, she looked around with wide eyes into the gloom. She knew they were there. She could sense them. The air vibrated with their low rumbling growl.

She noticed the slight tremor in the ground. *They can't be that heavy...*

The soft padding of large paws reached her ears as the shadows separated from the darkness. Two large, six-legged beasts prowled towards her from different sides. With only a few feet to go, they sniffed the air.

One moved closer. The mouth, sharp teeth clearly visible, was inches away. Its breath was the worst thing she'd ever experienced. She could feel its whiskers on her skin. At any other time, it would have tickled, now she held back her shriek of utter fear. The rockion's nose sniffed along her arm to her hands.

A massive tongue feeling like wet sand ran across her palm, licking the blood off. The other beast shouldered its way closer, sniffing her. It nuzzled under her, rolling her onto her back. The rasping sensation of its tongue ran over her scraped knees, then moved up her body.

Mara was numb with fear, all pain forgotten. It was nothing compared to the terror of these massive jaws' inches away. The sniffing continued up her body until it reached her breasts. Some of Col's blood had dripped down her throat as well but the beast hesitated when taking in the scent of the locket. After several more sniffs and snorts, it backed away to join its partner, mewling in confusion at the mixed scents.

Mara didn't know how long she held her breath, but she needed air. With immense control, she released her bursting lungs slowly, then inhaled deeply. Her panic-stricken mind considered her options; she had a hairpin and a cheese knife as a ludicrous attempt to fend off a bloody and gory death.

The rockions now circled her, large noses constantly sampling the air. They may not be hungry now, but cats—predators—do love to play.

A boot scraped on the cobbles in the lane. Mara turned to the noise, as did the rockions. With utmost care and suddenly glad of the recent exercise regime back in the harem, she strained her muscles and managed to sit up.

Col was now standing next to Vern. The two men stared, transfixed by what they were witnessing. In the fading moonlight, a naked woman sat on the ground, two rockions looming over her, tails lashing from side to side.

Col said something incoherent. Wincing, the trainer wiped his mouth, which was still dripping, and his arms were covered in blood.

An idea dawned in Mara's foggy mind. A long shot, but the potential outcome was better than taking on these beasts with cutlery and hair accessories. Grimly, she stood and made a step

towards the gate, cringing at the imminent clawed death from behind. When nothing happened, she stepped again. Still nothing.

“Yer ain’t gettin’ out that easy.” Vern belatedly staggered forward to hold the gate closed.

“You’re right. *I’m* not.” She beat him to the gate, put her small hand through the bars and lifted the latch. She glared into his bloodshot eyes. “Run,” she whispered to him, then stepped back, pulling the gate wide open.

Shocked with the realisation that four dinner-plate eyes were now focussed on him, Vern instinctively reached for his sword, forgetting it was tied down. He turned and fled with a scream.

Go play, ladies. Mara held her breath as the two shadows of death loped by silently.

Col never stood a chance. He was dead before he could scream. Covered in his fresh blood, the first rockion pounced, crushing him beneath its claws before pawing the bloodied corpse around the lane.

Vern managed to get a bit of a distance, but he was swept up in large, toothy jaws. The rockion tossed his body into the air. He hit the cobbles with a splat. The beast did it several times, each time punctuated by a high-pitched growl.

Mara knew she was lucky to still be breathing. She had to move before either of the rockions decided she wasn’t really what she smelt like; and there was also the inevitable fact the compound would be soon swarming with guards.

Her nightgown was now ruined, but it would still serve a purpose. She picked it up and wiped up Col’s congealing blood then threw the rags into the enclosure. “Let them think I’m also dead.”

She had no idea where the locket was now. Gathering her dropped pack, she raced away from the gory scene to where Col had come from as it was the nearest building. It was dim, but still enough moonlight entered through the broken window to allow her to see.

A quick search found some other clothes and boots. She didn’t let her mind consider when they were last washed, if ever. Running around in silk nightgowns was one thing, but she could not run around completely naked. Not even from a whorehouse.

That would most definitely invite more unwanted attention.

As she donned the clothing, she discovered the knife had fallen out somewhere. She snatched a satchel from a chair and stuffed the food inside.

“Now, how to get the hell out of here?” Moving carefully, a back door led through a lean-to then a lane. The sounds of men yelling and screaming, punctuated by the occasional roar and growl, came from her left. Fortunately, judging by the position of the descending moon, she needed to turn to her right to head back to the stables.

Though it was less risky, she could have simply run to the nearest woods, but trying to escape on foot would be foolhardy. They’d track her down before dawn. The riskier, but far more practical escape would be mounted. She only had to head towards the rousing guardhouse, saddle a horse and race off before anyone spotted her.

Mara heard several horses snort as she entered the stables. One sounded familiar.

“You’re going crazy, girl. One horse snorting is much like any other,” she mumbled, going from one stall to the next until the last one.

“Sleena?” With a cry of joy, Mara ducked under the railing to hug the horse she thought she’d never see again.

Sleena reared in the stall, pawing the air and whinnying in fear, setting off some of the other horses.

“Shit.” After a tortuous moment she realised she was wearing a scent that would terrify any animal. And no doubt the clothes reeked from the rockions too.

Backing away, a search located a water trough. It was a far cry from the hot mineral spring she had grown accustomed to, but with no other option, she climbed in and doused herself and rubbed fiercely for as long as she dared, mindful any moment guards would be coming in.

While talking calmly to soothe her horse, her second approach to Seleena was far more successful, but the attempted hug was still too much. The horse whinnied, lifting and turning away. Mara had to settle for a neck rub.

Once saddled, she walked Seleena towards the doors. There was an old cloak and straw hat on a hook. She reached out and grabbed them before mounting, hoping her manly clothes, along with the cloak to cover her curves. The hat wasn’t fitting. She pulled the now bent hairpins from the tangled and blood-smattered mess of her hair and tried again. The hat now obscured her long hair.

The sun was cresting the horizon as she moved onto the road where she nudged Seleena into a slow trot.

More cries and screams came to her ears. Seleena's ears twitched nervously. Mara leaned forward to whisper in her ear and scratch her neck until they rounded a bend where she felt it was safe enough to increase their speed without raising undue attention.

"Let's get out of this cesspool." Letting her horse pick the pace, she revelled in the wind rushing through her hair.

###

CHAPTER 8

She wasn't just racing away in any random direction, but the only realistic option for her was south. This was where the bulk of House Olber allies were situated, but that also meant it was the obvious place for her to go.

It wasn't lost on her that if anyone searched for her, this would also be the most likely direction to start looking. *Assuming they still think I'm alive.* She hoped fervently the bloodied nightgown in the rockion lair—along with the knowledge rockions ate everything—would be sufficient evidence for them to conclude she was dead.

Even so, Mara wasn't about to run to the nearest noble house and beg sanctuary, that would only increase the risk of getting caught and ruin another fine noble house and end any chance of maintaining alliances with the other houses.

No, the best thing about heading south was simply there were far fewer potential spies. She wasn't kidding herself, there would be spies, but fewer than to the north. Mara then had another consideration. Ont'eba would be the one collecting the information, as well as Blarik. She'd need to be wary. For all his faults, her uncle wasn't completely stupid. She doubted he'd rely on one source of data, and could have contacts anywhere.

She hadn't been this far from home before, keeping her ventures closer to the estate, and Larandi, the capital, and took in the features of the landscape in the hope something would gel from any descriptions she may have heard from her father and his meetings.

Jaranabi mostly landlocked, which is why the port on the north coast was vital, and why Blarik was so keen to quash any infiltration from Klarget, even if it was an extremely remote possibility.

Three nations shared the island of Harando; Jaranabi was the largest; Klarget second and Dran'ali third. Expand on this a bit perhaps

Only a power-hungry paranoid would give this any further consideration.

Jaranabi's east and west were made up from rugged mountain ranges. The geographer Samanka had travelled far and wide. It was one of the more interesting lessons to sit in on. He was nice to look at too, hence why his classes were always full. He was about ten years older, but the wealth of knowledge he had was surprising.

While Jaranabi had a large southern coastline, it was all jagged cliffs from border to border. Her country had no east or west coast. Klarget basically had the whole west shore, and Dran'ali stretched down the east.

Several attempts in the past had been made to establish a southern port, but the remoteness, and harshness of the region made nothing more than tiny fishing villages hugging the cliffs viable. She had Florin to vouch for that.

With the knowledge that she wouldn't be safe in any noble house—even if they did take her in—the choices of a safe refuge to go was exceedingly small. In fact, there was only the one place she felt she could be safe assuming the stories were anywhere near accurate. And the recent development of magyk reinforced the idea of her destination.

The Crag. Even though it sounded like an unpleasant place, with it being a woman's refuge, she hoped to find sanctuary. If there was a witch living there—as in a real witch and not some nasty cow everyone despised—then perhaps there was a chance even remotely, some form of guidance could be given.

Despite Corum's assurance, she had an irrational fear of losing her mind. Some of the things she had done or attempted to do created doubts. Mara didn't want to go insane—only crazy people wanted that. *You're getting delirious, girl. You need rest and food.*

She had been on the road now for a week.

Her food had gone the first night, then, when she couldn't forage, she resorted to stealing from the remote farmhouses she came across. She hated having to do that, believing that a farmer would help a woman in her predicament. But if anyone was searching, her trail would be easily found.

She avoided all towns and when she spotted someone approaching on the road, she hid. It would have been better to avoid the roads all together, but a lone rider on the road was one thing, but since this was mostly agricultural land, a rider traipsing through a field would create more trouble than it was worth.

Several times now she had been surprised by travellers. Not being able to get away quickly enough, she kept her head down and made non-committal grunting noises at any query in the hope they either thought 'he' was a simpleton, or with a sickness.

Whichever the case, it worked and they moved on quickly, some with a wave, some with a shrug, and one with curses and threats, which she feigned ignorance; putting her trust that Saleena

could easily outrun any farmer's nag if the threats became reality. Luckily, they were nothing but bravado.

Sleena had not failed her yet, but her condition was slowly deteriorating. Several times now Mara had to clear her hooves from rocks and mud, but a shoe was coming loose and she had no way to fix that.

Face it, you will need to get help from a town sooner than later.

The road she was on, more of a track, wended up another rise. As always, she stopped and listened carefully to hear any approaching horses or wagon before cresting the hill. When all she got was the soft susurrations of the wind, she slowly moved ahead.

At the top of this rise she saw a small hamlet at a junction where the track joined a road heading more or less east and west. One side of the road was a field with a crop of sunflowers, drooping and brown, ready to harvest. The other was fallow. In the distance, beyond the many fields, was the dark blur of the southern renowned Great Southern Woods.

Over the last days she put together some of the landmarks based on the various descriptions she'd heard at home. She didn't know the name of this village, but if she was accurate with her bearings, the road to the west would lead to the Trallko estates; House Olber's strongest allies.

And therefore, a place guaranteed to be watched.

No patrols were seen or heard either in her week or travel, but there were better and faster roads heading south.

Let them continue thinking I'm rockion fodder. The main sadness with that is the trauma Florin would be going through. Poor girl. So lovely, so sweet... maybe not so innocent. She smiled at that. Perhaps, one day—

Sleena snorted.

There were hoofbeats on the wind. Mara glanced over her shoulder to see a horse and cart a few hundred yards away. Standing like a dolt on the hilltop, she was easily seen. Leaving the road now wasn't an option.

“Okay girl, maybe you'll have a bed tonight.” She clucked Sleena forwards and slowly trotted to the village.

She kept her head down and avoided eye contact with anyone while searching for a stable or a blacksmith. There was a barn attached to the side of a two-level tavern and after dismounting, walked over to it. Tying Sleena to a post, she went to the doorway and looked inside, letting her

eyes adjust to the dimness. There was one other horse in the far stall, a farmer's nag, not a courier or long-distant traveller's horse. There was no stable hand.

Thinking the taverner should be able to help point her to a blacksmith, she reluctantly headed for the door and pushed it open. Her first impression was of a cool and homely interior; not too bright, but comfortable to view without stumbling into gloom or a glaring lantern. There was a wide central aisle with several tables either side directing new patrons to the long wooden bar. A large hearth—cold now because of the season—took up half the wall to her right, and there was a door in the adjoining wall with the stable.

The half dozen patrons looked her way, but kept chatting, drinking and eating; totally relaxed. One serving girl worked the bar, but the taverner wasn't in sight.

Here goes nothing.

Lingering in the doorway would attract attention. Mara stepped across the threshold as the door swung slowly closed, and casually made her way to the bar. It wasn't lost on her that she probably reeked, but there was little to do about it, and surely others would be equally odorous after several days of travel.

"Evenin', miss. Any chance of a smithy seein' to me 'orse," Mara asked in a quiet voice when she reached the bar.

She felt ridiculous speaking like this, but part of her ad-hoc spy training was for the students to attempt to fit in with the local community, whether they be country yokels or city well-to-doers. As the instructor had said: "Only the experienced and well-travelled spy can master this, but ladies, may I suggest you practice with each other as homework. Until you go out in the wide world, it is all you can do."

Imitating a male was also for those with vast experience and practice. She just wanted to sound like a travel-weary woman. Her appearance was certainly that, being in desperate need of a wash, with her dishevelled hair, dirty fingernails and smelly clothes.

The barmaid smiled her greeting politely. She was about the same height, marginally slightly fuller figure, and though a decade older, still moved with a spring in her step.

"Welcome to Culming. The smithy is out on errands, but'll be back in the mornin'. Looks like you'd be needin' a drink. What'll it be?"

"Ale, I reckon. What've ya got that'll hit the spot?"

“Red wine from the best vineyards in all Jaranabi. The Trallko estate is jus’ up the roads a bit.”

“Trallko? I’ve ’eard of ’em. Sounds like the ticket. And food?” Mara was famished.

“Righto. Let me fetch yer drink and some grub.” She efficiently uncorked a bottle of red and poured into a mug. “No wine glass ’ere,” she apologised, placing the mug on the counter.

“Not a bother, I’m thirsty enough ta drink outta me boot if I ’ave ta.”

“Righto then. Wants to sit at the bar or a table?” she moved around the far end of the bar and wiped down an empty table by the inert hearth. “Table ’ere is betta. Plonk that perty arse down there,” she said with a twinkle in her eye.

Beautiful greens eyes, just like Florin “Thank’ya kindly.” Mara sat in the chair backing the wall. It was a simple, sturdy chair, but after a week in the saddle and sitting on the ground, it was bliss.

The barmaid flicked her long locks of red hair back over her shoulder. “Me name’s Nioma. Grub comin’ up.” Nioma left through a back door into what Mara assumed was the kitchen area.

From under her hat, she cast her eyes around the room while she sipped. No one looked her way with anything more than casual glances. Their voices were not overloud. It was a nice atmosphere.

Her head was itchy and sweaty. She pulled out the hairpin, now converted to a hat pin, to stop the hat from blowing off with the riding and the wind and removed the hat, hooking it over the back of the chair beside her. It was a relief to run her fingers through the long strands, removing what tangles she could. She knew it must look dreadful, but shaking her locks free almost made her laugh.

Nioma returned shortly with a bowl of stew and a small bread roll.

“Your hair is utterly magnificent,” she placed it down in front of her with a spoon.

“Why thank’ya. Jus needs a goo—” Mara went red-faced, seeing Nioma’s grin. Her yokel accent was gone. “Are you...”

“Let me introduce myself properly.” She held out her hand. Even for a barmaid, the hands were elegant and well-cared for.

Unsure, Mara reached for the proffered hand. When she did, the grip was firm, but she felt the tell-tale tap and scratch sign of the spy school.

“Welcome to Culming. I’m Nioma Blakthorg, very pleased to meet you.”

“And you. You know who I am? Was I that obvious?”

“To a trained eye, yes, but considering the minimal training you’ve had, it is completely understandable.”

Mara’s embarrassment turned to worry. *Who was Nioma really working for?* Tired and weary as she was, Mara slowly moved her feet under the table to a position allowing her to dash to the door if need be.

“I know what you’re thinking. Please relax. I should have given you this the moment you opened your mouth and brutalised and tormented your first syllable.” From the neckline of her blouse, Nioma extracted an envelope. It was vellum. Expensive and not what you’d expect to see anywhere in the boondocks.

“Dare I ask...”

Nioma sat down opposite her and softened her voice. “You are Mara, and you are safe. Onty sent word a raven-haired beauty would be heading south, and here you are; raven-haired and beautiful, though obviously a bit saddle sore and tired.”

Mara nodded. *This could also be a ploy.*

“Not convinced? Understandable. If Blarik wanted you captured, it would have happened. In fact, there was also a pigeon a couple of days ago, basically saying the same thing as Onty, though ‘raven-haired and beautiful were nowhere in the message.’”

“What did Blarik have to say then?”

“To notify him immediately if the traitorous wench, Mara Olber, showed her face.”

“I see...”

“Lucky for you though, I work for Onty and not some fat old pervert.”

“So, you know my uncle well then?” Mara grinned.

“I have had the displeasure of his unwanted attentions, if that’s what you mean.”

“Did he...” Mara let the sentence go and shook her head. “Forget it.” It wasn’t her business to ask and she felt horrible.

“I’ve not seen the prig for a several years. He has a beard now, hasn’t he?”

“He does.”

“That’s because he has a large scar just below his lip. He tried to get it on with me—men always underestimate women. If he tried before my training, he might have succeeded, but I’ve done some training in defending myself. I broke a wine glass and sliced it.

“He was furious, but Onty stepped in at the last minute and whisked me away. Can’t get much further south than here, and here I am.”

Mara couldn’t believe some of the similarities they had. “I guess my ploy of being devoured by rockions didn’t work.”

“Guess not, though... since the pigeon arrived a couple days ago—and you’ve been on the road for what, a week?” Nioma continued at her nod. “Then it worked for a time. How’d you—” Nioma stopped. “Okay. I have to apologise. This is not the time nor the place.” She picked up the untouched bowl and spoon. “Grab your wine and follow me.”

Without looking back, Nioma went into the kitchen, Mara following. The realisation this could be an elaborate trap only dawned on her when she left the tavern lounge.

But it wasn’t. Nioma had another table, slightly better quality and not so worn out, to the side of the kitchen.

“This is your place then? No taverner?”

“You’re looking at her.” Nioma bowed slightly. “Have a seat and please eat up. Help yourself to more if you like.” She pointed to the pot. “I’m going to run you a bath. Nothing like the school’s spa but I’m sure you aren’t going to object.”

After two bowls of stew and several glasses of the strong wine, she followed the directions of her hostess and went to bathe with a sponge and soap. There was even a lotion that stopped the scalp itch! She wanted to cry with the relief, and did.

Nioma came in later and helped wash her back, then brushed her hair, humming softly.

Any awkwardness about nudity around another woman was long gone.

“I’m going to burn those clothes,” Nioma told her as she started braiding. “I have spare clothes which should be alright, though you are slimmer. I could take them in if need be.”

“Oh, no. You’ve done so much. I can sew. Before this nightmare, sewing and embroidery were about the only skills I had.”

“I doubt that’s true, but it’s okay. Let’s see how it fits first.”

Mara dressed in the clothes laid out for her, a loose blouse with a low neckline. The leggings were a thigh hugging leather, which were practical for horse riding. The evening passed like in a dream. They chatted and reminisced, punctuated by Nioma tending to the bar.

“Most of the locals help themselves anyway,” she said. “They’re an honest bunch down here.”

“Are you a local?”

“Local enough.” She told her a brief family history, but it was not much different that most of the girls. “It helps with the dialect though. I blend in.”

“I must have sounded atrocious.” Mara looked aghast.

“Honestly, I reckon I suffered internal damage trying not to laugh.”

Mara laughed. “Cow.”

“Can’t get much more local than a domesticate animal, I say.” Nioma laughed too, refilling the wine.

“Shit, Sleena—”

“Your horse is fine. I got one of the lads to take care of her. She looks like a nice mare.”

“She is, thank you. Can you ride?”

“Born in the saddle.”

“You must think badly of me for her condition.”

“Nonsense. I have an idea what you’ve been through, though everyone’s trauma is personal. But...enough of that maudlin crap. You must be exhausted, and I dare say if I’m feeling it, the wine will have gone to your head too. I’ve made up a bed. It’s—”

“Let me guess, not like the feather-down mattresses at school.”

“Exactly. Nothing like them. I’ll show you. Need a hand?”

“I’ll manage.” Using the walls as support Mara followed Nioma down the narrow hall and up the back stairs. *Oh. Nice.* She was eye level with her backside and couldn’t help but notice the hypnotising sway of her hips... the way her butt—

Nioma stopped suddenly to open the door.

Mara bumped into her. “Oops. Got distracted there.” She giggled, feeling her face getting warm. She nearly slipped down the stairs, but managed to regain her balance.

“It happens. The room is nothing like you’d be used too,” Nioma said by way of apology.

“If it’s more comfortable than a pile of leaves or a barn, I’ll be happy.” Partly because of the wine, and exhaustion, tears of relief ran down her cheeks. “I honestly can’t thank you enough.” She swayed for a moment before ascending the last few steps.

Nioma put a hand out.

“I’m fine.” Mara shook her head, but not too much or she’d get dizzy. The stairs and door way were narrow. Sliding past her hostess, Mara paused, breathing. *Even her sweat smells divine.* Looking down, she couldn’t help compare cleavage. *Her breasts are the same as mine...* “Achtilly, I think I’m drunk,” she declared.

“You’re in a tavern. That happens on occasions too.” Nioma chuckled, helping her through to the room which was small, but comfortable and clean. “Need a hand getting undressed.”

“Aha, I see your cunnin’...plan. Takin’ advantage of me...” She pulled the blouse up which tangled in her long hair. After a brief wrestle, hair and blouse parted.

Nioma plumped up her pillow. “I could have taken advantage of you when you bathed.”

“Ahh... but I wasn’t tipsy then.” She stuck her tongue out.

“Do you need to be?” Nioma asked softly, but Mara was battling with the leggings. And losing

“I’ve grown fat...” With the leggings down to her knees she lost balance and fell onto the bed. She knocked her head, but laughed it off. “kay...you can help.”

Laughing with her, Nioma knelt and peeled the trousers down the remainder of her slim legs, then lifted them onto the bed. “Cunning plan, indeed,” she muttered.

“Did you say somethin’?” Mara asked through a yawn, lying back.

“Girl, from the way Onty talks about you, I’m surprised he let a treasure like you go.” Nioma moved up, leant on the pillow and stroked her hair.

“He had no choice,” Mara mumbled.

“Is it true you were going to be married?”

Mara smiled at her, though they were slightly unfocused. “You could say that. Blarik palmed me off to the Overlord of Dran’ali. I’m not a... brood mare to spawn a foreigner’s bloodline.”

“Dran’ali?” Nioma made a circle with her lips. “Their horses are legendary.”

Lying back, Mara closed her eyes. “I’d put in a good word for you, but my beloved horse-herder overlord would skin me.”

“I can’t blame him. Your skin is exquisite,” Nioma admired, running her eyes down her lithe body.

Mara yawned again, snuggling into the soft pillow. “So’s yours.”

“Liar.” Nioma chuckled quietly.

“Night...dear...Florin,” Mara whispered.

Nioma had to stifle her laugh as Mara was already asleep, snoring slightly.

“Rest easy, beautiful lady.” She pulled the sheet over her and watched her for a few moments before getting up and softly closing the door.

###

CHAPTER 9

“Hey there sleepyhead. How was that?” Nioma greeted her halfway along the hall. She gave her a warm hug and quick kiss on the cheek.

Mara tingled at the intimate contact, noting the scent of her perfume. “Hmm. That is lovely. Lavender mist?”

“Well done. You have a good nose too.”

“It’s one of my favourites. And yes, it was truly the best sleep I’ve ever had.”

“I’m sure it felt that way.” Nioma turned. “Come and have a seat in the kitchen. I’ll put breakfast on.”

“Please, let me help. You cook and care for people all day.”

“Because I enjoy doing it. If I’m not out with the horses, then this is where I’d rather be. Now stop fretting and sit.” Nioma changed her accent and pronunciation which would have fitted in seamlessly with the high council meeting. “You are in House Piorin and you *will* follow the instructions of the head of house to the letter. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mara curtsied, smiling. “And that was very good.”

“Why’s thankee m’lady. I jus ’av this knack, dun’ya know. Now git yerself sat.”

Mara’s smile stretched from ear to ear and sat where the plates had already been laid. It wasn’t long before her cheeks and jaw needed massaging to relieve the ache. It was such a change of circumstance from the last week. She watched her getting the food prepared. She looked different and it took several minutes to see why. Nioma had fixed her hair up and was wearing nicer clothes.

“That’s a charming blouse,” she complimented. “It suits you completely.”

When Nioma brought a pot of tea and two cups, Mara swore she saw a rosy look to her cheeks, which hinted to her she was the reason for the extra care. *No point dressing up for shepherders*. Mara realised it might be wishful thinking, but it warmed her heart. She felt like she belonged here...for a short time at least.

“Breakfast won’t be long.” Nioma smiled, then went back to the stove.

Mara watched her busying herself. Even in the kitchen she moved with grace.

“Forgive me if I’m out of line, but I think you’re wasted here.” Mara poured the tea for both. “You have so much untapped talent.”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve been tapped.” Nioma turned and winked cheekily.

Mara grinned when she realised Nioma’s meaning.

The clothes Nioma had put out for her were similar; a pair of leggings that seemed to stretch and hug her thighs and a light and comfortable blouse. “These are lovely too, thank you. A far cry from those silky and clingy nightgowns we had to wear. Surely only a man would think of see-through clothing for girls.” Her mind went dark thinking of Blarik’s debauchery.

“Would you’d be surprised to know it was, in fact, a woman? She started the school about forty years ago.”

“A woman started this?”

Naomi nodded. “Madam Dolor Phian, she despised men and loved the female form so much, she only employed young beautiful girls and wanted to look at them all day.”

“Plain girls can’t spy?”

“Sure, they can. The spying is relatively new, at least for the school. Madam Phian only ran brothels, for both males and females.”

“When does the tavern open?” she asked as a pan of eggs and bacon were brought over.

“Why? You want something to do?” She teased, then answered. “Lunchtime until late. If I had paying guests, I’d be here for them, otherwise times my own.” She dished out equal portions of food for Mara, then herself.

“Oh, about that...”

“Don’t you dare offer payment! Other than being insulting, as far as I’m concerned this is spy work. You’re just in deep, deep cover.”

Mara opened her mouth.

“And no thanks are necessary either. I’ve had nothing but farmers and shepherders for months, and while they are a nice bunch, your arrival is like a breath of fresh air. I should be thanking *you*.”

Having put the pan on the bench she returned to the table and sat. Nioma sipped her tea, and started eating. “Now, down to business,” she said after she swallowed.

“What plans have you got? Do you have a final destination?”

Mara chewed thoughtfully. “It sounds crazy.”

“Should be a good cover then. No one will think of it. Tell me.”

“I was going heading for The Craggs,” Mara said tentatively.

“The Craggs? That is crazy. Brilliant.”

“You think so?” To her it was an idea borne of desperation, but if Nioma, with all her experienced agreed with it, she felt a release in tension.

“For you, sure. Not for me though.”

“Sometimes I think it ludicrous, other times it would seem obvious for a woman in my situation. What do you know about it? I mean, I’ve heard stuff, but if you’re so local...”

Nioma related all she knew about The Craggs, which wasn’t too much different than what Mara had already known.

“Corum said there was a witch?”

“Oh yes. She’s old, but very powerful. How do you think the community has survived so long? You think the men that run this place want a women’s refuge becoming a bona fide community?”

Mara hesitated, her father had been ‘one of those men’, though he never struck her as being a misogynist.

“Oh. Sorry,” Nioma looked contrite, realising what she just said. “I didn’t mean your father; not personally. Like any ruler, unless he is constantly travelling the realm, what he knows is relayed to him by others. No doubt some men have their own agendas and probably feel your father didn’t need to know every bit of the goings-on in the boondocks.”

“Like Blarik.”

“Exactly. Tells your father one thing, does something completely different. I hate politics,” she said after sipping more tea. “Have you thought of about an identity, a name. Background? What did they teach you at spy school?”

“The specifics of spying weren’t top of the agenda. Seemed my studies concentrated on the mysteries of manly wiles.”

“Oh, a short course then.” Nioma laughed. “It isn’t like it’s a long list—tits, arse and open legs will get his attention every time.”

Mara blushed at the ribald description, hiding her face in her cup.

“It’s true!” Nioma nudged her.

“I don’t doubt you.” She put her cup down. “I’ve not...When...The only attention I’ve had from men was brief, brutal and clumsy.”

“You never...?”

Mara shook her head. *Not with a man.*

“What about any friends at..? Never mind. None of my business.” Nioma gave her a long, soft look. She changed the subject, moving away from the awkward moment. “But a Dran’ali queen would have been such a magnificent posting.”

Mara sighed, relieved. She didn’t know why being a virgin was such a taboo subject, or why it caused so much awkwardness. “Sure, if you overlooked the constant fucking and beating. Can’t do a great deal of spying on your back in bed.”

“Well, true enough. But if it was the right person...that’s where pillow-talk comes into it.”

“Blarik just wanted me gone. I don’t believe he had any plans for me being a foreign agent. He wanted a cavalry.” Mara told her of the horse dowry,

Nioma’s eyes widened and she nearly choked on her tea. She laughed at herself and wiped her chin.

“I have the perfect identity for you; Tarryn Kronyer. While not noble, has a slightly similar history—only child, deceased mother, father not around, and abused. Should be easy to fill her boots, considering the similarities.” Nioma gave her all the background while they finished their breakfast. “She was a cover I used in the north. I very much doubt any residents of The Craggs will know of her, and if you’ve no other persona, she’s already developed.”

“You’ve been north?” Mara poured the last of the tea.

“As far as Whelron. I had a short stint there, yes, but Onty managed to get me back here.”

“Was that Blarik overstepping again? Uncle or not, someone should deal with that arsehole. I made some feeble attempts, but would roundly applaud anyone who managed success.”

“You never know. The opportunity to complete it may present itself.”

“I can’t imagine it happening. Not if I’m ensconced in The Craggs.”

“Perhaps, but did you ever think you’d be at a spy school? Or a Dran’ali Queen, or heading to The Craggs?”

Mara shook her head.

“Never say never,” Nioma said sagely then started clearing the table.

After helping wash the dishes, Mara wanted to see Sleena. Nioma directed her to the back door then began preparation for another day in the tavern. When Mara entered the barn and saw a barrel-chested man tending to her hooves.

“Mornin’” he said, looking up.

“Hello to you. Chaz, isn’t it? How is she?” Mara stepped in and gave her horse a neck rub and some apple pieces.

“Not overly bad, but much more, it coulda been. I’ll redo the lot, miss.”

“You’re too kind.”

“Pleasure.” Chaz inclined his head. “Beides, Ny would ’av me balls if I didn’t. She knows ’er ’orses, she does. This mare is lovely too.”

The day past slowly. After noon, the usual crowd arrived either singly or in pairs. They ordered their drinks and food and sat to discuss the state of the weather, the flock or the crops.

Chaz had done a fine job on Sleena, and Mara spent an hour or so giving her a good brush and getting the tangles out of her mane and tail. She also found a very well stocked saddle kit, and decided to give the saddle and all the gear a thorough clean and started pulling everything apart, straps and all, then wipe the encrusted dust off all the surfaces before rubbing them down with the saddle soap.

Nioma approved later when Mara told her of her afternoon.

“Do they have horses at the Craggs?” She asked later when there was a quiet moment. The wine was out, so they sat side by side, chatted and sipped quietly.

“I don’t know. I can’t see it happening. The community is on steep cliffs. Mountain goats might be better.”

“Sure, I’ll ride off into the sunset on my trusty mountain goat.”

“You’d be going the wrong direction to get to The Craggs.” Nioma laughed. “You’d be in Lutwan in a couple of hours?”

“Other than the Trallko estate, I know little about this region...”

“At last, I found my calling, a trip adviser to wayward spies.” Nioma went on to give a general rundown of the area. The tavern was in Huttern. Lutwan was a fishing village also hugging the cliffs.

“A fellow student and a good friend of mine—in fact the only friend—said she came from a town like that. Are there many down here?”

“Not that direction. Dobigh is only other village on the coast and is way over to the east. What was your friend’s name?”

“Florin Allcin. She said she came from a village where the fishing was difficult, but they harvested lots of shellfish. She was a diver.”

“Ah, Florin.” Nioma smiled knowingly.

“You know her!” Mara asked in disbelief.

“No... you...said her name last night.”

“I did? Whe...” She blushed.

“Mara. Seriously, it’s alright.” Nioma put an arm across her shoulders for a brief hug and continued. “I don’t know the family name, but I’ll keep an ear out now. Never know. They might appreciate knowing their girl is doing well.” Nioma paused. “Is she?”

“Doing well? Oh...yes. She’s the youngest there, but she’s got spunk and doesn’t stop.”

“Sounds promising. And now, the list of bitches, if you please.”

“List?”

“You said you had one friend, and she was the youngest? Remember, I’ve been there. I can see it now. The youngest student—always picked on and treated like trash, then a new girl comes along. Before you know it, she reaches out, desperate to make a friend before the others get their claws into you and turn you against her.”

“I... I never thought of it like that!”

“But it’s true though, isn’t it?”

“Sadly, it’s very accurate in hindsight.” Mara finished the last drops of wine.

Nioma poured two more glasses and had a swig from hers. “Okay. New subject. Name the head bitch.”

Mara sniffed and wiped her nose. “Shayr Reguk. I think she comes from Slamand, in the north. Not sure if the pronunciation is right.”

“I’m not surprised. She was a young student when I was there. She was vindictive then.”

“Hasn’t changed.” Mara told her the horror of the rockion trap. “Do you think she intended that? To have me killed?”

“That environment can change a person, especially set amongst a hoard of women from everywhere. Men, they just go and bash each other, then it’s done. Women nurture and feed grudges until an opportunity arises. And you stopped her from becoming a queen!”

“Not that I wanted any of it.”

“She wouldn’t have cared. With no chance of getting Blarik, she aimed her wrath at you. It’s cruel how some men go out of their way to make our lives a misery. But, when they’re not, some can be magnificent.”

“May I ask how old were you when you joined?”

“Twenty-six. I was working in a tavern near Horkin. A couple of unruly patrons were giving one of the other barmaids a hard time. I hard-timed them back instead. Onty witnessed the exchange and came over to talk. I was surprised to see a eunuch in town. About a month later he calls in and asks me to join up. And that’s me. Well-travelled, well-tapped, and well-versed in all things deceptive.”

“And still so young and vibrant.”

“Flattery works too.” She reached out and touched Mara’s fingers for a moment. “So…” Grinning, brought out a slip of paper and a pen. “I better send Onty an update. Let him know you’re here and safe.”

“What if Blarik gets it? Don’t these messages sometimes get intercepted?”

“Sometimes. Welcome to the conundrum of spying—getting information across accurately without others getting it. That’s why we have cypher.”

“Cypher?”

“Another subject you didn’t need. Coded messages. It won’t make any sense to anyone unless they have the key.”

Nioma looked at her for a few moments, considering, then put pen to parchment, scribbling in code and gave it to her.

“What language is that?” Mara stared with little comprehension at the text. She even turned the slip of paper upside down.

“Spyspeak, silly.”

“And they’re actual words?”

“Coded. Yes.” Nioma shrugged, smiling.

“What’s it say?”

“Not telling. And it’s yours to keep.”

“Isn’t this for Onty?” She held it to her.

“Oh, he wouldn’t want that one.” Nioma chuckled. “That ones for your eyes only. Maybe you’ll decipher it one day.”

“I’d never be able to do that.” Mara stared at it, perplexed.

“Then my secret’s safe.” Nioma winked and pulled out another thin slip of paper. “I’ll write another to tell him you’ve arrived and safe, heading to the Crag. Even in code though, I won’t mention your name or even ‘raven-haired beauty’ or The Crag, but he’ll work it out.”

“And you have a pigeon?”

“Several, but they belong to Chaz.”

“Is he…”

“A spy? No. But he helps out in many ways.”

“Lucky him.” Mara smiled cheekily.

Nioma chuckled. “Funnily enough, not that way. He has a family.”

“My apologies. I just assumed.”

“Easily done, especially after considering what you know of my background.”

“Which is hardly anything, apart from spy training.”

There was a knock at the door. Chaz’s large frame filled it a second later. “Ny. Message from ’is lordship. He’s comin’ through tonight. Need all the beds.”

“Oh crap. Now he tells me!” She jumped up. “Mara”

“Point me to where I can help.”

“Good girl. Knew you were smart.”

###

CHAPTER 10

Preparing as many beds as they could in a short time was sweaty work. Chaz was too bulky, so since Mara was slightly slimmer, she went into the loft and dragged out some extra bedding, disturbing several mice in the process. Once the extra bedding was dropped through the hole, Mara climbed down.

“You’re a treasure.” Nioma stood below to help her down the ladder with a steady hand.

Once down, they grabbed the bedding the pair headed to the rooms and started making the beds. There were five in this room, though it was a squeeze. Even four bunks was cosy.

“They’ll simply have to leave any of their kit outside.” Nioma dabbed at her brow and face with a damp towel and passed it to Mara. “Damn lucky I’ve got no boarders.”

“Where would Lord Trallko sleep if you had no spare beds?” she asked, dabbing her own face and neck.

“Shit, if it came to that, Harrod would have my bed and I’d hit the barn.”

“You’d do that? Your own bed?” Mara tossed the towel near the door and continued making the bed.

“Sure. Can’t have the local noble bedding the local taverner.”

Mara threw a pillow at her. “Not that—though I’ve no doubts it’s been done.”

“Many times, over the years, I have little doubt, but not with me, and not in my tavern.”

“How many can you fit in?”

“I only do one at a time. I have my principles. There are those howev—”

“Nioma! That’s not what I meant at all.”

“I know. I just love stirring you and seeing you riled. And blush.”

“I am not blushing.”

“No?”

“No. I’m just hot and sweaty.”

“Bath time later.”

“You’re incorrigible and have a one-track mind!” Having finished with the bunks here, they moved to the next room and continued.

“And I topped that class,” Nioma joked. “Okay. No bath. If pushed, and the men are short and slim, I can house about fifteen inside, another fifteen in the barn.”

“And how many have we coming?”

“No idea, but he’s never had more than twelve, so we should be right.”

“Does he do this often? Harrod always seemed so logical and orderly.”

“Only once before—”

“Let me guess, that was an impromptu High Council summons at my place?”

“When that summons was put out, he rolled straight on through. This was a couple of years ago—one of those rare Dran’ali incursions over the mountains.”

“I didn’t know they tried to invade.”

“More of a local clan flexing muscle. They lived in the highlands and found a narrow rift to get through. It was over in a few days, and a House Trallko and House Hommid gained several Dran’ali horses for breeding. Would just love to get my legs over one of those...”

“Nioma!” Mara did go bright red this time. “That’s...that’s...”

“Now look who has a one-track mind.” The taverner laughed again. “It’s okay, I have no Dran’ali blood, so I’m not interested in mating with any horses.”

They both burst out laughing.

“Oh, stop it.” Mara held her sides. “My jaw and ribs are hurting.”

“Fair enough, back to it.” Her friend sighed and stretched.

Before long, the last bed was made.

Approaching hoofbeats could be heard from the window.

Both girls glanced out.

“Advance guard,” Nioma guessed.

“Oh...he’s here. He’s here.” Mara almost jumped like a child and spun towards the door.

Nioma was there before her, blocking the exit. “Mara, you can’t go. Your presence has to remain a secret!”

“But it’s Trinol! My head guard. He is absolutely wonderful and trustworthy.” Mara tried to push passed, but Nioma had a surprisingly strong grip.

“Believe me, I know. It’s hard, but... hear me, first.” She let go. “I can’t force you not to go...well—I could—but I won’t. You need to understand Blarik has eyes and ears in most noble

households. Trallko's is no exception, and being a strong ally of House Olber, you can be certain he will keep tabs."

"Can't something be done about them?"

"We get rid of them, yes—and we know of at least two—and then new ones are sent. We won't know who or when. Better battling the monster at your door, than the small beast sneaking up from behind."

"I can hear him laughing..." Mara stared longingly back to the window. "It's good he is well and happy, and I'm glad he managed to get away with his family. I've spent weeks worrying." She turned back to her friend. "I understand. Thank you for being so strong. And I'm sorry..."

"Oh girl..." Nioma held her again, but in consolation, not annoyance. "It is me who is sorry. You need and deserve some happiness, and I seem to be the one standing in your way. This is a burden I wouldn't wish on anyone."

Mara hugged her back, taking the time to get her emotions under control. It was a prolonged hug, one that neither seemed to be in a hurry to break.

Nioma nuzzled her neck then pulled back to look at her; her green eyes, moist and longing searching those deep blue eyes. She cupped the back of her head, threading her fingers through her dark locks. She licked her lips. "Mara...I know there has been heartache and trauma leading to you being here, and if I could, I would take it all back, but for all the wrong reasons...I am glad you are here—"

Mara's kiss was pure and passionate, and was reciprocated in kind.

The whinny of horses and raucous laughter of several men broke through the haze of their desire.

They parted, eyes sparking. And laughed with newfound joy.

"I guess you better see to the men."

"Work work work." Nioma kissed her quickly then turned and flounced away, a new spring in her step.

Weak-need all of a sudden, Mara slumped back onto a freshly made bunk.

She went to wash her face before heading downstairs to start the food preparation. She seemed to move in a daze.

Nioma was soon back in the kitchen and looked over with a coy smile. "You okay?"

"Better than I can remember."

“Wonderful. Me too. Thanks for doing the vegetables.”

“A woman with skills other than sewing, remember.” Mara took a moment to breathe at the feeling of contentment. Soon, several piles of vegetables covered the large table and she began cutting and peeling.

“I dare say that’ll be Lord Trallko this time,” Nioma said when more horses were heard. “Stay here, don’t go into the bar and keep away from the windows.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Mara curtsied. Practicality and security aside, she was still disappointed over not being able to speak with Trinol and let him know she was alright.

“And don’t pout. You know the reason.” Nioma blew her a kiss and went to investigate, making sure the door was closed.

“Ner ner ner ..” Mara tossed vegetables into a pot. “Shit,” she said, annoyed her little tantrum made the hot water splash and hiss over the stove top. She topped it up and put the lid on, slightly askew so it wouldn’t boil over then started preparing the meat.

A few minutes later Nioma stormed back inside, almost slamming the door. “Shit. Shit and double shit.” She put several more lengths of wood in the stove and started to angrily stir the pot.

“What is it?” Mara looked up from the bench where she was now cutting the meat.

“Mimia is with him.”

“Harrod’s daughter? I haven’t seen her for years.”

“Damn it. Damn her!”

“Why’s that a problem? She’s not too bad...bit of a stick in the mud...but she’s okay.”

“Because she can’t very well sleep in the rooms with the men, and definitely not the barn. That means she’ll have to have my bed. And her maid will have to sleep on the floor.”

“Your room? I’ll sleep in the barn and she can have my bed,” Mara offered.

“No can do, my pretty one. Firstly, I can’t very well send our noble born lass to the smallest room in the tavern—”

“You did to me...”

“And,” Nioma tossed a cloth at her, continuing. “You can’t be seen, remember? These chaps will be tending their own horses and tack. They will be in the barn for ages. And I reckon one or two will probably sleep there. Plus, there will be patrols...and if they find some buxom beauty in the hayloft...you see where I’m going with this?”

Mara nodded.

“Harrod even apologised for the short notice. He’ll be sharing a room with his captain of the guard; the rest of the men will have to bunk where we can fit them. Chaz is rearranging a couple of bunks.”

As if on cue, the sound of furniture scrapping on floorboards sounded from above.

There was a sharp knock at the door and Lord Trallko walked in.

“Nioma, as a token of good—Mara!” The bottle of wine Harrod had fell to the floor and smashed on the flagstones. Glass shards scattered in all directions and red wine splashed across the tiles and seeped through the joins.

Within a heartbeat, booted feet came running and three guards barged in to the kitchen.

Trinol was one of them. He stopped and stared. “Mara!”

“Well...fuck!” Mara and Nioma swore.

“My Lady. What are you doing here? Mara...” Harrod stepped over the broken glass and hugged her. “We thought Blarik had some dark plans for you. For weeks we have beseeched him for news. Every time he ignored us.”

Mara hugged Harrod back. While he was also a lord, he was a very close friend of her father and her mother before. She wept tears of joy to see them, sad for the memories he stirred within.

When she backed away, Trinol was watching with wide, eyes. Tears streaking his face.

He dropped to his knee. “My Lady...”

“Get up, Trin.”

In a fluid motion her head of guard stood. She reached out and they hugged like brother and sister.

More tears were shed, and she realised everyone in the kitchen was staring at her, dumbfounded.

Nioma, after a moment of hesitation, went to the door and closed it.

“Lord Trallko, no one can know of her presence.”

“What? This is cause for celebration.” The nobleman looked from face to face in confusion.

Mara explained quickly about her kidnapping, and subsequent escape. “I am truly glad to see you again too, but this—me—must remain a secret, as Nioma said. “I was hoping he was thinking I was dead, but that ruse lasted less than a week. Blarik will be searching high and low.” Mara went on to explain hr predicament.

“Yes, yes, of course. It will be as you say. You are still High Lady to me and those loyal to House Olber.”

Mara wept. Nioma looked surprised at hearing this and looked to Mara with questions in her eyes.

“Where are you all off too at such short notice?”

“We had another summons from that fat fool. This time with dire threats if we don’t bring Mimia with us.”

“Your daughter? Why?”

“All the Houses are invited, their daughters especially, for a wedding ceremony.”

“Wedding? Whose?”

“Urgad Hakower.”

“Is he still coming?”

“You knew?”

“It was supposed to be me. Blarik planned me to be the overlord strumpet. Hence why I escaped.”

“The message stated Urgad is marrying one of the daughters of a noble House. It’s a surprise—which is to say we don’t know who yet. It is promised to be the biggest event of the year. Of the decade. There will be an equally large ceremony in Dran’ali. All nobles are invited.”

“Surely someone knows who this replacement bride-to-be is?” Mara wondered fleetingly if Shayr really got what she wanted. *But Shayr wasn’t a noble, so...*

“If they do, they’re not saying. Probably the daughter of one of his friends up north.”

“You can’t say no to this? The wedding is a farce and he’s *not* the High Lord—it was a coup.”

“True, but he has the power and the man-power to enforce it, and taxing us to the hilt.”

“Your guards—”

“Have been conscripted. See many young men around here? Mostly all old farmers or the infirm. What you see here is half of what I have left, and I’m lucky to have these as it is.”

“But, there’s no war...”

“Not yet. Reports are it’s hotting up though.”

“Reports from who? Blarik’s resources? If he’s the one saying it, I wouldn’t believe them.” Mara looked at their faces. “Sorry. You’re not here for political discourse. And I’m out of the picture, so have no say.”

Harrod opened his mouth, but Mimia strolled in, pushing passed Nioma, and looked the place over with dissatisfaction.

“Mimia, look who it is!”

Mimia was slightly shorter than Mara, and slightly on the plumper side. Her brown hair looked as listless as her hazel eyes. She wore a plain beige dress—nothing too spectacular, and practical for hours spent in a carriage.

“Oh, Mara. How pleased to see you again. It’s been too long.”

Mara smiled. It didn’t take any spy school training to see the lack of authenticity of her words. “Mimia. Likewise.” Mara embraced her quickly. And how is Trisch?”

“Oh, mother is having one of her moods. She won’t be able to make it to the ceremony. Her loss.” From the look on her face, Mimia wasn’t overly impressed by the kitchen. “Is there somewhere I can wash the disgusting dust off?”

“M’lady, if’n it pleases you. I’ll show yer to yer bunk,” Nioma curtsied, catching Mara’s eye and winking. “Tha’ frock becomes yer, m’lady. Pick it yerself?”

Mara had to fight hard not to burst out laughing, especially at Mimia’s horror when she heard ‘bunk’.

“Very well, lead on.” Mimia walked a few steps after the taverner. “Oh, Mara. We must chat later. Lots of gossip to catch up on and all...”

“Of course, Mim. I’ll be he—.”

“Pru?” Mimia called out. “Goodness where is that girl? Pru!”

“M’lady.” Another woman came in, loaded with several bags. Pru may have been pretty, but now she was so haggard and dusty, it was hard to tell. “Comin’ right up.”

Mara opened her mouth and stepped towards her.

Trin quickly intervened. “Please, Pru. Allow me.”

“Oh, Master Trinol. It be okay.”

“Good. No arguments then.” He grabbed the bags, and carried them easily. The relief on Pru’s face was palpable. “Let’s be off then. Can’t leave dear Mim waiting. The poor flower will wilt any moment.” He winked at Mara as he passed.

With Nioma and Trin gone, Mara was left with Harrod and two guards. “I...I better clean this up...” she said, looking to the spilt wine.

“Oh. Yes. Um. I will see to the men. Mara... it truly is good to see you again.”

“And you. We will talk later,” she promised.

“Of course. As you wish.” He bowed. “My Lady.” He turned and left, motioning his men outside.

Mara slumped in a chair to breathe. She could hear Mim pointing out the deficiencies as she progressed to her room.

“...and dusty, these stairs are too steep ... and too narrow...”

Glad Trin is there to stop Ny from doing something stupid.

Several minutes later Nioma came down the stairs followed by Trinol. She went to the bar and returned a moment later with three mugs of ale and set them on the table. She immediately started drinking.

Leaving his mug untouched Trinol looked to Mara. “My Lady—”

“Trin, we’ve moved on from that.” She reached for his hand.

He smiled shyly. “Mara...I must see to the men. We will chat later?”

“Assuming you’re not guarding Mim’s door from assault.” She looked at Nioma’s fuming visage.

“I’m sure Lady Nioma will not be a concern.” He grinned at them both then left.

“That’s him, isn’t it.” Nioma smacked her lips and started on the mug she’ set for Trinol.

“Him who?”

“Your fantasy man. When you grew up and the only man in your little noble girl life was your guard. He’s nice.”

“Married, older”

“They’re the best kind”

“He is not, nor will ever be my lover.”

“Fair enough. I can’t talk. It’s not like I followed through on every fantasy...” She sat and drained the mug. There was a shriek from upstairs followed by foot stamping.

“Pru, get that mouse! I hate this hovel.”

Mara pushed her mug towards Nioma. “I think you need this more than me.”

Nioma grabbed the mug and took a swig. “I must say, your judge of character is sorely misplaced if you think that cow isn’t a stick in the mud. I swear, I’ll tan that brats hide if she wipes her finger again looking for dust.”

“She *has* changed. Not for the better, it seems,” Mara conceded. She put a calming hand on Nioma’s. “She’ll be gone tomorrow and life will be as it should be.”

Nioma softened her tone. “The highlight is, Harrod has supplied his own stores, so mine won’t be too depleted.” She lifted another bottle of wine. “And he brought this as well.”

“A nice vintage?”

“Nice? Surely you jest. The cost of this bottle is more than my entire bar selection.”

“Might have to save it for a special occasion.”

###

CHAPTER 11

Keeping any sighting to a minimum, Lord Trallko and Trinol dined in the kitchen during their overnight stay. The guards kept busy with the swords, tack and horses.

So as not to disturb her regular patrons, and a subtle effort to reduce any casual sight of Mara, Nioma arranged for a trestle table to be erected under the awning covering the front of the building.

Mimia remained in the 'cupboard' and sent Pru down regularly for this and that.

"Forgive Mim," Pru said to Nioma. "This up and leavin' on short notice—"

"Is character building. And she needs it. A lot."

Pru looked askance at such words, worried.

"Pru. It's just you and me here, they don't care what the staff think or say, so no need to worry."

The maid smiled in relief. "Truth be told...the young lass is quite needy."

Nioma nodded knowingly. "There's a deep, dried-up well out back past the henhouse. Give me the word and Mim will be at the bottom of it." Nioma winked.

It was all too much for Pru. "I..best be goin'." She grabbed the tray and quickly escaped upstairs, nearly bumping into Mara. "Ma'am," she apologised on the run.

"You scaring the staff now?" Mara said to Nioma.

"I was suggesting to Pru that Mim could easily disappear if she just gave the word,"

"Some of these older staff...so entrenched in the proper decorum of a noble house, they can't take a joke anymore."

"Who said I was joking?"

"You're wicked."

"Thank you. It's a natural talent. The school simply perfected it."

Dinner was a casual affair. Nioma was kept busy with serving the patrons and the guards. Mara wanted to help, but for the reasons to be discreet, couldn't. She busied herself looking after Harrod and Trinol, though her ex-guard looked abashed at being served by the High Lady,

"If you call me 'my lady' again, Trin, you will wear this stew."

Not trusting himself to respond without the risk of assault, he simply nodded and smiled.

“Maybe, after all this fracas settles, you can emerge. You are always welcome at our place, especially if you can keep Trinol and the men in line.”

“Harrod,” Mara said to him softly. “My uncle is obsessed. The only way this will end is with one of us dead.”

“Surely not—”

“Please. Enough. If you want me to dine with you, I’d rather not spend the precious hours with you two talking about that poor excuse for a man.”

“Who?”

“Exactly, now, tell me all that’s going on at home. I hear Trisch isn’t well? How is the Hommin Estate, and the Kindair’s. Start from...that night...”

It was late before dinner finished. Other than the patrol of a couple of the guards, everyone went to bed. As Nioma had said, the bulk of the guards went upstairs via the bar access, and a few preferred the hayloft as the rooms were cramped.

Nioma entered the kitchen after dousing the lanterns in the bar.

Mara greeted her with a glass of wine.

“You’re a treasure.” Nioma sat wearily at the table, joining her friend.

“Least I could do. You worked so hard.”

Nioma shrugged. “Part of the business.” She sipped and yawned, almost spilling it down her front.

“You’re exhausted. I’ll finish up here. I’m almost done anyway. You get yourself up to the loft. I’ll be up there soon.”

“Right...I better wash first.”

Mara banked the stove. Cleared the table and washed the remaining mugs and plates. With one last wipe of the table, she doused the lantern and made her way up the stairs to her room.

Nioma had collapsed on the edge of the bed and already in a deep sleep. She undressed and slipped in behind her. It was cramped, but she was so tired, Mara doubted she’d wake her. Draping her arm across the warm body, she closed her eyes and was soon snoring with her friend.

The sound of horses and men stirring woke her. From the angle of light through the small window, Mara realised it was just after dawn. Nioma was nowhere in sight. Quickly throwing on her clothes, she went downstairs.

“You should have woken me!” she grumped when she arrived in the kitchen seeing Ny busy over pots of porridge.

“I tried.”

“Liar. Want me to do the eggs?”

“No. You keep stirring this. I have to go the henhouse to fetch them.”

Soon, the breakfast was taken out for the guards and the two women could sit back and have their own meal.

“It is a sad realisation that, with these things going on constantly at home...I never even considered how it was for the staff, until now.”

“Welcome to the real world. They’ll be out of here soon enough.”

“Then we can relax—”

“Then we can strip all the beds, wash the linen, store that bedding back up in the attic, sort the remaining stores, feed the hens, then prepare for the usual crowd.”

“Yes, but what am I doing?” Mara grinned, then laughed with her, more of relief that they were left to themselves for a few hours.

#

The days passed for Mara as in a dream. She was very happy; happier than she could ever remember. She had plenty to keep her busy, which took her mind off things. After waking up with the most beautiful woman in her life, they’d both breakfast, do a few chores, then take Sleena and Bragante for a ride before it got too warm. Nioma joined her because, with the extra hand, she had more time to do the things she loved.

She proved she was indeed born in the saddle. Mara thought her horse was just as magnificent as Duyma, and said as much, then she found out Bragante was offspring from the captured Dran’ali stock several years back.

The tavern was comfortable. Food and drink were in abundance, and the company was like she had never imagined it would be. Admittedly, she considered, her life experiences had been fairly minimal, if you took out the recent traumas.

Mara had never been in a serious relationship—though the memories of her brief time spent with Florin always put a smile on her face—and now here she was sharing her life with the most wonderful women she could ever hope to meet.

And that in itself was a total surprise. The school was an alien environment to her. Not bad, not good. Being in a harem of beautiful, scantily clad women would no doubt lead to exploration of new desires and interests. It felt as natural as breathing. She idly wondered if it was the same at the school for males. Did they too explore new horizons...did it feel as natural to them as to women? *Or is it just me? Am I a minority?*

Nioma came into the kitchen and busied herself. She smiled, came over and gave her a nice long kiss, then went back to work.

Mara watched Nioma whenever she could. Such a high-spirited and vital powerhouse of energy. Her lover could laugh with the old folk, help shoe a horse, even assist Chaz in fixing a wagon wheel, and drink anyone under the table. The ideal partner, in her estimation.

Two weeks later, word came from a trader that Lord Trallko's party was returning. There was little more information forthcoming since the trader was leaving the town just as the Lord's party was arriving.

Having had ample notice this time, preparation was far less frenetic. Even the stables were cleaned out with fresh hay. And a trestle set up on the balcony with barrels of ale and a tray of mugs at the ready.

While Nioma was busy, Mara went up to her—their room—and cleaned it from floorboards to rafters. “See if Mim finds dust this time!” She stopped before she called her a brat. That was probably me up until a few months ago.

The arrival of Lord Trallko and his entourage wasn't the happy occasion expected. The horses ambled in, almost a casual stroll, not the normal pace to travel cross-country. The guards were sullen and barely raised a hand in greeting and went directly to the stables.

Trinol dismounted and came over. His armour looked the worse for wear, far more than what time spent on the road would do.

“Let’s talk inside,” he said simply. They followed, and Mara looked over her shoulder for Lord Trallko, but he was nowhere to be seen. Neither was Mim.

“The wedding was an utter disaster,” he started.

Nioma sat him down, poured him an ale, and both women sat across from him to listen attentively. Mara had never seen him so down. She reached out a hand, to touch his fingers.

Slowly, the story unfolded of how the wedding went and the chaos that ensued after.

“Much of this was behind closed doors, but word gets around... Urgad was displeased the promised bride wasn’t there. Blarik begged him to reconsider, offering Urgad his selection of the nobles present in an effort to hold to the promise.”

“I reckon that was why Blarik insisted the nobles bring their daughters. He knew this was going to happen.”

Trinol nodded. He sipped the ale. “During the arrival banquet to celebrate and welcome the Dran’ali entourage, all the nobles were introduced, along with their daughters. It would seem from that, Urgad made his selection.”

“Like a bloody flesh market,” Nioma spat.

“Who did he sel...who was the bride?” Mara asked.

“It was announced the betrothed was Pricila Phillit.”

“Lord Phillit’s granddaughter? He was no ally to Blarik.”

Trinol nodded. “There was another day of feasting and preparation for the big day. Many visitors congratulated young Lady Phillit.”

“Any idea how she felt about it?”

“Officially, she was delighted and honoured though nervous.”

“Officially,” Nioma scoffed. “And in reality?”

“We will never know,” he said, and kept talking before they could interrupt. “The wedding itself was magnificent.”

“Trin, what are you reluctant to tell us?”

“Lady Phillit...is dead. We won’t know the truth about whatever happened during their first night together. What we do know is she was screaming and crying when she fled the bed chamber...she slipped down the stairs and...and was fatally injured.”

Mara and Nioma gasped in horror.

“It was a tragedy. It would seem the brutality of the Dran’ali Overlord was not exaggerated. Lord Phillit’s heart failed at the news. He is also dead.”

“Pricila was his only heir... House Phillit is no more?”

Trinol nodded. “They were the last of the line.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if Blarik didn’t somehow suspect this would happen. He is a conniving and despicable arsehole.”

“I haven’t received a pigeon for a while now...” Nioma turned to Mara. “I wonder how Onty is? He wouldn’t allow this.”

“I confess to barely remembering the dark-skinned eunuch.” Trinol had no knowledge of his whereabouts.

“Trin...” Mara hesitated to ask. “Where...is Harrod? Is he... ..”

“He is alive.” Trinol’s voice broke. “Lady Mimia also passed away from injuries received during a horse stampede. Her father is mourning in the carriage with her body.”

“No! It can’t be!” The women cried out and burst into tears, not hearing his last words. They clung to each other and sobbed. They didn’t have to like the girl to feel the loss of the flesh and blood that walked these floors a couple of weeks earlier.

They were on their feet, but before they could step out, Trin reached for their wrists.

“Don’t. Lord Harrod insisted not to be disturbed.”

They resumed their seats. Other than the weeping, it was quiet in the kitchen. Trinol left after briefly laying a consoling hand on their shoulders.

The rest of the day was a numbing blur. The regular farmers and locals arrived in dribs and drabs, but within a very short time having picked up the morose atmosphere, left them to their mourning.

The guards, while still feeling dejected, ate and drank. They were fighting men and used to death and loss. Lord Harrod barely ate. Pru came and went, now caring for Lord Trallko, though she too had red and swollen eyes.

Mara’s identity was unknown to many of the guard, and since they were now returning to the estate, she did what she could to ease the workload for Nioma. Between doing the rounds to provide meals and drinks to the group, she gleaned sufficient information from the overheard conversations to piece together the tragic event.

The one lesson of any benefit from the spy school.

In the aftermath of Pricila's death, there was demand for an accounting for the tragic loss of a young life on the night a woman should have been cherishing. Even Blarik's closest allies were outraged.

It was clear from the outset Urgad took no responsibility to the death. He was displeased with Blarik's betrayal. The Dran'ali Overlord made an ultimatum to Blarik; to provide the promised High Lady Mara Olber, or face the combined wrath of the Dran'ali. If there is any blame for the circumstance, then it was his, for he had broken the agreement!

"Like any Dran'ali," Urgad had said, "we honour our oaths. This union of the two greatest clans was to cement the borders of the two greatest nations, provide many sons and daughters for future marriages."

Urgad had turned to the red-faced Blarik. "Does your word mean nothing to you? You promised and it was agreed, that my bride would be the first and finest noble lady of Jaranabi, the High Lady Mara Olber of House Olber.

"I come here in good faith, trusting you on your word, and what do I find? Not the promised High Lady, but some wilting and snivelling brat who can barely endure her first rodeo. Bring me the Olber woman, or expect my wrath. My horse clans will descend upon your loathsome lives. Our magnificent horses will trample your crops, your estates and anyone who stands in our way. My riders will rape every able-bodied woman, kill every male and enslave the rest. This is my blood oath." He drew a dagger, sliced his palm and raised his fist so all could see his blood drip down his forearm.

Violence had erupted in the streets after this threat. Many people died in the melee, but just as many died when the Dran'ali steeds stampeded through the crowded streets. Mimia was one of them. Several of the other nobles and their children sustained injuries.

The Dran'ali were last seen heading home, though fewer in number.

Mara dropped the tray in dismay as the shock took hold.

These deaths, this tragedy was all because she ran away.

The nearest guards helped her then patted her on the rump when she made her way to the kitchen. She sat by the table, ashen-faced until Nioma found her.

"They want me. This is my fault."

“That is utter nonsense!” For the very first time, Nioma’s anger was directed at her. “I will not hear that from you again. The blame lies squarely on Blarik’s shoulders.” Then Nioma hugged and rocked her for what seemed like hours. When they emerged outside, the street and stables were empty; the guards had already departed to the Trallko estate where poor Mimia was to be buried.

###

CHAPTER 12

The day after the tragic news, an invite to the funeral of Lady Mimia Trallko was received.

“I’m worried about Blarik’s snoops. With this invite, word will quickly spread around the Trallko estate you are here.”

“Maybe they won’t know where ‘here’ is?” Mara argued.

“Perhaps.” Nioma considered. “But they will be wary, extra vigilant.”

“Then... cut and colour my hair. They’re expecting a raven-haired beauty—”

“And only a short-haired beauty will be there instead.”

“Chances are, no one but a couple of the guards, the Trallko’s and Trin will know me from a horse’s arse.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Nioma.” Mara stepped closer and clasped her hands behind Nioma’s neck and looked into her eyes. “I love you dearly, but I cannot remain completely enclosed in your tavern for ever.”

“Okay, okay. I will cut and dye your hair, but...only...on...one...condition—would you stop kissing? I’m trying to be serious!”

“Oh, rejection.” Mara moved back slightly, but left her fingers clasped. “Pray tell what these onerous conditions will be.”

“One, not plural, and nothing onerous about it. Remember that fake persona I talked about?”

“Tarryn... something.”

“Tarryn Kronyer. We have a couple of days before we need to be there. I am going to drill into you—”

“Promises, promises.”

“Drill into you the pertinent details of her,” Nioma insisted. “So, if anyone asks, you will be able to answer any question without fail.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Please listen. These people could be highly trained —”

“Or simply yokel busybodies.”

“Don’t you understand I do not want anything to happen to you?”

“Yes, I know.” She held her tight. “I feel the same way. I never expected it, but here we are.”

“Now, down to business.” Nioma said once they released each other,

“Straight away?”

“We need to deal with your hair. Cutting it short isn’t enough.”

“How do you lighten black hair.”

“In stages, which is why we need to do that first. I’m going to empty out the stove and you can empty out the fireplace. Bring all the charcoal and ash out the back.”

“Umm...what? Why.”

“Trust me?”

“To the...Farquo Islands and back.”

“Good. Then do as I say.”

Once all the charcoal and ash were collected, Nioma emptied the buckets in an empty ale barrel on a table. Mara watched with doubt as Nioma then poured water into the top.

“Fetch one of those empty buckets and stick it under that tap.”

Mara did so as she explained.

“When the water comes out the bottom. It isn’t water anymore. I heard an apothecarist call it lye. It will bleach your hair. This is why it will be in stages. We can only do so much in the time available, but I hope to get a light brown out of it when finished.”

“Will the black return?”

“Yes, as your hair normally grows your natural black will come through.”

“I’m going to cut your hair. Short hair will take less time to dye.” She finished with the water and put the pales together under the table. “And now, the lesson begins.”

With surprisingly skilled hands, Nioma removed the long, black tresses.

Mara grew quiet, almost teary, when the first locks were cut.

“Yes, it is gorgeous, but it’ll grow back in a few months. Then you’ll be as ravishing as ever.”

When she finished, she found a cracked mirror to show her.

“I look like a boy!” She turned her head side to side to view. It was so short, clipped around her ears and neck.

“A boy with breasts, and a devilishly handsome one too.” Her words didn’t cheer her friend up. “The less you look like ‘Mara, the raven-haired beauty’, the better. Looking like a boy is a success in my books.”

“Now what?” She asked as Nioma collected the bucket of lye.

“Lightening your hair. It’s easy, but time consuming if we don’t want to injure you.”

“Injure?”

Nioma got her to lay down on a trestle with her head hanging over the edge. “Lye can burn the skin if it is too strong. Hence why I have more water and old wine—”

“You’re going to douse my hair with old wine?”

“Relax, it’s basically vinegar. It weakens the sting of the lye. Several rinses stops it completely. We’ll let it dry, see how it looks, then do it again.”

“How many times?”

“As many as you can stand, or until the colour is light enough to then dye.”

“Can I have red hair like you? It’s wonderful.” Mara reached for Nioma’s hair, but Nioma playfully slapped at her hand.

“Reds aren’t all that common—a travesty, I know—but two red-heads together will draw more attention than not.”

“Especially two beauties—”

“Exactly. Keep still, here we go.”

Three times over the days, Mara underwent the lye treatment. When it became uncomfortable, Nioma gently poured water over it, then several douses with the wine vinegar. Once her hair was a much lighter shade, Nioma brought out the last of the henna and applied it. The end result was a short, pale auburn hair.

Every moment of the day during their chores, Nioma asked questions. Some were the same but worded differently to make sure Mara was concentrating. Even during their love-making, or in the middle of the night, she’d wake her to test her.

Mara didn’t object to being woken in the middle of the night. “It simply means more time spent awake in your arms.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“And it’s all...your...fault...”

During breakfast, Nioma refused to reply to anything Tarryn asked or said unless it was in the proper accent, it was a subtle inflection on certain syllables.

“Are we taking this too far?” Mara asked.

Nioma continued stacking the fire wood.

“Are we taking this too far?” Tarryn asked again in the appropriate accent.

“Perhaps, better to be safe than dead. We’ll find out tomorrow. I dare say many nobles from far and wide will be there. Some of them may know Mara, but they won’t know you or me. Point them out and we’ll steer well clear of them. I can guarantee they were all at the wedding. Now everyone across the lands knows the name and will be on the hunt.”

Mara was quiet for a while. “How am I doing so far with being Tarryn?” she asked,

“Quite well, actually.”

“I was trained by one of the best.” Mara threw a towel at her. “Don’t sound so surprised.”

#

On their arrival at the Trallko estate, they had a quick word with Trinol who was manning the gates. He recognised Sleena and was about to say something before he slowly recognised her. He nodded and smiled before sending them on their way. A quick audience with Harrod and Trisch was arranged to share their condolences and grief, after that, it was agreed to keep apart.

Trisch was listless and barely said a word, so deep in her grief. Harrod hated the idea that the true High Lady of Jaranabi should be rendered to such efforts.

“As a wise woman tol’ me, ‘Better safe than dead’,” she had to remember to sound like Tarryn, even when talking to Harrod.

Then the real test began.

As expected, many dignitaries were present. Mara knew quite a few of them, and the pair did their best to avoid them, which wasn’t too hard considering they were ‘nobody of consequence’, as one peacock muttered, but loudly enough to be heard.

Mara fumed, but Nioma’s calming presence distracted her sufficiently to ward off any confrontation.

“The nerve. That prig actually tried to kiss me a few years back.”

“Did you break his nose too?”

“No, I pushed him and he fell into the fountain.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?”

“Second-chance revenge? I can—”

“It means the disguise and Tarryn persona are working.”

Mara opened her mouth.

“But it doesn’t mean we can flaunt it.” Nioma sidestepped a servant and grabbed two wines from the tray. “And stop pouting.”

The service was carried out in the House chapel. It was a sombre affair with many tears and long faces. After a private farewell with Harrod and Trin, the women mounted Sleena and Bagante and returned to the tavern.

Each day resolved into routine, chores, ride chores relax. Even relaxing in the bath, Nioma kept up the testing of the Tarryn persona.

“What do you say to keeping it short and coloured. You’d be a great help to me running of the tavern, and engage more with the patrons and travellers. I know you don’t like keeping in the back and out of sight. Now that we know it works.”

“I’m actually beginning to like it. Much cooler and practical.” Mara turned her head this way and that, seeing her reflection in the mirror. “You know, I think I should cut and dye your red locks.”

Nioma caught her eyes in the mirror. “Mara, fuck off.” Then she laughed and quickly tickled her, then kissed the back of her neck.

Mara leaned back into her and all was right in the world. “I’m glad I found this place, and you,” she sighed. “Seems long ago, but less than a month.”

“Any more thoughts about going to The Craggs?” Nioma spoke languidly in her ear.

Mara reacted her like she’d been punched, sloshing water over the rim of the tub when jolted upright. “I thought... can’t we stay together?” She looked away for a moment, blinking back the threatening tears. “Do you want me to go?”

“What? No. Not ever.” Nioma leant forward, wrapped her arms around her and pulled her close. “No, no my love. That was never my intention. It was such a big plan before—”

“Before I met you. Now, I haven’t given it a second thought.”

“Good. I’m sorry I mentioned the place. It will never pass my lips again.” Nioma started caressing her long, sinuous neck with the sponge, watching the water trickle down her spine. “You wander into my life and abuse my ears with that drawl, and the first time I looked into your beautiful blue eyes—”

“You fell for me?”

“I thought ‘here’s someone who has no bloody idea what she’s doing’.”

“You did not!” Mara splashed water at her.

#

Returning from the ride, they were rubbing the horses down in the stable when Mara stopped. A feeling of cold overcame her. She dropped the brush and staggered, falling sideways against Sleena before regaining her balance.

“Mara, what is it?” Nioma was at her side in seconds. “Chaz,” she called.

The large man lumbered over quickly to help.

Mara saw them through a haze of pain. The only times she had felt this way was when she was under dire threat. But the day was a beautiful, sunny day with a nice southern breeze. The ride was sensational. *Nioma taught me a few tricks.* “I...I don’t know,” she eventually answered. “Something I ate, perhaps?”

“I ate the same. Are you sick?”

Mara shook her head. “Not sick. I do feel bad...like a terrible thing has happened. Or is going to happen.”

“We’ll take you inside and get you to bed.” Nioma wrapped her arms around her and assisted her to her feet.

“Yes. Sex is good therapy.”

Chaz smiled and winked at Nioma.

“No. Not sex.” Nioma elbowed him.

“Well, I don’t know about you, but I feel good afterwards.”

Nioma had to chuckle at her. “No sex.” She repeated.

“Sex if I improve, or sex if I don’t?”

Nioma shook her head. “Girl, you’ve changed from the sweet and innocent lass you once were.”

“And you love it.”

“True. And you, but I’m worried. You even look pale. Has this ever happened before?”

Mara nodded. “First time was when I was nearly raped, then when beaten, and that time when I was almost rockion fodder.”

Nioma shared a look of concern with Chaz. “Now you have me worried.”

“You?” Mara chuckled. “You’re a rock.”

“Am not.”

“*My* rock,” she insisted as they moved

At the sound of an approaching wagon, Nioma and Chaz looked up. Some crazy fool was racing down the road, far too fast.

“If he don’t slow...” Chaz was saying.

They watched as the wagon turned at the junction to head west. The wagon did lean over onto the left wheels, but miraculously didn’t topple over. It righted itself and headed west, leaving a trail of dust.

Chaz watched in disbelief. “What the blazes got into ’em”

Several figures topped the rise. Three, six horsemen and a wagon appeared. They paused, as if surveying the terrain, then continued their descent this side.

Mara groaned. “They’re here.”

“They—Who? Blarik?” She looked again. One of the riders did look like a fat man, but it was still too far to see enough detail.

“And his mages in the wagon. Nioma. You have to go. He only wants me.”

“Then they’re dead men. I want you more.” She turned to the smith. “Chaz, fetch whoever you can. Bring whatever weapons.”

“Right yer are, Ny.” Chaz bolted.

Nioma found the strength to get her inside and through the tavern into the kitchen. She sat her at the table, brought towels and water to cool her, wiping her brow.

From outside, they could hear a bell clanking. It was generally used to sound for fire or some catastrophe. It wasn’t regular. When anyone heard it, they came running.

“You stay put or so help me; I’ll tan your hide when I get back.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Okay. No sex for a week.”

Mara smiled, wanly. “Deal. I ain’t movin’”

Nioma was out the door in moments and reached for the sword behind the counter. She rarely brought it out. And now regretted not training Mara in the basics. It wasn’t a life she was proud of, and not the life she wanted for Mara.

Wrapping her hand in the leather hilt brought back vivid memories. Still too vivid. Too dark. Too bloody. A past she tried to forget. Seems like hiding in the furthest reaches of Jaranabi wasn’t enough.

“Idiot,” she muttered. “You can’t run away from memories. Where you go, they go.”

But not this day. This day, with the way Mara was reacting, and the ominous arrival of several strangers, she relied on those vivid and bloody memories to revive her lost skills.

She was damned good with a blade; extremely good, but that was another time. Another life. If it meant keeping Mara safe, she had no regrets in wishing that life back now. Pulling the gleaming blade from its scabbard, she admired once more the ornate pattern. Of all things, this was a gift worth a High Lord’s ransom, but at what cost to her and her friends? It worried her that, having no family, who would eventually take this exquisite blade from her dead fingers?

Nioma swung the blade expertly in a complex sequence for a second before turning to the door with the look of death incarnate on her face.

Mara heard the noise of fighting; the screams of men and the clash of steel. There was distant thunder as well. She was resolved in sitting it out. She promised; besides, she’d be no use out there, especially the way she was feeling. Then she heard a woman cry out.

Nioma?

“Looks like no sex for me this week.” She pushed herself upright. After drinking water from the bowl, she doused it over her head. The chill revived her a bit. Enough to ward off the nausea. Mara moved to the tavern, then from table to table until she reached the front door.

She stepped outside. *Funny, there are no clouds.* An arrow hit the wall beside her.

Her gaze took in the street in front of her.

Several men, strangers from the looks, definitely not local, lay in the street, unmoving. There were a few locals among them. Equally unmoving.

There was a clash of swords, and a woman swearing.

Nioma? Moving unsteadily to the side, she approached the wall of the adjacent building and looked rounded the corner.

Chaz was across the road, dealing with a sword-wielding stranger. After a flurry of swings, the man fell when the farrier crushed his skull with his hammer. From his appearance, Chaz had been nicked a few times, but nothing fatal or disabling. He turned to check on Nioma, but then noticed her. He waved her back inside.

Mara stared at Nioma. Her red-headed lover was now a stranger. She moved like a cat—reminding Mara briefly of the rockions. The memory only turned her thoughts darker.

Two men were fighting with Nioma. And they were losing. Mara had never seen such swordplay, and never expected her friend was able to do such things. Every time a man swung to slice her, her sword somehow was there, fending off the edge then she was bringing the hilt up into his face. Her leg lashed out, kicking his partner in the groin.

Nioma must have seen Chaz in the corner of her eye. She flicked a glance back to where he was looking. “Get ba—” but the fighting resumed.

Halfway down the hill, Mara knew, more from sense than sight, that it was Blarik waiting, watching from a safe, cowardly distance. His three elementalers stood close by, though two were arguing and slapping each other like fools. The one paying attention pointed.

At me?

Blarik must have said something as the two other elementalers stopped whatever it was they were doing and joined the lead mage. The three men now stood like they did back in the council meeting; one in front and two behind.

Mara suddenly felt her limbs constrict. She was being bound!

Not that again!

Nioma pulled her sword free and shoved the last man to the side with her boot. Breathing heavily, with blood and sweat making her blouse cling to her, she turned and walked to Mara, looking unimpressed.

She even moves like a rockion.

“What did I tell you, young lady?” she said in a stern, weary voice.

Mara could barely breathe. She tried to say something to her, but unable utter a sound. She felt a tug, weaker, but like when she was lifted over the balcony. Mara tried to resist. She had no idea how, like she had no idea how she healed back at the school.

The tugging faded. *Am I doing this?*

Suddenly Nioma was in front of her. Her green eyes were blazing. “How the hell can I keep you safe if you simply walk into danger?”

Was that anger, or love, or concern? Mara wondered. *No sex for a week?*

Nioma opened her mouth, and froze. Her sword dropped to the ground and a look of pain crossed her face. Of shock and confusion. Blood sprouted from her breast as she fell forward. She flung her arms up to wrap over Mara’s shoulders. She clung for a moment.

Nioma! Not you. Not this!

“I...love...you...girl... ..” Nioma coughed. Blood dribbled from her mouth.

I know I know I know. Mara wanted to wipe at the blood from her lover’s lips. *And I love you too.* Mara sobbed, but the words didn’t reach her lover. She wanted to cradle and rock the only true love she’d ever known. The love so pure and freely given with no expectations of reciprocation.

But the love *was* reciprocated. Equally and freely with abandon.

Mara looked up at the hill. The three elementalers, now with arms on each other to provide more power, were concentrating. They were now struggling. She felt their binding weaken.

The man on the horse was lowering a bow.

Blarik! Once again, he had ruined her life. Killed another loved one.

This ends now!

The ground shook violently; no minor vibration this time. The fields were empty, and livestock had scattered. Tiles fell off the tavern roof and windows shattered. A tide of blackness rose up. The pain and desolation of her loss overwhelmed her nausea. Her world had collapsed around her, leaving her alone.

Mara screamed. It was the cry of lost love. Fuelled by her rage, her anguish breached the elemental planes, the structure that held the balance. It was the cry of an abandoned soul. It was the cry of devastation and of pain. It was the cry of anguish, and it had no bounds.

Mara opened her eyes. The sparkling blue was gone, replaced by black orbs.

She was revenge. She was retribution, and she now had a target; her uncle. A rapist, murderer, and the harbinger of all that had befallen her.

With the ground buckling around her, Mara stood firm. The tavern walls cracked and the roof fell in. Within minutes flames licked up from the fallen timbers. The townsfolk had left, the last seen scurrying over the horizon to the south or down the road to the east. Their small houses toppled.

Yet Mara stood firm and raised a slender arm—an arm that would never feel the caress of her lover again—and she pointed at the men on the hill; the three elementalers standing by their lord. Gone was the impotent girl scratching at his face. Gone was the child brandishing a broken wine glass in the vane hope of slicing his neck. Her scream was all she had, and she filled it with all her pent-up pain, anger and animosity and aimed it at them.

A shimmering haze formed a dome over the four men. Any binding or restriction on her vanished. Through the haze, she saw one then two elementalers keel over, their crumpled forms lying in the dirt. The one still remaining, on his knees, exhausted. The shield he had raised for protection shimmered, faltered, then faded completely. The mage fell sideways over his colleagues, unmoving. Dead or exhausted, she didn't care.

Bucked from his frightened horse, Blarik was on the ground. The horse reared and whinnied in terror and ran, disappearing over the edge of the precipice.

Her slender arm lowered and the ground shaking stopped. When the ground and dust settled, Blarik cautiously struggled to his feet and looked around him. He was now on a perfectly circular outcropping ten feet across at its widest. A pit, twenty paces wide and equally as deep, surrounded him. The ground this side of the pit was ruination, looking like a blasted desert, whereas he was still on lush grass.

Mara collapsed.

When the young woman woke, she stood, swaying slightly, and stared blankly around her. She saw the lone man on a rocky knoll. Her eyes moved on. A village, collapsed and burning, surrounded her. There was no other sole insight, and no animals, only a stiff breeze promising rain.

A woman lay at her feet. An arrow protruded from her back. Kneeling beside her, the shaft disintegrated to dust with barely an effort. Rolling the body over, she cradled her in her lap. She used the hem of her blouse and wiped the blood from the woman's beautiful face.

Stroking her red locks, the silky strands flowed through her fingers. She then gently caressed her brow as her eyes ran down the length of her body, drinking it all in, from the blood crusted blouse to the black leggings and riding boots.

“Such a beautiful thing...such a beautiful soul.” She studied the look in her eyes. “So green. If there was ever a look of love, that is what it would be like. Who was it you loved so dearly, beautiful lady? If only someone loved me like that...”

She raised her eyes at the man who was now calling to her. He seemed angry and upset, then pleading. She ignored him. *What a strange man.*

Gazing once more at the woman in her lap, she ran her fingers over the eyes to close the lids. “Who were you, beautiful lady?” Her whisper disappeared on the wind. “My name is Tarryn.”

###

End of Part 1