

The Pale Rose

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Part Three

Clues

Chapter 15

3081 C.D.

Cheid: 16 years old

Cheid looked on with slight worry as Satu had her small flame men dance around the table. Their tiny feet left behind dark spots that the tavern owner would not appreciate. They were joined by the figures formed from dirt that Wess had dancing in the middle of the table. The entire Quintet was there. Many had tankards full of ale or mead in front of them while others enjoyed wine.

It was a party to celebrate Cheid's birthday. It wasn't his real one, of course, but even a fake person needed a birthday.

He lifted his tankard and took a long sip of the ale.

The years had changed him. From a boy he had turned into a man. Even his own father would have had trouble recognizing him. He had grown taller and the beginnings of a beard shaded his chin slightly darker than the rest of his face.

He had to save the sleeves of his robe as the firemen suddenly danced right in front of him, jumping and doing tricks as if they were from a travelling troupe.

"Watch it," complained Cheid and glared at Satu.

The copper haired girl stuck out her tongue and winked at him. "It's your birthday. Lighten up, Cheid," she said, but she none the less made the dancing flames disappear in a puff of smoke. She stood up from the other side of the table and made her way next to Cheid. Wess looked slightly disappointed for a moment, but that soon melted into a content smile as Jade slipped back into his lap and started whispering in his ears.

Satu sat down uncomfortably close to Cheid. She nearly leaned into him and he could smell her hair and the ever so slight hint of something burnt. Despite that, it was not an unpleasant smell and over the years Cheid had grown quite fond of it, despite his best effort to avoid making such emotional contacts.

"You don't seem happy," she finally said and took a sip from her cup. Cheid knew it was red wine. She rarely drank anything else.

Cheid turned towards her and smiled. "I am. I have all my friends here. I just wish they won't repeat the disaster of a few years ago. I don't want to sit in front of Skander and explain why another tavern burned down."

"It's all right to loosen up once in a while," protested the girl, though calling her a woman would probably have been more fitting. Her skin was still pale, but her body had grown in the right places and even her robes had a difficult time making her look anything but a woman.

"I suppose," said Cheid and stared at his tankard. He was not sure what to think of her. Ever since he had joined the Quintet, Satu had paid close attention to him. Ever since that first night, she kept walking home with him and finding reasons to spend time with him.

There were times when Cheid welcomed the company. She could turn a boring night of studying into something fun. Even though she was from the Tower of Fire, the early years of study had had many things in common so there were times when things could be practised and studied together.

She had been a great help in getting to know how the element of Fire worked and what you could do with it. As a result Cheid felt like he was much better at it than many of his peers and some of the masters seemed to agree. Combined with his other efforts and talents, he had earned the right to a private room at the Tower right on the eve of his birthday. It had been only two days ago that he had moved in.

Then there were the times when her presence was simply a distraction or even an annoyance. At times the flood of questions she unleashed was too much and at other times the way she twirled her hair between her fingers or tapped the table made for an infuriating distraction.

Over all Cheid had to admit he liked having her around more than being without her.

"You're doing it again," said Satu with a slight frown.

"What?" asked Cheid.

"Looking like you're not here. Like you're not enjoying yourself."

Cheid took a sip of ale and gave her a smile. "My mind just tends to get the better of me and have me working even when I should be enjoying myself."

“There's an easy solution to that,” said Satu with a sly smile and sipped some wine.

“What's that?” asked Cheid.

Satu reached out and lifted his tankard to his lips. “Drink.”

The smile on her was warm and made Cheid smile back even as he drank. She was right. Drinking was a good way to put your mind to rest and Cheid followed her advice. Tankard full of ale followed one another until he was feeling he could take no more. It wasn't the first time he got drunk so the limits of endurance were not unknown to him. He knew when to stop and still retain enough control of his body to make it home.

The others at the table shared his enthusiasm to drink and more than a few rounds were ordered to the delight of the tavern owner, though chances were he'd regret it as soon as he'd spot the scorch marks on his table.

It was together with Satu that Cheid finally staggered out from the tavern. The woman leaned on him heavily and he had his arm around her waist. It was winter and a light coating of snow covered the streets. The slippery stones gave the already impaired pair more trouble with getting about. Both huddled under their winter capes as their robes were not enough to keep the cold air out.

“Pretty, isn't it?” said Satu as they climbed up a ramp and got a good view of the lamp lit street below. Snow hung from store signs and the rooftops. In the summer the slightest footsteps or laughter would echo through the streets for what would seem like an eternity, but now the snow dampened all the noises and made for a silence that was rare in the large city.

“It's the same street as always,” said Cheid and shrugged his shoulders, which made both of them almost fall down. As soon as she regained her footing, Satu shoved Cheid off of her and glared at him.

“You have no sense of..sense of..beauty,” she complained.

Cheid stumbled before regaining his footing. He blinked in surprise and stared back at her. “What are you on about?”

“You don't even see it!”

“See what?”

Satu sighed and walked over to him. She put both hands on either side of

his head and forced him to look down the street.

“See what the snow has done?” she whispered in his ear. Her hot breath sent a shiver down his spine as it hit his chilled ear. Cheid looked. He tried to see what she was trying to show him. Finally, he realized it.

“I see it now,” said Cheid and turned to smile at Satu. “The silent street, no one around. The snow..it's beautiful.”

In the summer, even at night, there would have been drunkards staggering around and other people going about. The snow had convinced all of them to stay home or inside to stay warm.

“You're not completely hopeless then,” said Satu and started walking again. Having her warm hands removed from his head made Cheid feel the cold all the more. He pulled the hood of his cape tighter around himself and started after her.

The pair walked through the streets as quickly as they could. Neither wanted to spend too much time in the cold weather. They crossed the bridge to the towers in a spontaneous spurt of running that almost ended in both of them falling down on the slippery stones. Inside the great lobby they burst into laughter as soon as the big door behind them slammed shut.

They garnered disapproving looks from the two students on night duty. They were there in case someone had emergency business with someone in the towers.

Both took in heavy breaths before starting towards the transport shaft.

“What are you doing?” asked Cheid when he noted the woman following him. She should have been headed for the door leading to the tower of Fire.

“You still have that book I lent you, do you not?” asked Satu and glared at him.

“You want to get it *now*?” asked Cheid, surprised. He hadn't had the book that long, but she was the impatient sort and expected people to return what they loaned in a timely fashion.

“Why not?”

“It's late,” protested Cheid. He had things to do in the morning, not least of which being the training session with his personal tutor. It was a secret he had kept from many, but it was also the key to how he had become so successful.

“It won't take long. I'm already here, after all,” said Satu and waltzed onto

the transport disc that had just arrived from above. She left Cheid with little choice.

“Fine,” he said in a resigned voice and stepped onto the disc next to her. It soon started its journey upward. Cheid felt his head clear up a bit. The cold air had done wonders to lift some of the haze the ale had brought with it. Why would she want to get the book in the middle of the night? She could have waited until the next day. What was she planning?

Cheid eyed the woman next to him. She seemed well meaning enough. There was no malice coming from her. During all the years, she had shown no signs of wanting to harm him, but that was the only thing he could come up with as to why she'd want to come up to his room at such an hour.

Maybe she just really wants her book, thought Cheid and shrugged his shoulders.

The disc came to halt and Cheid led the way through the corridor until they came to a door. He had to dig around for a moment for their key. Fumbling with the lock made his ears burn because he knew Satu was behind him, no doubt looking on with an amused smirk on her face. Finally, the lock opened and Cheid pushed the door open.

Without even giving it much thought he cast the simple spell that brought forth a floating orb of light. Even in a drunken haze it was no problem casting the spell. He had done it thousands of times so it had ingrained itself in his backbone.

The room wasn't large. The bed was on the right from the door and opposite to the door there was a table and chair. To the right there was a single chair for guests to use. Most of the right wall was taken by the piles of books stacked from floor up to Cheid's height.

“Now where did I put that book,” muttered Cheid as he made his way to the table and started going through the books laid out on it. Absent-mindedly he fixed the light he had summoned onto a lamp that rested on the edge of the table. He paid no mind to the sound of the door closing behind him.

“Ah, here it is,” declared Cheid and grabbed a book from the pile. He turned around and froze the moment he saw Satu.

She had sneaked in. Her cape and robe were on the floor in a pile and she stood naked in front of Cheid, giving him a look that seemed to ask him to challenge the situation.

“Er..” It wasn't much of an response, but it was all Cheid could muster out from himself in the situation. He didn't quite know where to set his eyes. Her perky breasts certainly called for attention, but venturing downward to the curve of her hips had its own appeal as well. With considerable effort Cheid decided to focus on her face, though his eyes glanced at other places from time to time.

“Not quite the reaction I was hoping for,” said Satu with a sly smile and put her hands on her hips.

“Erm..what are you doing?” asked Cheid. He'd recovered from the initial surprise that had stolen his tongue.

“I'm giving you your birthday gift,” said Satu and took a few steps forward. She was close enough that Cheid could have touched her, but instead he clung to the book in his hands like a drowning man would on a piece of wood. “Though I have to admit I have been wanting to do this for a long time.”

“Er..”

Satu took the final step and wrapped her arms around Cheid's neck. Her body pressed against him, though the book between them made for a convenient barrier. She leaned in close and pressed her soft lips against Cheid's. It was enough to make him relinquish the hold on the book.

From there on she was in control. She was the one who pushed him onto the bed and undressed him. It was her that made the passion rise in him and she was the one who swept him away. Heavy breathing soon filled the room with the occasional moans of pleasure. The small bed forced the two to remain pressed against each other even after the worst of their passion had subsided.

Cheid woke up in the morning to a throbbing headache. He found Satu nestled against him. He could feel her soft breasts pressing against him, his hand rested against her lower back. He reached up and stroked her silky copper hair.

He wasn't sure what to think about the events of the past night. He had been caught completely by surprise and consequently poorly prepared. The sex had been good even if somewhat dulled by the amount of ale he had drank before and

the fumbling any first timer suffered from. Strictly speaking what they had done was not against the rules of the towers, though it was frowned upon to have someone sleep over. Usually it was customary to rent a room from a tavern when two students felt the need to share some intimate moments.

What worried him the most was where things would head when going forward. Was she looking to start a relationship? Her words made it seem likely. For Cheid that posed a problem. He had things that would be hard to keep a secret if someone got too close.

With slight panic he realized morning had passed. He could hear other students making their way in the hallway and that meant he had completely missed the private session with his master.

“Shit,” he muttered, perhaps too loud. Satu stirred next to him. She opened her eyes and smiled. She gave Cheid's shoulder a gentle kiss.

“Good morning,” she muttered, sleepily, though it was impossible to miss the sheer content in her voice. There was a woman who was happy to wake up where she had.

“Good morning,” replied Cheid, still somewhat uncertain about the entire situation, though he had a hard time admitting anything wrong with the situation. Her warm body pressed against his was perhaps the most comfortable thing he had felt in years. It felt right.

Satu let out a content sigh and pressed tighter against him. One of her legs flung over him under the blanket and started rubbing his shin. Her thigh occasionally pressed against his groin, slowly stirring awake things that should have stayed asleep.

“I have to go,” said Cheid, though he made no effort to get out from under the warm blanket.

“Do you?” whispered Satu in his ear. Her hot breath felt like it would have been enough to make an eunuch feel horny.

“I've already missed a meeting I promised to attend,” said Cheid. It took effort not to turn to face her and pull her into the throes of passion once more.

“So have I,” countered Satu and gently nibbled on Cheid's ear. Her hand caressed his chest.

“You're making this very difficult,” protested Cheid, garnering a giggle from the woman next to him.

“It doesn't have to be difficult,” said Satu. “All you have to do is let go and enjoy.”

“I'm sorry. I can't. Though I loved last night and..this..I can't abandon everything else for it.” It felt wrong to say such things in the situation, but Cheid had decided it was better to be honest than to fight the battles later on.

Satu rose up enough to plant a kiss on Cheid's lips. She looked him in the eyes. “Then go. I'm not the sort of woman who would chain her man and keep him from other things he loves. And I do know how much you love magic. I share that same love.”

For a moment Cheid just laid there, digesting her words. Then the urgency hit him again. There were people he needed to meet. With no small amount of reluctance he slipped from under the blanket and started looking for his clothes. Satu remained in bed, stretching herself and looking as if she was in no hurry to go anywhere. Most of all, the small sighs of pleasure she let out were distracting and would have stirred the desires of any young man.

“Are you sure you have to go?” asked Satu just as he had managed to locate a shirt and a pair of trousers. His business would take him out of the towers and into places where the robes of a Tower student would gather unwanted attention.

“Yes,” replied Cheid bluntly, doing his best to ignore the temptations of the naked woman.

“There seems to be a stiff portion of you that would disagree,” said Satu teasingly and gave him a meaningful look. Cheid glared back at her and quickly pulled up his pants and fastened the belt around his waist after tucking in his shirt.

“Don't you have somewhere to be?” he asked as he gathered some nicknack's in his pockets and fastened a pouch with a few coins to his belt.

“Mm..I suppose I do,” said Satu though she made no effort to get up from the bed. She wiggled her toes for a bit before continuing. “But it's perhaps best I wait for the classes to start. Wouldn't want your neighbours seeing me leave. Think of the gossip that would start.”

“Ah, right. I suppose I’ll leave you here for now then,” said Cheid as he grabbed his thick winter cloak and draped it over his shoulders. Gossip was the last thing he needed in his life right now, though he suspected there might be some on the way in any case. The walls were not the best in insulating sounds and there had been a few moments during the night when the noises they had made had gotten a bit loud.

“I’ll slip out when things quiet down,” said Satu.

Cheid nodded. “I suppose we’ll talk later.”

“We’d better.”

Cheid gave the woman a smile and slipped out of the room. He closed the door quickly so the student that happened to be passing by wouldn’t get a glimpse of her laying on the bed.

All the way out of the Towers he thought about what had taken place last night. It was difficult to focus on anything else. He hoped the events wouldn’t change the relationship he had with Satu too much, though it looked like there was little hope of that. The way she had been talking seemed to tell of her desire to get closer to him, perhaps even date like a proper couple. The more he thought about it the harder it was to find excuses to say no to something like that. The previous night had been nice and if dating her meant more of similar nights then saying no would have been madness.

The cold breeze at the bridge made him wrap the cape tighter around himself. There was little traffic to the Towers. Perhaps the cold kept people at home instead of going out for business. A warm fireplace was a bigger draw than what the Tower could offer to anyone but the ones with most urgent business.

Cheid headed north. He walked through the nearly abandoned central market before heading west into a part of town that had a somewhat questionable reputation. It was an ill deserved reputation. Simply because some less than savoury stores had chosen to set up in the same area did not mean the people living there were the same sort.

For someone like Cheid there was little to worry about anyway. If anyone dared to bother him he could turn them into charred bones with little effort.

He took a ramp up to the second level and gingerly took a narrow walkway to

a side street. The dragon head shaped store sign drew him to the right door. He was welcomed by the warmth of a fireplace and a mix of smells that could have been anything from a rotting corpse to freshly blooming flowers. His sense of smell was thrown into a fit trying to figure out whether it was an unpleasant smell that should induce vomiting or one that should bring a smile on his face. It decided to settle on something in between that left him feeling a bit queasy yet pleasantly relaxed.

“Ah, so you have returned,” came a creaky voice. A hunched old man hobbled from behind the counter and squinted to see better.

“As agreed. Do you have what I wanted?” asked Cheid and brushed some snow off from his shoulder. He glanced around the room. Opposite to the door was the fireplace and to the sides there were shelves stocked with all sorts of things; from books to jars filled with things no normal person would have kept visible.

“Hmh. Has old Fred ever let you down?” asked the old man and went back behind the counter. By the sound of it he was digging through drawers to find something.

“No, I can't say you have,” admitted Cheid.

“Neither can anyone else,” declared old Fred and placed a cloth wrapped package onto the table. He undid the string keeping it together and unfolded it to reveal a leather bound book.

Cheid moved in to inspect it. It lacked the embroidery of the original, but as he flipped through the pages he could see what mattered was there. The text was exactly as in the original.

“This can't have been easy to get,” said Cheid as he ran his fingers through a page and noted the words.

“The local library of the Order of Salvius didn't have a copy of it, but I know someone in Mandor. They had a copy in the temple there. That's why it took more time than expected.”

“And they just let you copy it?” asked Cheid.

“Of course,” said Fred and glared up at Cheid. “It's not in the restricted section. Anyone can hire one of the monks to make a copy.”

“If anyone could do that then how come I had to come to you and pay a hefty amount for it?” asked Cheid.

Fred grinned, revealing his yellow teeth. “You could have, had you known, but you didn't. That's how people make their money. They do things others could do just as well, if only they knew.”

There was no arguing against the logic. That was how the world worked. No one could master everything so they used others to fill in the gaps on their own skills and time. The further Cheid thought about it as he perused through the book the more he realized how right the old man was. The entire society was based on that simple concept.

It was a thought Cheid locked away for later discussion. The Quintet would find some amusement out of it even if it didn't involve magic at all.

“So, you satisfied boy?” asked Fred with slight impatience. He was always welcoming when you initially arrived, but quickly grew irritated with you if your stay went too long.

Cheid reached for the pouch and threw it on the counter. It let out a heavy thud and clink. “I am. You've earned your pay.”

Fred quickly grabbed the pouch, opened it and counted the coins. It was a lot of money for someone Cheid's age and means, but he had spent years building up his war chest. Important acquisitions like the book he now had. Skander could take books out of the towers library, but he could not purge the entire world of certain works. Over the years he had continued to keep a close eye on what Cheid loaned and more than once the librarians had refused to let him take out certain books. It didn't impact his normal studies, but ensured he could not skip ahead to learn things that would be more useful in exacting his revenge.

Satisfied that the entire amount was there, Fred pocketed the pouch and gave Cheid a look. “Good. Now sod off.”

Cheid chuckled as he wrapped the book in its cloth. “It's a wonder you have any customers with that attitude.”

“I wouldn't mind if they all decided to walk past my door,” said Fred in a grumpy voice, though Cheid suspected it was more a show than anything. The man had a carefully built image that he had worked for years to perfect. He was

not about to let it crumble in front of some sixteen year old.

“Well, I’ll say good thing about you anyway,” said Cheid as he grabbed the book in one hand and opened the door.

“Eh, don’t bother,” shouted Fred after him just as the door closed.

Cheid adjusted his cloak a bit before starting back the way he had come. He felt a bit giddy at having the book and couldn’t wait to have the chance to dig into it. It would teach him many spells that were deemed too dangerous for students of his rank. He’d have to keep the book hidden of course, though with the new private room it wouldn’t be that hard. There were already plenty of other things he shouldn’t have had that were hidden away in the locked travel trunk at the foot of his bed.

But before he could get to reading the book he still had one person to meet with. It was something Cheid was looking forward to perhaps even more than getting the book. After all, the person he was meeting would have the first concrete clue as to who had been behind the attack eight years ago.

Chapter 16

(Eleria, age sixteen)

It was dark. Eleria could feel the rough straws of hay as they poked through her skimpy clothes. The sobs from the resting place next to her carried over clearly. The young master had done something horrible to her once more. Eleria wanted to comfort her, but what could she say? There was no hope for either of them. The door to the small chamber was thrown open and it snapped her awake.

For a panicked moment she thought the dream had been real, but she soon discovered herself to be laying in a soft bed with pillows and a warm blanket. Four pillars rose above her and strung a canvas over the bed and allowed curtains on all sides.

She drew in a shaky breath and tried to ease her heartbeat back down from the pure terror driven rate it was pounding with. Even after six years there were still times she thought the rescue had never happened and that serving her master was all she could hope for the next day to bring with it. There were the nightmares that still haunted her with their loneliness and cruelty.

The initial welcome she had received upon returning had been overwhelming and had not allowed her the time to think what she had been through. There had been speeches, parties, ceremonies to reward people – all the usual things you would expect to come from something like that. The warm emotions and closeness of her parents had kept the bad things away, but after a while they grew to their old distance, kept away by the duties of ruling an empire.

That was when the nightmares came, when she regressed back to silence and shutting out the people around her. The ladies of the court saw it happen and they tried to keep her interested in other matters, hoping that would somehow draw her out, but they did not know her. Embroidery and gossip were the last things she wanted to partake in.

It had been Theoden that finally set her on the right path. The old man saw what really ate away at her and suggested Loren to spend more time with her.

The two brothers, along with their family, had gained immense favour for what they had done for the Ramyn empire. They were now tasked with Eleria's safety and it was a duty they took seriously. They knew full well what had happened to the last family to fail in protecting her. It also meant it was not unusual or gossip provoking for Loren to spend more time with her.

Loren was someone Eleria could talk to. It had started on the journey home with them and that sentiment had only grown the more time the two spent together. There was nothing romantic in it – he was much too old for Eleria's tastes – so the relationship was more that of an older brother and younger sister.

He did not try to force her to be a princess and all the things that entailed. She could have an actual conversation with the man about anything – from politics to court gossip – and he would take her opinion and chew it out and give her an honest answer no matter if it would upset her or not.

She heard the bedroom door open and the shuffling of a dress as someone walked outside her bed. Even with the curtains closed she knew who it was. No one else would dare enter the chamber so early in the morning.

“Good morning, your highness,” came a soft voice as the curtains around the bed were parted to let in the sunshine from the glass window. It was bright enough to make Eleria squint for a moment and water her eyes.

“Good morning, Marja,” said Eleria as the woman continued to fuss around and prepare everything for her. She was perhaps four years older than Eleria and she had been with her ever since returning to the palace. She was no Tabitha, but over time she had grown on Eleria and it was rare for her to have any complaints about how she was treated.

A knock on the door sent Marja towards it. Her brown, middle-back length hair bounced around as she walked. The dress she wore was a practical one, but made with fine cloth instead of the coarse stuff the peasant had to settle for. She was a slender woman which made her fit well with Eleria as she was of the same type.

A tray was handed to her through the open door and she quickly brought it to the bed and set it in Eleria's lap as she sat up and rested against the mountain of pillow she had stacked behind her. Marja lifted the cover from the tray,

revealing fresh bread along with a bowl full of a dull grey porridge.

Eleria's heart sank. "They're still insisting on feeding me this?" she asked and plopped the spoon in the porridge.

"The healers insist, my lady," replied Marja as she perused through the closet to find a suitable dress for Eleria to wear.

"But it's been years now. I'm fine. I've always been pale skinned and thin. A porridge with herbs isn't going to change the way I am."

Despite complaining, Eleria ate a spoonful of it.

It tasted as unpleasant as it did every morning.

Since her return the emperor had been overly concerned about her health. He had called in healers from around the empire to see to her and they had come up with a diet that should have helped her grow stronger and more healthy looking, but despite their efforts over the years there had been no change. Still, they refused to give up and continued forcing her to eat their porridge and other mixtures.

"It makes your father happy to know you're eating your medicines," reminded Marja.

"But I want some real food in the morning," complained Eleria. "I want some stew with meat in it. Maybe some eggs and bacon. Anything besides this eternal porridge."

"You'll sneak something from the kitchen like you always do, my lady," said Marja and pulled out a dress from the cupboard. She turned around and gave the imperial princess an appraising look. "Perhaps today is not a good day for red."

Eleria glanced out the window. Snow covered rooftops gave way to a view down the river. While there were some white sheets of ice on the river banks, most of it remained melted and flowing during the winter. There were a few ships making their way through the water. It looked like a cold day.

"I don't need anything fancy," she said and reluctantly spooned in some porridge. It was better than nothing and even if it did not taste all that great it filled the stomach. "I don't think I'll be going out today."

"But you must, your highness," said Marja and continued looking for a dress. "You're supposed to meet Lord Theoden."

“That's today?” Eleria had forgotten all about it despite how important a meeting it was. Ever since arriving she had made efforts to change things in the empire, banning slavery among her top goals, but work had been slow on it. The nobility objected to it heavily as did many of the merchants with enough wealth to own slaves. All of them might turn a blind eye to the emperor tearing down a family, but if he tried to reach in and take away something from everyone, the push back could be immense.

Despite his faltering health and high age Theoden was still an influential figure in the court. His opinion carried weight even though his appearances were rarer and rarer. Getting to talk to him in person about the issue could be a turning point in the battle to free the slaves from their misery.

Eleria had done so on a few occasions during parties and other social events and the old man had listened carefully, but there had always been an interruption to prevent him from giving a proper response or thoughts on the matter. Having him alone and all to herself would finally give that opportunity.

“Choose something sensible,” Eleria instructed and finished her porridge and wolfed down the piece of bread. There was some cold water in a cup with which to wash it all down. She could have had wine, but the water from the palace well tasted better than most wines in her opinion.

“Of course, my lady,” replied Marja and pulled out another dress. “You are going to meet an old and distinguished member of the court, not some young suitor.”

“When have I ever met a suitor?” asked Eleria, annoyed that her personal life had been dragged into the conversation. There had been suitors, of course. She was the princess and many of the higher noble families had their eyes on her to marry one of their sons. There were even some foreigners who had come to the court to express their interest and intent. Despite that, she had never met anyone alone. They had all been at official court functions and even there only a few words had been exchanged before she had been whisked away to meet another group of people.

So far her father had allowed her to turn down everyone, claiming she was not ready yet, but she was certain that would not last much longer. The ordeal

she had been through had bought her time to be free, but eventually the duties towards the empire would force marriage upon her. Her father was not getting any younger and he had no other children. If he died that would make Eleria the empress and that was something many of the noble families would not accept. There had never been a female ruler on the throne and there were those who wished to see it remain that way. Most of those simply wished their sons would marry Eleria and become emperors that way.

There were even those who wished she had never returned, but such talk was kept behind closed doors and hushed tones.

“Just because you have not met a suitor does not mean there are not appropriate dresses for it in your wardrobe,” came the reply from Marja as she pulled out another dress. It was a sensible looking green dress that did not hug too tightly around any place. She nodded approvingly. “I think this will do, my lady.”

Eleria glanced at the dress and nodded. “Very sensible.”

Marja hung the dress from the cupboard door and turned her attention to the empty tray in front of Eleria. “You are finished, my lady?”

“Yes. I think it's time to get up now,” replied Eleria and after Marja lifted the tray she swung her feet over the side of the bed and stood up with a long stretch. The white nightgown she had on made her look almost like a ghost in the sunshine.

Getting dressed was the usual ordeal of brushing hair and putting on the dress. Even if it was a practical and less elaborate one than many others, it still took effort despite Marja's help. One look in the full body mirror and Eleria approved of the outfit and the way her hair had been done. After all the years, it still felt strange to her to have someone do such things for her.

“At what time am I to meet Theoden?” asked Eleria. She hoped there'd be time to grab something from the kitchen. Maybe a roasted chicken leg. They always had those going.

“In two hours, my lady,” came the reply from Marja who was busily tidying up the garde-robe. She made certain all the brushes were lined up neatly and any hairs that had stuck to them were removed and thrown out.

“Where?”

“At his city estate, my lady.”

Eleria pursed her lips. That meant they would have to leave soon to be on time. No time to visit the kitchen.

She sighed, disappointed.

“We'd better get going then. Walking there will take a bit,” said Eleria and left the bedroom. She entered the room beyond it. A fireplace kept the room warm and there was a lush carpet covering much of the floor. A table and chairs sat in the middle of it, making for a nice conversational area.

“Walk, my lady?” asked Marja as she followed her with a thick cloak in hand. “Would a coach not be more comfortable?”

Eleria waved her hand dismissively. “It has been a while since I last took a good walk.”

“Your escorts might not allow it, my lady.”

Eleria opened the door leading out to the corridor and came face to face with Oughund who was just about to knock. He looked just as scary as he had the first time she had seen him, although he was better dressed. He wore the uniform of those tasked with protecting her. The insignia of a pale white shield topped with a red rose covered his chest while the rest of his outfit was a moderate mix of blue and purple.

“Your highness,” said the man after a brief moment of surprise. He made a small bow that was more clumsy than anything Eleria had seen. Oughund was a man who was more used to chopping off heads than making pleasantries with the high born.

“Oughund,” said Eleria with a smile. “You know where I'm going today, right?”

“Yes I do, your highness,” replied the man. “The coach is ready and waiting.”

“What would you say if I wanted to walk instead?” asked Eleria and gave the man her most disarming smile. The Kalunta's had tasked him with her safety. He was the man who saw to the day to day routines of it. If he said no then the word was pretty much final. He'd have no trouble ordering the guards to keep her inside the room if she insisted too much. They would not allow her to over ride

the safety concerns.

“I would say it is mighty cold outside, your highness.” replied Oughund and gave her a stern gaze. “You would be much more comfortable taking the coach. They've already put in the iron pot with hot coals. It'll keep you warm for the journey.”

As much as the warmth appealed to her, she wanted to walk. There was something relaxing about it and she wanted to take the chance to take in the sights. While the nobles estates were a spectacle in the summer with their lush gardens, winter had its own beauty. The snow covered trees and walls made sculptures that were a sight to behold and would challenge some of the best sculptors in recreating it.

“I do believe I would like to walk,” said Eleria. There was insistence in her voice that usually resulted in her getting what she wanted. Oughund was the only one who routinely refused her. She could have gone to her father about it, but more than likely he would have sided with Oughund.

The big northerner rubbed his chin. The beard that had been scruffy and untended was now finely trimmed and gave the man a certain air of respectability. “All right. We'll walk, but no detours.”

“I promise,” said Eleria with a smile. She allowed Marja to help her put on the heavy cloak before parting towards the outside. Oughund walked in front of the two women while three guards followed close behind. Once outside they were joined by twenty more men. That was the usual guard she had with her when ever she ventured outside the palace walls. Though the snow covered parade ground they were making their way through was as secure as any other part of the palace her father insisted on near ridiculous levels of security around her.

She knew twenty more men would join them at the transfer point, putting her guards strength close to fifty men. For anyone else that would have been an suffocating amount of guards, but Eleria had had years to get used to it. She barely noticed the amount of them, though people she passed by most certainly did.

“He was right. It is cold,” said Eleria to Marja and pulled the cloak tighter around her. She was starting to wish the dress was a bit heavier. The coach she

did not miss.

"It's not too late to change your mind, my lady," said Marja and wrapped her own cloak tighter around herself. Her breath created a thin cloud of mist every time she breathed out. As Eleria looked around she could see frost forming on the beards and moustache of her escorts.

"I doubt they would appreciate me changing my mind right now," she replied and walked on. They were almost at the transport point anyway so turning back for the coach would just have meant more time spent in the cold. Besides, walking in the heavy clothes they all wore it was easy to stay warm enough, though she suspected the metal her guards had wrapped themselves in sucked away a lot of the warmth.

The guards at the transport station did not bother her at all. They knew who she was and asking for a pass from the princess did not make much sense. It was for her protection that they were asked from others. The rest of her entourage was quickly assembled and the first squad of them went down ahead of her to ensure the area was safe. Eleria and Marja went down with the second half of the guard.

The wind in the open air between the two layers of the city made even her heavy cape flutter and forced her to hold on to it tight so the cold wind didn't bite through her dress. The others around her had similar problems and by the time the disc reached the ground the group had huddled together with the princess in the centre without even realizing it.

The walk to Theoden's manor was uneventful, though filled with marvellous sights just as Eleria had hoped for. The snow and ice truly were the masters of sculptures. At one intersection there was a fountain that had frozen over. Icicles hung from the bow the boy in the middle of it had in hand. A layer of ice covered the entire sculpture, giving it an additional appeal.

Theoden's manor was one of the more significant ones around. Tall walls surrounded it and part of the building started straight from it, giving additional height to the protective layer. The guards at the gate were quick to let Eleria and her escort in. Many of her escort were guided to the barracks of Theoden's personal guard where they could enjoy the warmth of a fire and a meal. Some,

like Oughund, stuck with Eleria to ensure nothing happened to her. She might have been in the manor of the most trusted man in the empire, but after what had happened to her there was no slacking even in such a place.

The manor compared favourable even to the imperial palace. It might not have been larger than a single wing of it, but the richness of it was comparable. Even under the snow and ice you could see that there was much care put into the garden and the shaped bushes and trees along with flower beds and gravel covered paths.

When Eleria stepped through the doors into the hall of the main building she could not help but be impressed. The quality of the marble, the pillars with their decorative elements, the crushingly heavy looking crystal contraption hanging from the roof, reflecting light from the magical lamps mounted on the walls. A round, red carpet stood in the middle, serving as a landing point for the two stairways that curved onto the second floor and above. A large fireplace was opposite to the door with a few chairs for guests to use. The heat from the fire could be felt all the way at the door.

Eleria handed her cape to a servant as did Marja. Another servant offered her some warm wine to stave off the bit of cold the cape had been unable to hold at bay. The cup warmed her hands as much as the fire she made her way to.

“Lord Theoden will meet you shortly, your highness,” said another servant. “He begs your forgiveness for the delay, but age brings burdens with it that do not bow even before the emperor.”

“I understand. It's quite all right,” replied Eleria and took a seat in one of the chairs. Oughund loomed behind her while Marja took a seat next to her. “I could use a moment to warm up.”

The servant bowed and left the trio in peace.

“This wine is quite good,” noted Marja as she sipped from her cup.

“It is,” agreed Eleria. She made no mention of Marja forgetting to address her properly. They were alone so it was not a big breach of etiquette. In fact, it was preferable for Eleria that her companion was finally starting to forget the honorific from time to time. As long as she knew when to use them.

The silence continued after that. The crackling of the fire was the only sound

in the hall. Eleria didn't mind. It was good to relax before serious talks. It gave time to collect thoughts and prepare your arguments once more. She almost didn't want to leave when the servant came back to guide her to meet Theoden. She left Marja to wait in the hall, but Oughund followed her like a shadow.

Up the stairs and down a corridor lined with paintings and portraits of past heads of the family. Finally the servant opened a pair of doors and motioned for Eleria to enter. It was a study much like any other with the usual desk, chairs, bookshelves and fireplace to keep you warm. The biggest accommodation to the usual style was the divan on which Theoden was resting. It was placed close to the fireplace to ensure maximum heat. Even then he had a blanket covering his legs.

The old man smiled at Eleria as she entered.

"Your highness," he said. "I hope you will forgive me for not standing up."

Eleria walked over to him and took his extended hand. The wrinkled skin felt cold and she could feel the bones of his fingers. She smiled at the old man. "You have earned the right to lay down and let us younger people do the proper greeting."

Theoden smiled. He looked tired despite it being early in the day. Perhaps he had trouble sleeping. "You're too kind, as always, Eleria. Please, have a seat."

A servant had brought a comfortable chair next to the divan. Eleria happily made use of it and enjoyed the warmth of the fire.

"What is it that I can do for you today?" asked Theoden. He had never been one to make idle chit chat for long. Straight to business was more to his liking and even with the imperial princess he was not willing to waste time talking about things that neither were all that interested in.

"You have no doubt heard what I have been suggesting to my father and others in the court willing to listen?" asked Eleria.

Theoden let a small smile pass his thin lips. "Do you mean your efforts to banish slavery?"

"Yes," admitted Eleria.

"And you want to hear my opinion on it?" asked the old man and adjusted his position on the divan.

"I would be foolish not to," came the reply from her.

"Then I will be direct with you. What you are suggesting will not work. There are too many nobles and wealthy merchants who rely on their slaves. They will fight tooth and nail to keep them from being free."

A sudden fit of coughing interrupted the man. A servant rushed over and helped him drink some water from a shallow cup. Once recovered, Theoden waved the servant away.

"Are you all right?" asked Eleria with genuine concern. It had been difficult to sit there and watch him try and cough out a lung. She had to wonder how much longer he would be around to give advice to those younger than him.

"Yes, yes. Just a cough," muttered the man and blinked to clear some of the moisture from his eyes. "Now where was I? Ah, right. Like I said, what you are trying to push through will not be accepted."

Eleria felt slightly disappointed at hearing him say that and it must have shown for he smiled.

"You're trying to change things too quickly," said Theoden. "People resist sudden and radical change. They need to be eased into it, the temperature raised slowly as if you were trying to boil a frog alive without having it jump out of the pot."

Eleria had to concede the wisdom in the man's words, but gradual change would take time. Perhaps too much time. How many slaves would die during that time at the hands of their masters? How many miserable lives would be created? It seemed a high price to pay just to spare the feelings of the nobility and wealthy.

"Do not get me wrong," continued Theoden. "I'm not against abolishing slavery. But it must be done in small steps for it to be accepted. That does not mean you can not better the position of those who have the misfortune of ending up as slaves. There is plenty you can do. Introduce laws for how slaves can be treated and protect them from undue cruelties. Establish rights for slaves. Over time you will be able to introduce stricter measures to protect them and eventually it will simply not be worth it to object against abolishing the entire practice."

"But that will take decades," said Eleria. "I'm not sure I can keep suggesting

things for that long. Duties might take me away from it all.”

“Then there is but one course of action you can follow,” said Theoden and gave her a stern look.

“What's that?”

“You must become the empress of Ramyn so you can introduce these laws yourself.”

For a moment Eleria sat there shocked into silence. To even say such a thing was borderline rebellious, but at the same time it was the truth. If she wanted to abolish slavery she'd have to somehow become the empress. But the obstacles to that were just as numerous as they were to outright achieving freedom for all slaves. The powerful nobility would object to her just as much as they would to any attempt to rob them of their free workforce. They would insist she marry and the older her father got the less likely he was to resist the suggestions.

If he ordered it, there would be a marriage.

“What you are suggesting is no less difficult to achieve than what I am trying to do,” said Eleria finally after collecting her thoughts for a moment.

“I never said it would be easy,” replied Theoden. “But worthy things seldom are, aren't they?”

There was no denying it. Things that came to you easily tended not to be worth much in the long term. The ones you had to sweat and bleed for were the ones that lasted and gave the greatest reward. Eleria knew that full well.

“I assume you are not suggesting this to me without having a plan?” asked Eleria.

Theoden gave her an amused smile. “Naturally.”

“Let's hear it then.”

The scheduled meeting went on longer than planned from that point as the old man had a very detailed plan that he shared with her. By the time she left the mansion and headed back towards the palace she was convinced the plan could work.

She would become the empress of Ramyn and rule with her own justice.

Chapter 17

Snow had started to fall. Cheid pulled the hood further over his head to keep it away and hastened his steps. It had started as only a few flakes of snow drifting down, but it had soon grown into a heavy fall that restricted vision so badly that you could barely see the buildings across the street. In a city like Ramyn a wrong turn could quickly find even a native lost and out in a snow storm there was always a chance of ending in the wrong sort of place all together – the sort of place that would have your head severed from the rest of your body or at the very least, your purse from your waist.

He took great care in keeping the book safe and away from the damaging snow. It was a new book so having its pages wavy from moisture would be a bad start for its longevity.

As he looked up at the fake sky above him he had to question the wisdom of allowing rain and snow to pass through to create a more believable illusion. At the very least it could have been restricted somehow. He had to admit rain had its place as it kept grass and trees alive, but why snow? It did nothing but annoy people, unless you were a little kid with time to toss snowballs at your friends.

Then again, who was going to change it? He doubted most of the masters even understood how the island and its floating layers had been done. Meddling with things you did not understand was never a good idea and the chance of the mass of land in the air crashing down was a hefty risk few would dare to gamble with.

But none of that was more than a way for Cheid to occupy his mind as he made his way through the snowy streets. There were few people about besides him. It was that time of day when most people were either at home enjoying a meal or at a tavern downing some ale and enjoying the company of friends or perhaps the singing and play of a travelling bard. He was still on the ground layer of the city and headed for a certain tavern.

The man meeting him was not one to leave the shadows much and he had

his favourite place to do so in. It had taken Cheid considerable time and persuading and no small amount of money to get him to accept a face to face meeting. He could only hope it was worth all the effort.

The pig head shaped sign guided Cheid to the right tavern and it was with no small amount of pleasure that he closed the door behind him and let the warmth flush over him like a wave by the seaside.

It wasn't the best of taverns, but it wasn't bad either. The tables were neatly arranged in rows and there were private booths by the far wall. The customers seemed content enough to keep to their food and drinks while listening to the minstrel singing by the large fireplace.

It was one of the private booths where Cheid spotted the dark figure. There was no mistaking him. Cheid loosened his cape as he made his way to the man. He ordered some warm wine from a passing by barmaid and threw himself on the seat opposite to the hooded man.

"You're on time," said the figure in a rough voice that made it seem like someone had crushed the man's throat at some point.

Cheid grinned and placed his book on the table. "Aren't you supposed to say 'you're late'?"

All he got in response was a snort. The arrival of the barmaid with Cheid's wine was likely what saved him from a more opinionated response.

Cheid took a sip of the wine after handing the woman a coin. He turned his full attention back to the man in front of him.

"Do you have the money?" asked the hooded figure.

"Sure do, Kadna. Do you have my information?"

The man reached into a pocket on his cape and pulled out a rolled up piece of parchment. He made no effort to hand it to Cheid.

"I take that as a yes," said Cheid and dug out a pouch of coins.

He hesitated for a moment.

The information along with the book was about to cost him most of the money he had. There'd be little left over for other things. He'd need to spend months if not years building up wealth again. Was the information really worth it? On that same consideration, if the information was on the piece of parchment

then why not simply rob it from the man? There would be little he could do against his magic.

But then word would get out about it. After that no one would sell him any information for fear of meeting a similar fate. A man like Kadna would likely have friends as well that would be less than pleased at him getting robbed. They would come after the culprit to exact revenge and that was something Cheid could ill afford.

He had enough people to worry about and kill already.

“Here,” said Cheid and tossed the pouch to Kadna. The hooded figure caught it with ease and weighed it in his hand before nodding approvingly. He rolled over the piece of parchment.

With almost shaky hands Cheid unrolled it and read the information inside. He frowned, then grinned, then frowned again as he got further in the text. The information was not what he had expected and the people implicated in it had him feeling doubtful whether he'd be capable of doing anything against them even with magic.

The names given were powerful and some had magic of their own.

“Are you certain about this information?” asked Cheid as he reached the end of the document.

“As certain as one can be about such things,” replied Kadna.

“So there could be mistakes?” demanded Cheid. He took a sip of wine to try and calm himself a bit.

Kadna shrugged his shoulders. “There's always a possibility for that. The information in that parchment has been pieced together from hundreds of bits of clues from hundreds of sources. It is your job to decide how much you trust it.”

“Considering your reputation I suppose I should be fairly confident in it,” said Cheid and re-read parts of the document. Every time certain names jumped out he felt his thirst for revenge daunted by the sheer difficulty of it.

“I make no guarantees and no refunds,” said Kanda and stood up. With the business concluded there was no reason for him to stay any longer and Cheid made no objection as he left.

Cheid sat in his place for a good while, sipping the wine and reading the

parchment over and over again. He wanted to know every bit of it by heart. Finally he rolled up the parchment once more and stuck it in one of his cape pockets.

The minstrel had changed his earlier upbeat song into a sad one and it fit the mood Cheid was in perfectly. A ballad of loss and revenge that had people sacrifice their lives for others, take revenge and all sorts of things that people enjoyed hearing in story telling songs. It was enough to make him stay seated for another serving of wine.

After the ballad the minstrel started another, more upbeat song that finally pushed Cheid up from his seat and out the door. The cold made him wrap the cape tight around himself as he braved through the snowfall that had turned into a blizzard. New snow covered the streets, making the cobblestone all the more slippery, slowing him down as he made his way towards the Towers and the warmth of his own bed.

Inside him a fire burned.

He had names now and enough proof to continue verifying their involvement in the destruction of his family and the fate that had befallen Eleria. Despite some of the names being the kind that would make any sane person reconsider plans of going after them, Cheid felt no such urgency despite having some doubts whether he could pull it off or not.

All he knew was he had to try as no one else would.

Given how many years had gone by and there had been no progress in finding the culprits, at least not in public, it looked like the emperor and those working for him had given up on trying to find those responsible. From what Cheid had heard even Eleria did not seem that interested in finding out the truth of the events, but rather focused her efforts on trying to banish slavery.

While a noble goal that Cheid could agree with, he wished she had spent a bit of time digging the past.

The blizzard grew worse as Cheid walked through the streets. He checked multiple times that the book was still safely wrapped and protected from the elements. The gusts of wind that sent snow blowing in a blinding wall of white was strong on the bridge leading to the Towers. Cheid had to grab hold of the

railing just to feel safe crossing it. The slippery stone could easily had him losing footing and falling down.

He breathed a sigh of relief the moment the doors of the reception hall closed behind him and the warmth hugged him like Satu had the previous night. The mere thought of her made his cheeks burn. He hoped the people he passed by would chalk it up to coming inside from the cold instead of the less than presentable thoughts he was having. Thankfully it was late so there weren't too many people around and even fewer who cared enough to pay him much attention.

The ride up and walk through the corridors of the dorm went without disturbance. He hesitated for just a moment before opening the door to his room. Maybe Satu was still there, laying naked in is bed, ready to seduce him the moment the door closed. For a moment he wished that were the case, but then shook his head. He needed sleep and time to arrange his thoughts and a naked woman was the last thing that would allow for either.

The room was empty, though he was pleased to note Satu had made the bed and tidied things a bit. The stack of books on his table was no longer leaning as if about to crumble down. Cheid dug out the book from under his cape and set it down on the table. There was a hint of her scent left lingering about. It was the strongest by the bed. He spotted a note resting on his pillow and read it with curiosity. The delicate handwriting was familiar to him, not that there had been much doubt who it was from to begin with.

Dear Cheid,

Last night was truly enjoyable. I hope it will not be the last night we spend together. The Quintet is meeting again tomorrow. I hope you will find the time to come there. We have a lot to talk about. Maybe you can escort me home again..

With love,

Satu

Cheid put down the note and sat on the bed to think about it. What was he going to do about her? With love? When did such a thing enter the picture? It was too quick. Too confusing. The timing was all wrong and the distraction she would no doubt turn out to be could not have come at a worse time. He needed a clear head to pursue his goals.

The moment the thoughts ran through Cheid's mind the memories of her soft skin and breasts flashed through and made him blush again. There was no arguing against the natural wants of a boy his age. Cursing, he threw the note on his desk and started to get ready for bed. He'd meet her tomorrow and talk things out. He knew how the conversation would go. There'd be no saying no to her.

More importantly, there'd be some things that needed to be set in motion with the names he now knew.

Revenge would be coming.



The day broke with sunshine. The dark clouds of the previous evening that had blanketed the city with heavy snow had passed by and the clear sky made the air crisp and cold.

Orend examined the intricate shapes the freezing cold had made on the windows of his study. The sharp crystals of ice made the plain window compare favourably to the fine tinted glass paintings that decorated many of the imperial palace's windows.

The years had put a few grey strands of hair in his beard, but other than that there had not been much change, apart from his mood. With the debt collectors off his back and the emperors favour firmly behind him there were less worries burdening him. There had actually been time to laugh and enjoy life instead of worrying when the next piece of property would have to be sold. On the contrary, there had been time to look into buying property.

Theoden had been a man of his word and returned the properties sold to him at no cost. The money he had paid for them had largely cleared off the debts Orend's father had racked up. After that there had been a few well thought out investments and the rest of the debts had been cleared, allowing the family to

start enjoying the profits from their holdings. All of that combined had made the Kalunta family one of the more stable noble families when it came to wealth and it was in no small part thank to Orend and Loren finding the missing princess.

Of course, Orend's business acumen had played a part as well.

Many other families had grown jealous of the new found success for the family. They were especially angry over the Kalunta family receiving the honour of guarding the princess. Despite the fate of the last family tasked with the duty it was still a way to get in the good graces of the emperor and many had hoped to be able to profit from it.

Where Orend had to previously dodge debt collecting merchants he now had to deal with the intrigue and politics of noble families. Favours were asked, given and denied, debts made and paid, all to keep the peace within the empire.

Loren, being the relatively unpolished woodsman that he was, had ruffled more than a few feathers with his words and actions, bringing unwanted attention towards the family. The years spent in the south had done little to smooth the rough edges in his behaviour. Sometimes Orend worried it had done just the opposite and that the grudges born would end in blood spilling.

Though to his younger brothers credit, he had done an admirable job of overseeing the safety of the princess. Out of all the people that had flocked to help her after the rescue, Loren was one of the few to have stuck around and actually gotten the princess to open up and move on with her life. The healers, the studied priests and academics, the ladies of the court, they all had one thing in common – they had failed to help the princess recover in any significant manner. Many of them had come in with their ego in front, but ended up scurrying home with their tail between their legs.

Orend turned around as the door opened and Loren walked in. His green outfit looked like something any woodsman would wear, though his tailor had managed to make it look fitting for a noble by clever use of embroidery and high quality fabrics.

“How's the princess?” asked Orend as the younger man poured himself something to drink and found a comfortable seat in one of the chairs. The two rarely exchanged pleasantries these days. Both were the kind that wanted to get

straight to business.

“So you've heard?” asked Loren without answering the question. He took a sip from his cup.

“I heard she met with Theoden to discuss her crusade against slavery,” replied Orend and took a seat behind his desk. He couldn't bring himself to fault Eleria for trying to do away with the practice. In truth he'd support her if she ever needed any help in it. The years in the south had convinced both brothers that there was no redeeming value in slavery. If you needed someone to do work for you then paying a few coins and allowing the workers to go to their homes for the night and stay together with their families was a small price to pay for it.

People who received compensation for their work tended to put in more effort as well.

“I spoke with her this morning,” said Loren. He did not seem to be in any hurry to fully disclose what had happened. An annoying habit he had picked up somewhere.

“And?” demanded Orend with a frown.

“The old man told her she couldn't ban slavery in a short period of time.”

“Well, at least he was honest with her. The talk among some of the nobility is less than flattering about her,” said Orend and leaned back in his chair, relieved that no crazy ideas had been put forth.

Loren nodded. “Theoden is well aware of such talk. That's why he suggested Eleria take her time and try to make the change gradual.”

Orend found himself nodding as well. “The old man didn't get to where is by being stupid. Sounds like he offered her some good advice.”

A quick grin passed Lorens lips. “Because Eleria doubted she'd be able to keep campaigning for her cause for an extended period of time, Theoden convinced her she should become the empress.”

“He what?” shouted Orend in a sudden fit of..rage? Surprise? He was not sure himself what he was feeling. On the one hand the suggestion was ludicrous and if the princess pursued it it would put her in danger of pulling the wrath of the nobility on her. On the other hand, her becoming empress was the logical conclusion to what she wanted to accomplish. It would mean her not getting

married before the coronation and that would be a hard sell to her father and the rest of the nobility. Her being a woman would certainly raise opposition, but she had no brothers so what could the nobility do if she did not marry?

None the less the suggestion was something that should not have been put in her mind.

Loren chuckled. "You should see your expression, brother. One might think your eyes are about to pop out of their sockets."

Orend glared at him, but took a moment to calm down. "How seriously did she take him?" he finally asked with a worried voice.

"Seriously enough that she told me. She expects there will be some..upheaval once she start her plan."

"You can bet there will be upheaval! Do you think the people will just cheer for her in the streets?" demanded Orend.

"The peasants probably will," noted Loren.

"Once the important families find out she won't be marrying anyone before her father dies they'll send assassins if they think they'd have an advantage in the bid for the throne," continued Orend, completely ignoring Loren's little note. "Do you realize the danger she's putting herself in by pursuing this?"

"Oh, I do," said Loren and took a sip of his drink. "She doesn't. She claims to have a plan that will not upset people as much as everyone would think, but she refused to share it with me so I can't say if it's true."

Orend cursed and had to take a moment so he could talk normal again. He gave Loren a solid stare. "You need to find out what she's planning. We can't protect her if we don't know what she's up to. And while you're at it try and talk her out of it, for her own good."

Loren shrugged his shoulders. "I'll try, but you know her. It won't be easy to get anything out of her."

"If anyone can do it it's you," said Orend. It sounded flat, but it was the truth. Eleria trusted few people as much as she did Loren.

"I've already put a few extra guards on her. She didn't like it, but it's not an area where she can over rule us," said Loren and finished his drink. For a moment he looked to ponder whether to get a refill, but in the end he set his cup

down on Orend's desk.

“Good, though I fear that will not be enough once things start unravelling.”

“I doubt it'll be any time soon. The emperor is in good health and she can't do much before he dies,” said Loren and reposition himself in his seat.

“I bet she has plenty planned,” said Orend dryly. He was not looking forward to what her ambitions would bring forth. For all he knew it could result in an outright civil war or rebellion from one of the noble families. Would the legions be loyal to her? That was the big question. If they were she'd be able to fight, but if they weren't then her rule would be as short as a baby dwarf.

If it ever even got that far.

Her father could well insist she marry someone and that would derail her entire plan. How could she refuse the emperor in something like that? He was not a man you said no to easily. He had means of persuasion that would get even the highest duke to do his bidding, though how well those would work on his own daughter was not clear. How willing would he even be to use them?

Orend sighed. “And I was hoping I wouldn't get any more grey hairs this year.”

Loren chuckled. “She has a knack for it, doesn't she?”

“It's a wonder she doesn't walk around with a brush and a bucket of grey paint, stealthily attacking peoples hair with them.”

Loren laughed.

Orend soon joined him as the image of Eleria sneaking up on her father with a paintbrush popped into his head. He could imagine the shouting and bickering that would follow. The relief the laughter brought did not last long as the worries made their way back to his mind.

“We have to keep her safe,” said Orend finally and gave his brother the sort of look that conveyed all the worries he had on his mind. They both knew what had happened to the previous family that had failed to protect her. Neither wanted the same fate to befall the Kalunta family.

“We will,” assured Loren as he stood up and gave Orend a brief, reassuring smile. “Oughund isn't one to be fooled and neither are many of the men he commands.”

“Let's hope that's enough.”

“I have a few things in mind that might help us keep her safe, but I'll have to do some more thinking on them before I'm ready to talk about them,” said Loren as he made his way to the door. He stopped to glance back at his brother. He looked more worried than even at the worst times of dealing with their fathers debts. “You'll be the first one I'll talk to.”

Orend simply nodded and watched Loren leave the room. He could not dispel the worries from his mind. He could only hope Loren and the family would be up to the task of keeping the would be empress safe.

Chapter 18

Eleria glared at Marja. Her glare was met with a steady look that had no give in it. She didn't look angry, just determined. She could be like that even up to a fault. Sometimes it was enough to make even Elria want to call the guards and have her dragged out.

But she never did that.

When she had told Marja about the plan Theoden had cooked up with her the initial reaction had been to try and talk Eleria out of it. She had expressed much the same concerns for her safety as Loren had when told of her bid for the throne, but neither had been able to turn her head.

They did not understand how much it meant to Eleria nor did they have the full details of the plan.

Theoden had given it a lot of thought and the threats that would come her way had been accounted for. Perfect safety was impossible, but Eleria felt confident that no matter what the noble families would throw at her she'd come through alive and unharmed. It was not only the Kalunta family looking after her, she had the support of Theoden as well and that was no small thing.

"You're being unreasonable," noted Eleria and met the gaze from the woman. How she had managed to turn into as commanding as Tabitha had been was a sudden change. The attitude was fine when dealing with an six year old, even if she was a princess, but to have the same sort of attitude towards a sixteen year old was pushing it even in Eleria's mind. She was an adult and could make her own decisions.

"The emperor would likely disagree, my lady," replied Marja and did not budge from her place. She stood in front of the door leading to the hallway, blocking Eleria's way out from her own chambers. She could have called the guards, but she feared Oughund would side with the stubborn woman.

"It's only for a bit," Eleria pleaded and stomped her foot. She knew it was childish and unlikely to accomplish anything, but she couldn't help herself.

"No, my lady, it's not only for a bit. I know you. You say that, but in the end

it will turn into a full day out in the city without anyone to look after you,” said Marja in a firm voice. “A person like you should not be making visits to shady businesses like that.”

“But I have to!” said Eleria. It was an important part of the plan that Theoden had arranged beforehand. All she had to do was go pick it up. Unfortunately the shop was in a less than savoury part of town and getting there with guards would bring too much attention. Eleria had hoped to sneak away using a disguise and a fraudulent pass. It was not a forgery, but it was made for someone that did not exist as anything but a fake identity for her.

The guards would have spotted a forgery instantly.

“Then you will instruct me and I’ll go get what it is you need,” said Marja. “But I will not allow you to put yourself at risk like that.”

“Allow?” Eleria demanded. She opened her mouth to say something more, but decided not to, so she ended up looking like a fish on dry land. She had to consider the proposal for a moment. Theoden had been very specific that she had to go to the place herself, but that seemed like an odd demand knowing how things were around her. She had thought it a test to see if she could come up with a solution to how to shake off the guards, but now that she thought about it it made no sense. Why would Theoden knowingly try to put her in a dangerous situation? As he had laid out the plan he had always emphasized her safety as being a priority.

No, it had to be some other kind of test.

Eleria assessed the woman in front of her. Could she be trusted? She decided yes. If she had wanted to harm her there had been plenty of opportunities for it. Putting poison in her breakfast would have been a simple thing to do. The concern she was showing now was a testament to her devotion.

Marja was someone she could trust.

“Well?”

Eleria gave her a last glare before letting out a resigned sigh. “Fine. I’ll let you do it.” She couldn’t help but feel a slight sting of disappointment. Going out on her own to parts of the city she had never been to had been an exciting prospect. Now she had been relegated to watching from the sidelines as Marja

took the risk.

Marja nodded. “Good. Now tell me what the plan is.” She seemed pleased with herself and Eleria could not help but frown at her because of it. She made her way back to the comfortable couch and chairs that took up most of the centre of the room. There was also a table on which to set down drinks and snacks. Marja followed her and took a seat as Eleria threw herself onto the couch in a very unladylike manner, wrinkling her dress and exposing an almost scandalous amount of her legs and thighs.

“It really is quite simple. All you have to do is go to the shop and ask the owner to hand you that which was left by Fando,” said Eleria and examined her nails. They needed a bit of trimming.

“And which shop would that be, my lady?” asked Marja patiently. She doubted the princess realized just how many shops there were in a city the size of Ramyn.

“Theoden said it's called the Dragon's Head. A man called Fred owns it. He warned me about him being unfriendly and not letting that bother me.”

“And all I need to do is tell him I came for that which was left by Fando? The man, Fred, won't know to wait for you specifically?” asked Marja. It seemed almost too simple. Why would the princess have had to go do it herself?

Eleria shook her head. “That line is all you need.” So Theoden had told her. Few people in the empire still knew what she looked like. She had not made many public appearances and those that the masses had witnessed did not allow them to get a good look at her. Waving from a distant balcony allowed them to see a figure, but they wouldn't have been able to tell what colour her eyes were when they went home.

“In which part of the city is the shop?” asked Marja. Even with a name it would be hard to find it.

Eleria told her.



Marja waded through the snow and up the icy ramp. Someone had been courteous enough to throw fine sand on it so it wasn't an impossible task to walk

on it, but it was still slippery in places and she made certain to stay close to the building walls for additional support. She did not want to fall and slide down the entire way only to have to start climbing again. As she reached the top and glanced over the empty space separating the walkway from its counter part, she could see a man swinging a pickaxe and pieces of ice flying up from the ground.

At least someone was putting in effort to get rid of the ice.

She continued on and took a turn into a narrow alley. There she spotted the store sign, shaped like the head of a dragon. It sent chills down her spine. Had she known beforehand what part of the city she'd have to go to she might have been less enthusiastic about doing it herself.

Still, there was no way she could have allowed the princess to do it.

The smell that hit her as she opened the door made her nose crinkle. She quickly dug out a napkin from her cloak pocket and put it over her nose. The rose water it had been soaked in masked the worst of the smells. She closed the door and looked around. The shelves were filled with things she did not want to see any closer so she walked further in to the counter.

"Hello?" she asked and peered through the doorway to the back room. There did not seem to be anyone around.

"Hello?" she asked again, louder.

"I heard you the first time lass," came a grumpy voice from behind her.

Marja let out a startled yelp and turned around. Her heart pounded as if she were a rabbit chased by the hunting dogs.

Fred let out a laugh as he hobbled around her to the other side of the counter. He made no apology about scaring her.

Marja eyed the man with suspicion and apprehension. He was not confidence inspiring to look at and the way he had sneaked up on her did nothing to raise her opinion of him. The man had not even apologize for it!

"Well, are you just going to stand there or are you going to tell me what a lady like you is doing in my shop?" demanded Fred and glared at her. "Well? What is it? Did a lover break your heart? I've got a box of Veneral I can sell you. Slip it in his drink and you'll never have to worry about him again."

"What?" asked Marja, stunned. Was the man really trying to sell her poison

so she could kill someone? How could he be so open about it? Surely the city guard would shut his shop down the moment they heard about what he was selling.

“That's what I've been asking,” said Fred sounding frustrated. “What do you want? If you don't tell me don't think I won't get my cane and whip your butt just because you're a woman.”

“I'm here to collect what Fando left,” replied Marja, deciding it was best to just get the whole thing over with. She had little doubt the man would do as he said and get the cane. She had no desire to get whipped one way or the other today.

“Ah. That. Why didn't you say so from the beginning?” demanded Fred and turned around. He hobbled to the back room and Marja could hear things falling on the floor as he rummaged through what ever place he had back there to hold things in. Judging by the rest of the shop, she did not want to know what, exactly.

Fred came hobbling back behind the counter and put down a small box. It was decorated with golden paint and a few embedded jewels. A sturdy looking lock ensured it remained safely closed. It was big enough to hold a piece of parchment or perhaps a small dagger laying on its side. You could perhaps fit a half burnt candle inside it, standing up.

“Do you have the key?” asked Marja after closely examining the box. Eleria had made no mention of what it was she was coming to pick up.

“No, I don't have the bloody key,” said Fred grumpily and glared at her. “Does it look like you're at a locksmith's shop? No. Besides, you're the one picking up the box so shouldn't *you* have the key?” He gave Marja a suspicious look.

Marja could feel the red raising on her cheeks. She decided it was time to go. She had gotten what she came for after all. “I believe my mistress has it. Thank you for the item.”

Fred snorted and watched her pick up the box and wrap it in a piece of cloth she dug out from one of her cloak pockets. “No need to thank me. I was paid and that's good enough.”

Not knowing what to say to that, Marja simply nodded and turned to leave the shop. She kept her eyes well away from the shelves and as soon as the door closed behind her she let out a sigh of relief and enjoyed the fresh air. She stashed away the napkin and started back towards the palace. She had no problems along the way, save for the last transport point where the guards asked her to open the box. Having no key made that impossible and the guards were reluctant to let her through, but the arrival of Oughund and his guarantee of her being harmless allowed her to pass through. Much to her disappointment, the bearded man walked next to her with no intention of parting ways.

“What is that the guards had you on hold for?” the man asked and glanced at the cloth wrapped box.

Marja was unsure how much she could tell the man. His very presence made her feel uncomfortable. There was something unsettling about him. His eyes were those of someone who had seen things no man should and there was a constant pain reflected from them. She could not look at him straight without her skin crawling.

“Something the princess asked me to pick up,” she finally replied, thinking it to be a safe enough answer with enough truth in it to not raise suspicions.

“Ah. How has she been doing?” the man asked and adjusted the sword hanging from his belt.

“As usual,” said Marja. “She still complains about her breakfast almost every morning.”

Oughund laughed. “If you had to eat porridge every morning for years, you'd complain too.”

For Marja, even his laughter sounded like it had an undertone of pain to it. She could not help but wonder what the man had been through to make him like that.

“I've been eating porridge every morning since I was a child,” she noted, though she had to admit that what she ate was far more tastier than what the princess had to eat.

“Oh,” said Oughund and managed to sound embarrassed. At least that sounded genuine without any additional emotions underneath it. Still, the jab

was enough to make him silent for the rest of the walk through the palace and for that Marja was thankful. It wasn't that she hated the man. She knew what he had done to save the princess and for that she would be eternally grateful for him, but that did not lessen his unsettling effect when ever she was alone with him.

"Well, I'll leave you with your mistress," the man said as they arrived at Eleria's quarters. Marja simply nodded and let her into her chambers.

"Did you get it?" demanded Eleria and rushed over to her as soon as the door had closed. She looked as excited as a small child going to the harvest festival.

"Yes, my lady, but could you let me get these clothes off first?" said Marja and struggled to remove her cloak and the warm vest she had worn under it. She shed a heavy skirt she had put on to ward off the worst of the cold. She still had a lighter one underneath it. Finally, feeling less like having a heat stroke in the warmth of her quarters, she pulled out the package and handed it to Eleria.

The princess quickly scurried to the couch and set it down on the table. She unwrapped it with the sort of enthusiasm a small child would a gift from their parents. She examined the box thoroughly with a crinkled forehead, trying to decide what to do with it.

"There was no key," said Marja as she took a seat in one of the chairs opposite to her.

"I know," replied Eleria and turned the box in her hands a few more times. She pointed at the lock. "This is just a decoy. It doesn't actually open the box."

"Then how do you open it?" asked Marja, curious as to what the box held within. If there was no key then how could you open it?

"Theoden explained it to me," said Eleria and examined the box some more. She felt around it with her fingers, looking for something. "

Ah, here it is," she said and pressed down with one of her fingers. Marja heard a click and as the princess showed the box to her there was a small square that had been pressed inward slightly.

"Now we need to press the others in the right order," explained Eleria enthusiastically and began working on it. There were three more clicks from

various sides of the box before it finally opened.

Marja looked on with curiosity as Eleria pulled out a pendant from the box. It had intricate gold carvings surrounding a green emerald the size of a small egg. It was valuable, of that there was no doubt, and it was pretty to look at, but why had Theoden sent her to get such a thing from a shady part of town?

"It is pretty," she finally said as Eleria admired the pendant.

"And dangerous," said the princess as she ran her fingers over the emerald.

"Dangerous, my lady?" asked Marja. It did not look dangerous.

"This is what will keep me from being married to anyone," said Eleria before setting the pendant down in its box. "When you wear it, it will have an effect on men that will make them act in a manner that my father is certain to disapprove of. Any suitor I meet will make a fool of themselves and my father will have no choice but to send them away without my hand."

"So it is magic," said Marja, feeling uncomfortable all of a sudden. Magic had a tendency end one way out of two; either it did what it was supposed to or there was some unforeseen complication that would come and haunt the one using it.

Eleria nodded.

"What will it make the men do?" asked Marja. She feared it would put the princess in danger or perhaps worse, drive the men to make inappropriate advances towards her with such passion that she would be unable to deny them.

"I don't know exactly," admitted Eleria with a frown. "Theoden didn't know or he wasn't willing to tell me the full details. Apparently the effect varies too much from person to person to make clear predictions of its effects."

"Is it wise to use such an item then? Who knows what danger it will put you in."

For a moment a look of hesitation appeared on Eleria, but it soon passed and was replaced with the sort of firm resolve that did not leave a place for anything else. "There's no other way. I will make sure to keep Oughund and his men close by. They should be able to protect me from anything unexpected."

"Won't they be affected by the pendant?" asked Marja. It seemed like an obvious flaw in her plan. If her protectors suffered from the same effect then she would be in an even worse spot than if she had no one guarding her.

“The range is limited and it can only affect one person at a time. I should be fine as long as I take care when activating it,” said Eleria, dismissing her worries with the confidence of someone who believed to know what they were doing.

“Then I suppose the question becomes when will you use it first?” asked Marja even though she had a good guess.

“The day after tomorrow. There is a court gathering where the Bendest family hopes to introduce their oldest son as a suitor for my hand. It will be the perfect opportunity to test the pendant.”

“Are you not worried what this will do to the families and the men you plan to use the pendant on? Their names will be shamed. Your father is not the forgiving kind so if someone goes too far there might be blood spilled and ultimately it will be on your hands. Otherwise good men might end up dead because of this.” It was the last attempt by Marja to get her not to use the item. The dangers were too great not only for her, but to the peace of the imperial court.

“I worry about that,” admitted Eleria and gave her companion a mixed look. “I don't want innocent people to suffer because of this, but how else am I going to stop my father from marrying me off? I hope it will only take one or two cases for the other families to start to be reluctant to introduce suitors. Those that do suffer because of this I will make up for when I am empress.”

“That's a long time away,” noted Marja.

“I know, but what choice do I have? Do you have a better plan? If you do I am willing to listen,” said Eleria and gave Marja a hope filled look. Despite everything she had her own doubts about the plan and hurting innocents was the last thing she wanted. If she could avoid it there would be little stopping her from changing the plan, but as it stood no one had a better suggestion.

Try as she might, Marja could not come up with a better plan. It was clear that asking Eleria to give up was not going to work. She was determined to become empress and the pendant truly seemed to be the only way to scare off the suitors and ensure her father had no choice but to have her go on unmarried.

“Just..be careful, my lady,” said Marja finally.

“I always am,” replied Eleria with a feint smile.



Cheid felt slight apprehension as he approached the usual meeting place for the Quintet. His hands itched to get back to examining the evidence he had received. There were names there he had hope of tracing down relatively easy and with little effort on his part. Confronting those people was certain to lead to others and to more clues and ultimately to the mastermind behind the event that robbed him of so much.

He hoped to leave the meeting early enough to catch one of the names on the list. The tavern the man frequented was not that far off from the route to the Towers. Maybe he'd be open to talking, or if not, getting killed.

But there was no time to ponder such things now. There were more pressing matters, matters that, while not as severe, still demanded attention. The letter left by Satu promised the night to be an interesting one. What worried Cheid the most about it was the chance that he might be tied to the woman through bonds that would be hard to break. On some level he yearned for it, to see more of her, feel her next to himself once more, but at the same time the thought of letting someone so close to him had him trembling to the core.

What if he slipped up some day and let her know the truth about himself? Would she run to the emperor to give him in for the reward that still stood for members of his family? Or would she accept it and stand by him?

The prospect of the latter had Cheid feeling like he should allow it to happen. The road he was on would be hard to walk alone and having someone there giving support would be more than welcome, but how likely was that to really happen?

It was best to go in feeling pessimistic, expecting betrayal. That way, there would be no disappointments.

Cheid slogged through the piled up snow and cursed the workers for not keeping the streets clean. It was like they had all decided it was better to stay inside by the comfy fireplace and drink some ale. He couldn't really blame anyone for thinking that, but neglecting ones duties was something he could not get behind.

Muttering curses he pushed open the tavern door and enjoyed the breath of

warmth that greeted him. The chatter that followed was a welcome change to the howling wind and the light from the lamps and fireplace cast a warming light over the common room.

“Cheid!” came a familiar voice and it took him little time to see the red-headed girl rise up and nearly run towards him. She threw herself in his arms and planted a solid kiss on his lips. There were lewd shouts and cheers from the rest of the table she had departed from, but Cheid had no mind to pay attention to them. He had his hands full with the woman pressing against him. He could smell the spiced wine from her breath as she broke the kiss and smiled at him. Her cheeks had a healthy red to them, telling she had drunk more than her fair share already.

“What are you doing?” demanded Cheid as soon as he had managed to recover from the surprise. He was not too pleased with how the evening had started.

“What?” asked Satu with a confused look. Her hands were busy slithering around Cheid's waist.

“I thought we were supposed to keep this secret,” hissed Cheid barely loud enough for her to hear him over the chatter of the tavern. “Now everyone will know.”

Satu snorted and slipped to his right side. She lifted his hand and settled it over her shoulders. “Most of the Quintet already knew. The girls anyway. They've known for years that I had my eyes on you. Besides, these are our friends. How long do you think we could keep it from them?”

“Not for long,” admitted Cheid. There were examples from within the group. Pairs had been spotted by those looking on well before the two people getting involved even had an idea. He had to wonder whether that had happened in this case as well and he had been utterly oblivious to it?

“See? No harm done,” said Satu and planted a kiss on his cheek. She started to tug him towards the table where grinning faces were waiting for them.

“But we were supposed to talk,” protested Cheid. “We were supposed to decide what we are to be, if we are to be anything.”

Satu stopped and gave him a look. “Are you saying you don't want to be with

me?"

"Erm." He didn't know how to answer the question. There were too many things causing him worry to give a straight no as an answer, but he didn't want to say yes either.

The expression on Satu started to grow worried with a mix of anger and sadness. Her eyes looked to be more moist than before as she looked at Cheid.

"This is why we should have talked," said Cheid with a sigh. "I just..don't know what I want."

Satu glanced at the waiting Quintet members before changing direction and dragging Cheid to a more quiet corner of the tavern. "Let's talk then," she said and leaned against a pillar supporting the ceiling. Cheid stood in front of her and served as a muffler to the chatter of the common room behind him.

There was a long silence with awkward glances exchanged between the two.

Satu sighed. "What's the problem then? Don't you like me?"

"I do like you," admitted Cheid. There was no denying that.

"What is it then?"

"I just.." he searched for words. He couldn't tell her what really worried him, but he had to give her some reason for the hesitation. His mind was drawing a blank for acceptable explanations. "I don't know. Ever since I left my parents farm I haven't had anyone be that close to me. It frightens me, what it could bring with it."

The expression on Satu softened a bit.

"Then there are things I'm involved in," said Cheid, knowing well he was now venturing into dangerous territory that would invoke questions he might not be able to answer. "Dangerous things. I don't want to take the chance that you might get dragged into them."

The look of confusion on her almost made him wince. The questions would be coming.

"I don't know what you're involved in," said Satu in a quiet voice that Cheid could barely hear. She looked down at her feet as she spoke. "I'm not sure I want to know. You've kept it hidden until now and I'm sure there is a good reason for it, but that doesn't change how I feel about you." She looked up at Cheid. "I have

fears too, worries, but if you let such things control your life then what will you ever accomplish? Would we have ever made it this far in the Towers if we were people unwilling to face our fears?”

“Probably not,” admitted Cheid. He was starting to get a feeling where the discussion would end up going.

“Then why not take this journey with me?” asked Satu and gave him a pleading look. “If it works then we will both be happier for it. If it does not then we have learned something while having had a good time of it.”

Looking at her, Cheid could not come up with good arguments to say no. There was no denying that standing so close to her was bringing back memories of that night and those made him want more nights like that, specifically with her. There was so much more he could do and share with her.

He leaned in close and gave her a kiss.

“Let's be a couple then,” he said as their lips parted. The smile she gave him made the words worth it. She grabbed his hand and led him back to the table where their friends were waiting.

Chapter 19

What was supposed to have been a normal gathering had turned into a celebration of the new couple that had emerged from within the Quintet. The gossip and knowledge sharing turned into tricks and other entertainment a bunch of young, drunk wizards and elementalists could conjure up. The worried looks from the tavern keeper did nothing to calm them down and the cheers they got from the people around them for particularly entertaining shows only encouraged them further.

All of that was just a sideshow for Cheid.

Satu was comfortably nestled under one of his arms, the scent from her hair filled his nose and kept away the usual tavern nasties. The occasional glances the two exchanged along with the quick kisses and gentle caresses of their hands made the outside world seem like a blur.

Though he couldn't deny the wine and ale might have played their part in it as well.

Cheid did his best not to drink too much for he still had things to do afterwards, though doubts started to come to his mind whether he'd be able to slip away at any point. With Satu clinging to him and no doubt wanting to walk home with him, how was he to find time?

The night progressed in the merry atmosphere it had started with. The opportunity to slip away never presented itself to Cheid so he decided to try a more direct method of making room for it.

"I need to go," he whispered into Satu's ear over the laughter that burst out right at that moment.

"What? Where? Why?" Her red hair whipped across his face as her head snapped around and the green eyes drilled into him.

"I thought this night would be a normal one. I made arrangements to meet someone."

Satu frowned at that, but then shrugged her shoulders. "Then you should go."

Cheid was a bit surprised she made no counter arguments. He leaned in to give her a kiss and then stood up only to find her hand grabbing his. He looked down at her questioningly.

"I'll wait for you in the lobby. We can go up together," she said with a coy smile that made his pulse rise. Perhaps he could hurry and get to spend a bit more time with her that night.

"Just be careful when you head back," said Cheid before pulling his cloak around himself and making his way out of the tavern. Some of the Quintet called after him, but Satu explained why he was leaving and the shouts soon died down.

The cold air bit his cheeks as he started down the street. The sky was a black blanket with no stars in sight. Even the moon had trouble shedding light through the thick clouds and it showed only as a slightly paler spot in the darkness. The street lamps were the only source of light and even those seemed too sparsely spaced to properly light the way.

Against his better judgement, Cheid summoned an orb of light to float over his left shoulder to give some extra visibility. The streets were empty so he wasn't worried about it attracting too much attention and he'd dismiss it well before reaching his destination.

A few side-streets and several turns later he had the tavern in sight. He dismissed the ball of light and looked around to ensure no one had seen him. All he spotted was a miserable looking stray dog digging through a pile of snow, hoping to find something edible from underneath. Its bony frame made Cheid almost feel sorry for it, but the growl it sounded his way when it noticed the attention was enough to dispel such thoughts.

He hurried on through the snow and opened the tavern door. It wasn't as lively as where the quintet had met and that suited him just fine. He shrugged the cloak from around himself and took a few steps in. A lone waitress was going around serving the few customers the place still had. Some were already nodding off at their tables while a few groups still had energy to talk and laugh.

Cheid had no trouble finding the lone man he was looking for.

He ordered a couple of ales from the passing by waitress and strolled to the man's table, taking a seat without even introducing himself. The man raised his

head from his tankard and tried to focus his drunken eyes to see who disturbed him.

“What do you want?” the man slurred and tried to give Cheid an angry stare that turned into nothing more than a cross eyed look of confusion.

“Just to share a seat, Berdle,” replied Cheid. “Maybe share a drink. A story or two.”

“Eh, ain't got no stories for you boy. Go away,” Berdle grunted and sipped from his tankard, half of the liquid spilling down his bearded chin.

“With the way you're drinking it looks like you could use another one,” said Cheid, ignoring the man's protests. The waitress arrived just at the right time with the drinks and after handing her a coin, he shoved one of them to the drunk in front of him while taking a sip from the other.

The free drink made Berdle regard Cheid in a different manner, though he still seemed reserved. “Why would you offer me a drink?”

Cheid shrugged his shoulders. “I hear you have stories to tell.”

“Stories?” the man snorted and finished his own tankard before grabbing the one that had been offered to him. He took a more restrained sip from it. “Boy, the stories I have would give you nightmares and make you wet your bed. Go home to your mothers skirt. I've got nothing to tell you.”

“Not even about the famous raid?” asked Cheid. The information he had received had been thorough. The man had told stories that eventually had revealed them to be something other than what he claimed them to be to those with knowledge of the events. As good as the information was, Cheid wanted to hear the story for himself and ensure he had the right man.

Berdle chuckled. “The raid? Now where'd you hear about that one?”

“Word gets around about a good story,” said Cheid and sipped his ale. The earlier drinks were starting to make his head hurt. He hoped the new would dampen it.

“It is a good one,” admitted Berdle. He seemed to be warming up to the idea of sharing it. “A raid is always good if you get a bit of gold and get to dip yourself in a good woman.”

Cheid grinned despite the implications of the man's words. It was enough to

encourage the drunk man to start telling his story.

“See, the gold was guaranteed. We was paid for it by someone. Any loot we got was extra and the women we could have fun with for hours without some shit on a stick important officer coming to put a stop to it. That's what happens in the army. Damn legions don't know how to have fun.”

More like the legions knew where to draw the line, thought Cheid, but nodded in agreement to keep the man talking.

“There was maybe fifty of us, former legionnaires and other types with experience. It was an easy job, especially with the wizard that joined us. I've never had much good to say about their kind, but the one with us was like the rest; he wanted loot and didn't have any qualms with the methods used.”

“Who was he?” asked Cheid. The identity of the wizard had not been included in the information he had bought, though that was not too surprising. When a wizard took part in actions like that he was bound to take every precaution to ensure he remained anonymous.

Well, unless he was a madman walking on the dark side of life.

Berdle shrugged his shoulders and took a sip of ale. “Damned if I know. Didn't much care for his company. Now, the story. Where was I?”

“About to tell me of the attack,” said Cheid.

“Ah, yes. It was evening. We'd gathered around the estate we were hitting. It was almost like a fortress despite being nothing more than a glorified farm, but our wizard friend made short work of it all. He put the guards to sleep and blasted the gate that would have occupied us for hours right off its hinges. We stormed in and the fun began.”

The grin on the drunks face begged Cheid to reach across the table and set him on fire, but he restrained himself. He needed to hear the full story. There might be more clues in it and maybe the man would slip something that wouldn't fit in with the generic way he was telling the story.

“It was a slaughter in the inner yard. The poor bastards had been throwing a party for some occasion so they were caught completely by surprise. A few men got to their weapons, but mostly it was killing unarmed men, women and children. You know, the kind of killing any man in our position would like.”

“Of course,” agreed Cheid and stared at the man. He was lucky the drunk was too busy staring into his tankard. Otherwise the story telling might have been over.

“A friend and me cornered a kitchen hand in a store room,” said Berdle. His lewd grin was enough to warn Chedi of what was to come. “Damn she was fine. Finest woman I've ever had. We threw her over a barrel and did her good. Too bad my friend was too eager with his sword and killed her before we could do a second round with her.” The man licked his lips. “If it was up to me I'd have dragged her with me and I'd be fucking her to this day.”

“What happened after that?” asked Cheid, his fingernails pressing painfully at his palms. He made a decision. The man would not live past the night no matter what.

“We went outside. The boys were having fun with the owners. Nailed the man of the house to a tree and used his woman in front of him. The begging that came from him, you wouldn't believe. When they finally shoved a sharp stake through the woman he broke down in tears. Then some idiot set the entire place on fire and we had to leave sooner than expected. But we got what we came for. I'm still living off of my share and probably will until the grave.”

“Sounds like a worthy trip,” said Cheid. The tone of his voice was enough to draw a look from the drunk man, but he had had enough to drink that he probably couldn't even see a wall if it was inches away from him.

“It was,” agreed Berdle and squinted to see him better.

“I'd certainly like to know who hired you. Maybe they'd have something for a young man like me in the future.”

Berdle snorted. “I bet you would, boy, but there are names that aren't for telling. Not if you want to keep your head on your shoulders instead of under your arm.”

The frustration boiling inside Cheid would have been enough to tear down the walls surrounding the city. He calmed himself only by thinking what he'd do to the man once outside the tavern and in some dark alley where no one would dare to look. “Point taken,” he finally said and sipped the last remains of his ale.

“Too many questions will get you killed,” reminded Berdle before slumping

down on the table only to snap awake again as his head banged against the hard wood.

“Maybe it's time to call it a evening?” suggested Cheid. “Wouldn't want you passing out in the cold outside. You'd freeze to death.”

“Maybe you're right,” agreed Berdle after a loud burp and what looked like a hard swallow to keep vomit from flying all over the table. He pushed himself up only to falter back against the bench. It almost sent him flying to the ground on his back, but quick action by Cheid prevented that as he grabbed the man's hand and steadied him. He had been quick enough to stand up and round the table to stop the man from knocking himself out.

“Maybe you need a bit of help getting home,” said Cheid and continued to support the wobbly footed man. “Do you live far?” He hoped the man didn't have a room in the tavern. That would make it difficult to rob him of his life and the information still hidden in his mind.

“Eh, just around the corner,” slurred Berdle and didn't put up a fight when Cheid pulled one of his arms over his shoulder to give the man proper support as they headed towards the exit.

“Then I'll see you home safely,” assured Cheid as he pulled open the door and angled the drunk man so he fit through the door.

“You're a good lad,” the man slurred and focused on putting one foot in front of the other instead of crossing them and fumbling down in the cold snow. He didn't have a cape or anything besides his tunic and trousers that looked more fit for summer than the cold winter night. But there was enough alcohol in him that he didn't notice and Cheid didn't particularly mind. If he didn't kill the man then the cold would. Either way worked for him. Freezing to death was not the most pleasant way of going. Home the man would not see again.

“Which way?” asked Cheid and looked both ways on the street. Either way had small alleys in which to duck for a private conversation.

Berdle muttered something intelligible and waved down the street. It was good enough for Cheid and he started to drag the man with him through the snowy street. He didn't bother to get too far from the tavern before shoving the man to a small side street and drooping the act of caring.

“Hey! What's going on?” demanded Berdle as he stumbled forward and fell to the ground, almost knocking the air out of him. The man fumbled around to get up with help from the near by wall.

“You know, you shouldn't blabber about raids like you do. Someone will eventually connect the dots and find out what event you're talking about.” Cheid watched as the man pulled himself up. He wasn't worried he'd do anything. He was drunk enough that even if he had a dagger stashed somewhere he'd see triple and miss even with the best of stabs.

Besides, there was magic working against him as well.

“What are you on about boy?” demanded Berdle and turned around to face Cheid. A dagger glistened in his hand from the slim light that made it to the alley from the street. Even in his drunken state his hands looked steady enough.

“The raid you were so gleefully remembering. I know what it was. I know who you were looking for and why you attacked. The emperor would be more than interested in hearing my views,” said Cheid and watched the drunkard grow pale at the mention of the emperor. He knew what would await him if that man came to know about his involvement.

“Who are you?” demanded Berdle, seeming a bit more sober. Few things cut through a drunken haze, but fear was one of them. The kind that would make you wet yourself was enough to make even a well marinated man like him perk up.

Cheid grinned. “I'm the boy who had to find his uncle and aunt slain under that tree. I had to wade through the bodies of all my friends and family. I'm Cheid Strihin, the one who set that damnable fire you cursed.”

Berdle blinked. For a moment he looked confused. “But all the Strihin are dead. No one should have survived.”

“You tried, but I did. So did the princess,” said Cheid and took a step forward. Berdle raised up his dagger. “And now you're going to tell me who hired you.”

“Never,” assured Berdle and lunged forward. Had he been sober the situation might have turned out different, but as hopelessly drunk as he was the swing with the dagger was less than accurate. Cheid had no trouble dodging it and

delivering a hit of his own. He packed an electric charge in the hit, making Berdle's hand go numb. The dagger fell to the ground and the man stumbled backwards against the wall with a groan of pain.

He was the bigger man, but Cheid had his magic.

Berdle tried to push into a brawl with the smaller opponent, but the flames that engulfed Cheid's hand made him think twice. Cheid placed a burning hand against the wall, right next to the man's head. He brought flames to surround his other hand as well and gave the man a look.

"You know, this is how I first discovered I had magic," he explained in a calm voice. "One of your companions had me cornered and was about to drive a sword through me. But the power bursts out of me and set him on fire. That's how the entire estate burned down. I've had years to hone my skills since then. Do you want to see?"

"I can't tell you anything," said Berdle and looked to either side with wild eyes. The thought of being burned alive was not a pleasant one.

"Oh, don't be so quick to say that," said Cheid and focused on the inner well that was the essence of Free Magic. A dash of it along with some bits from the elements of air and water and he soon had a crackling strand of lightning swirling around him. It raised the hairs on Berdles arms and the crackling of it was enough to make him whimper. He'd felt the earlier shock to his arm. It looked like getting hit by the new surge would be much worse.

"Please," pleaded the drunk man as he started to realize there was no escaping the situation. The young wizard in front of him would strike him down.

"Please?" asked Cheid mockingly. "I wonder how many times my uncle and aunt said that? Hm? Did you listen then? No. But I might if you tell me who hired you."

Berdle looked straight into the cold eyes staring at him and saw the truth of his words. The young man would kill him, but if he talked he'd be dead either way. What it came down to was deciding which way to die was the worst. Looking at the fire engulfed hands the lightning that slithered around his body like a snake, the decision was not hard to make.

"It was lord Cedfeng," said Berdle. He glanced around as if ensuring no one

else was around.

Cheid's determination wavered. The third most powerful noble family in the Ramyn empire. But why? They'd never had a problem with the Strihin family. They were in the emperors favour so why would they want the princess dead?

Then it hit him.

The family had a young master who had been recently married. He had no heir as of yet. The family had no one to offer as a possible husband to Eleria. That meant they were out of the contest for the throne. They had decided to not make it a game of marriage, but a game of war. They had failed, but their situation had not changed. They were certain to try again.

"You're certain?" demanded Cheid.

"Swear on my mum's grave!" said Berdle and tried to retreat away from the flaming hand of Cheid. The stone wall behind him had no give in it.

It was good enough. The information Cheid had bought had already hinted at the name and now it was confirmed.

Cheid took a step back and let loose the lighting. It hit Berdle square in the chest, cinching his clothing, filling the air with the smell of burning flesh. The man slumped to the ground, arms and legs twitching.

Cheid let the flames on his hands die out just the same as the man on the ground. There was nothing more for him to do in the alley so he turned to leave. Satu was no doubt waiting for him and he didn't want to be too late from that meeting. A low growl caught his attention and he turned around to look.

It was the same lanky dog he had seen dig through the snow earlier. It gave him a suspicious look before trotting over to the dead man and sniffing it. Cheid grinned at it and turned around. Behind him he could hear the hound begin its feast.

It suited him fine. If the dog did a thorough enough job everyone would think it was simply another drunk that had passed out in the snow and then gotten eaten by stray dogs. It happened and another case would not raise much suspicion.

The return to the towers went quickly and without incident. There was a lot to keep Cheid's mind occupied as he tried to wrangle open the knot that was the

conspiracy to kill Eleria. He worried she would still be in danger, but at the same time he had to admit there was little he could do about it. The only thing to do was hope her new protectors were up to the task.

The greatest problem was how to approach the powerful noble family that was pulling the ropes behind the scenes. Any member of the family would be just as well protected as the princess and while Cheid had magic, he was no assassin. He'd need some way to get close to the family without raising suspicions.

Roderic!

Cheid grinned. The old wizard had dealings with the family and he had even taken Cheid with him a few times. Perhaps that would be a way in. In any case it sounded like the best chance for it. No one would pay attention to a student wizard when in the company of a master. He'd be as invisible as any servant in the house. The only problem would be convincing the old wizard to take him with him.

It was with those thoughts that Cheid crossed the bridge to the towers and entered the warm reception hall. Even warmer was the hug from Satu. She was waiting right by the door and as soon as Cheid stepped in she rushed over and threw her arms around him.

“What if somebody sees us?” asked Cheid. He could smell the spiced wine on her even stronger than before. How much more she had had to drink was a question he did not want to think about too much.

Satu glared at him before looking around the empty hall. There was no one around. Even the first year student that was supposed to stand guard and ready to tend to any guest venturing in was nowhere to be seen. “You worry too much. There's no one around.”

“I suppose so,” admitted Cheid after taking a look around. He had to admit that wrapping his hands around the woman before him was a pleasant feeling.

“How was your meeting?” asked Satu and looked him in the eyes. There was no judgement in them nor any anger over being left alone to walk home. Only curiosity.

“More productive than I expected.”

Satu raised an eyebrow, but didn't ask further. She seemed content to see

him return safely. "I hope you're not too tired because of it," she said in a hushed tone that seemed to promise all sorts of goodness to follow with the right answer.

A small smile passed Cheid's lips. "I'm not tired at all."

"Good. Then we can head up, can't we?" asked Satu with a mischievous smile.

"No objections," said Cheid and wrapped a hand around her even tighter. The two walked over to the transport disc and stepped on. The hardest part was keeping their hands off each other until in Cheid's quarters.

There, all clothes were off.

Chapter 20

Eleria looked at the reflection in the mirror. The dress felt tight around her belly, but that was the style of the court and she had to go with it. To do anything else would have..she frowned. Why was she letting the ladies of the court dictate how she dressed? She was the princess after all. If she didn't like something there was nothing stopping her from going against it. If she wanted a dress that didn't make breathing hurt she'd have one.

“Tell me again why I must wear this dress?” she asked Marja who was busy stashing away the numerous dresses that had come before the one she now wore.

“You do not want to look unfashionable, do you, your highness?” asked the woman and put away a red dress Eleria would have much preferred to wear. Alas, the style was two years out of date. Back then loose fitting had been the thing and women had enjoyed not having to brace for pain every time they took a breath. A lot less people had fainted during various social gatherings, but then someone had decided such thing could not be allowed to continue.

“But I'm the princess. Should I not be the one to define fashion?” asked Eleria and frowned at her reflection. She desperately wanted to undo all the string Marja had spent a good amount of time tying to the back of it.

Marja laughed good heartedly. “A princess you may be, your highness, but fashion is an untamed beast that no one can control. It takes seemingly mindless turns and brings about ludicrous trends and if anyone ever understands how it works, they will be rich.”

Eleria was uncertain what to make of the answer. “If that's the case then why do we spend so much time worrying about being fashionable?”

“Oh, most people don't,” assured Marja and put away another dress. “There simply isn't much to do in the court, so fashion takes on a more important role than it reasonably should.”

“If that's the case then I could stop following it and simply wear what I want and what is comfortable,” said Eleria. The thought pleased her. Being dictated

what to eat was bad enough, but adding clothes on top of that made it all the worse. It was as if she had no control over her own life.

“Oh no, you can't do that your highness,” said Marja, sounding almost shocked. “Think of the gossip that would cause.”

“If it's gossip about the way I dress then why should I care?”

“You don't want to draw attention to yourself with unnecessary actions, do you?” asked Marja. “If you stop following fashion people will start talking. They'll pay more attention to you and some might even be curious enough to send spies after you to find out what is going on.”

Eleria noted the woman stopped calling her “your highness” once more. It seemed to always happen when she lectured her about something. Maybe she thought it would give more weight to her words. Still, there was no denying the truth behind her words. Unwanted attention was the last thing she wanted right now. What she was about to do would bring enough of it.

She raised a hand to the pendant draped around her neck.

Now that the plan was about to go into motion the nervousness was starting to creep up on her. How bad would its effects be? Would she be able to go through with it?

“I suppose you're right,” admitted Eleria finally and turned around. The hem of her dress swirled around her with every move as if it were alive. If nothing else, she had to admit the dress was well made and made her look good. Add to that the arrangement her hair had been tied to and she doubted there had ever been a night when she looked more pretty.

Marja wore a dress of her own. Not quite as elaborate or fine as Eleria's, but good enough for her to blend in at the party and stay close to her mistress.

“Are we ready?” asked Eleria. She looked outside the window and saw the light growing dimmer. It was almost time for the reception to start. There she would be introduced to her newest suitor and there she would crush the dreams and hopes of that family.

“If you are, my lady,” said Marja and put away the last dress before straightening out her own attire from any wrinkles that had appeared during her fussing about.

“We should get going then,” said Eleria and grabbed a shawl from the bed. She wrapped it around her shoulders. While the rooms in the palace were warm the long corridors could get chilly at times. The thick shawl would keep the worst of it away and it made a nice addition to her attire. Marja grabbed one of her own and the two women left the bedroom, through the room beyond and into the corridor.

“Ladies,” said Loren as the two women appeared and gave a slight bow. He was dressed to party, though a sword still hung from his waist. His blue tunic was well made and fit him perfectly while the thick cape gave him a much needed hint of luxury with its fur linings. Behind him stood Oughund and a bunch of the regular guards that followed Eleria where ever she went. They had changed into more festive uniforms, but they would still stick out like a thumb in the eye amongst all the nobility.

“Loren,” Eleria greeted the man with a smile. She did not quite know how to feel about him being there. On the one hand it was reassuring if things got out of hand, but at the same time she feared he would see something she did not want him to.

“I must say you look mesmerizing tonight,” said Loren and gave her a good look from head to toe. He paused at the pendant for a moment and looked thoughtful, but then moved on.

“You don't look half bad yourself,” replied Eleria and started down the corridor. Everyone followed her, Loren walking by her side with Marja a few steps behind, then followed by the guards.

Loren let out a good hearted laugh. “It's not often you see me as dressed up as now, is it?”

“It suits you,” said Eleria and gave the man a mischievous smile. “If you dressed up more often then perhaps the ladies would pay more attention to you.”

“Ah, that may be true, but then my rough personality would disappoint them even further,” said Loren.

“There's nothing rough about you, not after you get used to it,” said Eleria. Loren might have been the sort of man she'd have liked to receive attention from, were he any younger. He wasn't boring like many of the young men introduced to

her. He had not lived a sheltered life. He had seen things and lived through them. They'd given him an edge to his personality, but it meant he was never dull company.

“So tell me princes, what do you have planned for tonight?” asked Loren, hoping to draw the conversation away from his love life or lack of there of.

Eleria glanced at the man. “Planned? I'm getting introduced to a man my father thinks would make a good husband for me. That's the plan.”

“I've known you long enough, Eleria,” said Loren. Using her first name was a rare thing, but he sometimes did it when appealing to the friendship the two had. “I can see it. You have something planned. Something your father won't like.”

“You're reading too much into things,” said Eleria dismissively and continued walking. They passed a few servants who were busy making last minute arrangements or corrections for the party.

“If you're going to do something the tell me,” pleaded Loren. “I can't protect you if you do something unexpected.”

“Just stay close tonight,” said Eleria. “I don't have anything planned, but it is a party with a lot of the nobility in attendance. There are people there who think killing me would be a better choice than marrying their sons to me.”

Loren grunted. “Your father has not been making many friends lately.”

“His downfall among the nobility started when he treated the Strihin family the way he did,” muttered Eleria quiet enough that Loren was the only one close enough to hear. “The nobles looked on from the sidelines with amusement as a house was dismantled, but like after a wine filled evening, they eventually woke up with a headache and realized the implications of his actions. If he could do that to one family, what was to protect the rest from similar action?”

“But he has not done anything rash since then,” noted Loren.

“Hasn't he?” asked Eleria and gave the man another glance. “I hate to say this, but the favour he has shown your family has not earned him any friends. Quite the contrary.”

“My brother is concerned that we have made too many enemies,” admitted Loren. He recalled many lectures about how he had played a part in gaining some of those enemies, but he had little patience for the idiocies of pampered young

nobles who thought they knew everything.

The truth of the matter was that an eight year old boy living on the streets knew more about real life than the sheltered offspring of nobility.

“And that has made some of the families question why you have the emperors favour. They care not that you saved me as there are those who wish I had never been found. Then they could have solved the matter of next ruler of the empire amongst themselves.”

Eleria slowed her pace a bit. The conversation was too interesting for it to stop simply because they arrived at the ball room.

“It is for exactly these reasons that you should be open with me. If you plan to do something, I need to know so I can protect you,” said Loren, hoping to return the conversation to its original topic of her safety and unwillingness to trust those tasked with her safety.

Eleria let out a frustrated sigh and fastened her pace again. Just when the conversation got interesting it got turned into the usual nagging.

“All you have to do is be close by,” she assured Loren and said nothing more.

Loren frowned at her, but the princess completely ignored his disapproval. With a resigned sigh he followed her through the double door into the ball room.

The chatter stopped as soon as the princess entered and her name was announced. There were bows and curtsies all around as she passed by with her entourage. It was a sea of colour as every noble woman had put in effort to stand out within the restrictions of the current fashion. The men were more moderately dressed in darker tones.

It did not take long for everyone to start talking again and the music to start playing. There was mingling while servants carried around platters filled with small snacks and drinks for the guests to enjoy.

For Eleria the reception started out much like any other. There were the usual ladies of the court that came to greet her and complement her dress no matter how hideous it might have been. Then they were replaced by the less frequently met nobles that had gathered from the surrounding countryside or just never bothered with the royal court that much. Most such people were heads of their families or sons and daughters that had been away because of family

business or some other reasons.

As tiresome as it all was, she was used to it. Just as with everything, if you did it enough times you'd start not to notice how boring it could be. You had to hear the same pleasantries over and over again while returning them with your own. You had to know names and what not to talk about with certain people. She drank wine, but not enough to get even a little tipsy and nibbled on the small bite size food items the servants eagerly offered her.

Loren watched on from the sidelines as the people flowed to and from Eleria. He did not get to enjoy the conversations, though he doubted there was much to be missed out on. The nobles rarely talked about things he cared for, though there were some among the men who enjoyed sharing a hunting story or two. The women liked to listen to his tales, but they never seemed to have much to offer in return besides smiles and laughs that never really resonated with him. The fact he had to keep a close eye on the princess further dampened anyone's desire to converse with him as all they got as response were short sentences and absent-minded platitudes.

It was not until a grey haired man made an approach towards Eleria that she started to really pay attention. He was followed by a black haired youngster with the sort of look on his face that told he knew how important he was and thought himself even higher than that. Even facing the princess of the empire he maintained the arrogant appearance. He was not handsome either, but then among the nobility good looks were often reserved for the sappy romance stories the women of the court sighed after. The reality for most was you married who the family told you to, looks and emotions playing little part in it.

"Princess," the grey haired man greeted her with an appropriate bow. The younger man followed his example.

"Lord Bendest," said Eleria with a small smile. Behind the smile she was both nervous as well as struggling to hide his disdain towards the young man lingering behind his father.

"How are you enjoying the party so far?" asked the lord. His wrinkled face was dotted by several moles and he probably should have considered cutting the thinning hair shorter.

“It is as parties are; a lot of talking, drinking and eating, but very little to feed the mind,” replied Eleria.

Her response gathered a chuckle from the older Bendest and a frown from the younger one. “You are correct, princess. These parties rarely have much to invigorate your mind, but hopefully I can offer you a little in that regard. Have you met my son, Tero?”

“I do not believe I have had the pleasure,” said Eleria and gave the young man a glance. The man had the misfortune of inheriting the moles that his father sported.

“I assure you, the pleasure is all mine, princess,” said Tero and made a slight bow. He had a pleasant, soft voice, though on such short meeting it looked to be his only good point. The arrogant expression on him never seemed to melt away. Eleria had little doubt he was the sort who'd beat his slaves over petty mistakes or just because he thought himself superior, perhaps even so much above the others as to be of another species.

“There have been talks with your father, the emperor,” said the older Bendest, tentatively. “Has he talked with you about this, princess?”

“He has made mention,” said Eleria and watched as a relieved expression grew on the old man. He was clearly relieved not to have to explain it all to her.

“Then with your permission, I will leave the two of you to get acquainted,” said the old lord and exited the situation with a slight bow.

Eleria watched him disappear into the crowd before turning her attention to the young man before her. She gave him the sort of appraising look you'd expect from someone buying a horse. It made him frown at her.

“Why don't we move somewhere a bit more quiet?” she finally asked. They were in the middle of the room and there was chatter from all around that made it difficult to hold a conversation. Not that she cared to hear what the man had to say. The less she knew of him the easier it would be to have him fall prey to the pendants power.

The less men were near the less chance there was for the magic to affect the wrong person.

“As you wish, princess,” said Tero and followed her to one of the more quiet

corners of the large hall. He did not seem too enthusiastic about it. As they walked he paid more attention to the nobles they passed than to Eleria. It made her think even less of him. Here he was getting married to become emperor, but did he care one bit to gain the attention of his future wife? No.

The old lord had not taught his son well if at all.

They found themselves at a quiet corner with hardly anyone around. It did not escape Elerias notice that Loren had followed them and was lingering near by, trying his best not to look like he was paying attention to them. Marja stood close by as well, though she made less effort to be unnoticeable. She was her maid-in-wait after all.

“What do you think of the party so far?” asked Eleria and turned her back to the wall. Tero stood in front of her, doing his best to feign interest, but failed miserably at it. Asking the same question as his father had sounded silly, but she wasn't all that interested in his answer. Under her breath, she uttered the words needed to activate the pendant.

“It is passable, princess, though I have to admit I have been to much more lively parties,” replied Tero with the sort of arrogance his demeanour promised. “You should see the things that went on in the festivities the Cedfeng used to throw.”

“I am sadly not allowed outside the palace that much,” replied Eleria and examined the man. The pendant did not seem to have any effect so far.

“Ah, yes, I forgot,” said Tero and managed to look a bit ashamed. How could he have forgotten what had happened to her? “The restrictions on your life must be considerable.”

“They are,” admitted Eleria. “Sometimes I feel like I'm in a prison.”

“Maybe if you loosened that dress a bit you'd feel better,” said Tero and looked at her with the sort of lustful eyes a sailor would the first whore he saw after getting off a ship that had been at sea for months.

“Excuse me?” Eleria was taken back by the sudden change in the man. She could not help but try to take a step back as he came closer, but she bumped into the wall. The amulet was working, but now she was afraid it was working all too well.

“Don't pretend you didn't hear me. Just take the dress off. I want to see you naked,” whispered Tero and leaned in closer. He placed a hand on her right breast and groped. With his other hand he was fast undoing his pants. “I've got something I want to show you.”

“Get your hands off me,” said Eleria more loudly than she intended and slapped the man on the cheek as hard as she could. Tero simply grinned and continued to undo his pants. They fell to his ankles, revealing his full manhood.

“See? Don't you want to give it a touch?” he asked right before Loren grabbed him by the collar and tossed him to Oughund who made little effort to be gentle with him. The music had stopped playing and the attendees were looking on with whispers and curiosity.

Eleria muttered the words to deactivate the pendant.

“Are you all right?” asked Loren. Eleria nodded and allowed Marja to come next to her and act worried. She took in a deep breath to talk, but Loren had already turned his attention to the young noble who looked confused more than anything and then frightened as he realized what had happened.

“What do you think you were doing to the princess? Did you mistake her for one of the whores you're so fond of?” demanded Loren in a loud voice that had a hint of rage in it. He did look angry and intimidating. Where he pulled the information about the whores was a mystery that would be a source of gossip for months to come.

“I..I don't..” Tero stammered.

“You don't what?”

“I don't know what happened,” the boy cried out in tears as Oughund tightened his grip on him.

“I saw it!” shouted Loren, his voice echoing through the halls. “You had your hands on her as if she were a woman of lesser reputation!”

“What's going on?” demanded a new voice. Lord Bendest pushed his way through the crowd. He glanced at the situation with a frown.

“Lord Bendest,” said Loren as he turned his attention to him. “You should watch your son more carefully. You turned your back for only a moment and he was already groping the princess as if she were a whorehouse wench.”

The stunned look on the old man's face could not have been more complete. Then it was replaced by fear. He knew what could come of it if the emperor heard of it in the right mood. His entire house could be in danger. "Is this true, son?" he demanded and took steps towards him. He clenched his fists.

"I don't know father," the boy sobbed and hung from the firm grip of the big northern man. "I don't know what happened."

"It is as Loren says," said Eleria in a firm voice, gathering the attention of everyone in the room. "He put his hands on me. He pulled down his pants and asked me to touch him."

Lord Bendest let out a groan and turned to hit his son in the face with a fist. The yelp of pain sounded out of place in the fine halls. Blood dripped from the young man's nose on to the stone floor. The porous stone soaked it in quickly. The servants would curse at it trying to clean it, though eventually they'd give up and just have the tile replaced.

Bendest then turned back towards the princess. "Your highness, I beg your forgiveness. I do not know what my idiot of a son was thinking. I assure you, you will never see him again."

"Do you think that will satisfy the emperor?" demanded Loren. He looked ready to behead the poor man right then and there.

Eleria realized that if she did not step in that was a likely outcome to the young man. She knew the reputation of the family well enough to know they had trade connections all around and that gave her an idea.

"There is no need to bother my father with this matter," she said in a firm voice. "Lord Bendest is a honourable man and his word can be trusted. If he says I will never see his son again then that will be the case, though I would like to make a suggestion to his punishment."

"I will of course hear your suggestion, princess," replied Lord Bendest and gave his son a glare as he sobbed a bit too loud and looked ready to voice an objection.

"I know your family by reputation and the rumours about the extensiveness of your trade network," started Eleria and took a step away from the wall. Marja did not let go of her, but kept a grip on her left arm, feigning to give her support.

“I’m certain you will agree your son should get to know how the business is handled. Send him to your branch offices, travel the outside world. Bar him from returning to Ramyn until such a time that he is to be heir to the house. Even then he is only allowed to tend the funeral and make the necessary arrangements to gain control of everything.”

It was not a gentle suggestion. The punishment needed to be real or the other nobility would not let the matter die. Effective exile was a severe enough punishment that it might even appease her father, but it would allow the young noble to live his life until old instead of it being cut short by the executioner.

If Loren did not do it then her father would.

Lord Bendest pondered the suggestion for a moment with a hesitant look on him, but the more he thought about it the more he started to like the idea. He realized just as well as the princess that he’d have no son if the emperor had a chance to weigh in on the matter. Finally, he nodded and made a slight bow towards Eleria. “I will do as you suggest, princess. You have shown mercy and wisdom and for that I thank you.”

Eleria gave graceful nod and looked on as Tero was dragged away by Oughund with the angry father in tow. “Oh, Lord Bendest,” she called after the man.

He stopped and turned around.

“I would hurry and get him out of the city quickly. News reach my father quickly and he might not agree with me.”

The old man frowned, but nodded with a concerned look.

The torrent of whispers that followed as soon as the boy had been dragged out was like a swarm of locust dining on a field of crops.

As she looked around before retiring from the party, Eleria knew she had made a successful first show with the pendant.

Chapter 21

The morning had been a good one for Cheid. Waking up next to the warmth of a woman was growing on him and did wonders to solidify his belief in having made the right decision by agreeing to be with her. The only thing he did not like about it was how hard it made to get out of bed and into classes. But he had somehow managed, though Satu did her best to keep him under the blankets as long as possible.

She seemed to have an almost desperate need to stay close to him as long as possible.

He'd been late for the first lecture of the day, but at least he had not missed it completely. It wasn't an interesting subject and Cheid had his mind on other things through the whole thing. Satu occupied a part of his mind, but another part was working hard on figuring out how to get Roderic to accept his help with jobs to the Cedfeng family. The best angle he had come up with was one of needing gold, but the master could just as well refuse even though he had admitted to liking Cheid. Perhaps a mention of a girl being involved might be enough to sway the master to help. He could understand the need then and perhaps even make him want to help a little extra bit.

The classes breezed by as Cheid plotted ways to get what he wanted. He gained little knowledge from the lectures as a result, but that did not bother him. They were a distraction at this point when he could almost taste revenge on his lips.

Poor Berdle had been only the start.

A part of him had expected killing a man to stir some emotions from within to haunt him, but there were no such things in sight. The killing was justified, of that he was certain, so there was no feeling of guilt over it. Perhaps what surprised him the most was that there was no feeling of joy or satisfaction either.

Killing the man had not felt like anything.

He had expected at least some resemblance of satisfaction from it. Part of him thought the reason was the fact Berdle had not been an important part of the

group responsible for the deaths of his family. Once he got to the more important people there was certain to be a feeling of fulfilment.

Then there was a part that was urging him to listen to what Skander had said to him about revenge. The way the killing had elicited little emotional satisfaction seemed to support the old wizards stance. Perhaps giving up on the hatred and revenge was the right thing to do and would lead to a more satisfying end to it all.

But his sense of justice made short work of such doubts.

The first steps had been taken and there was no turning back on the path he had chosen.

By the time the afternoon rolled in he had made up his mind on how to soften up Roderic.

For the older students the afternoon was time for independent study or private lessons from masters for those students who were fortunate enough to have caught the attention of one. For Cheid that meant visiting Roderic. The masters never seemed to choose more than one or two students at a time to tutor so getting under their wing was rare and a source of envy among the rest of the students.

So far that had caused Cheid no problems, though he had seen others getting pranks played on them and being bullied over it. Sometimes it was enough to make them tell the master they no longer wished to be guided by them, but those were only the weak ones that did so. If they couldn't take the added pressure from their peers they didn't really deserve the masters attention. The tasks they would end up performing would be far more stressful than a few bad words here and there.

The way to Rodreic's quarters was a familiar one to Cheid and he wasted no time with it. He had business with the master besides the usual lesson and he wanted to be done with it. If the old wizard didn't go for it then a new plan would be needed.

He nodded to the other few students that he ran across on the way. None stopped to try and strike up a conversation. They all knew time was precious and the masters finicky about being late.

A knock on his door and a muttered response later Cheid found himself in the familiar study of master Roderic. As usual the old man was busy scribbling down something behind his desk. He waved absently for him to take a seat and Cheid did as told.

“So, what should we do today?” asked Roderic as he penned the last few letters on a piece of parchment. He put down the pen and looked up at his student.

“There's something I would like to talk to you about,” said Cheid and put on a worried expression.

“What is it?” asked Roderic with slight concern in his voice.

“Would you be willing to take me with you on some of the jobs that come your way?”

“Why do you suddenly ask this?”

Cheid tried to look ashamed. “I need money.”

“What ever for?” asked Roderic with a frown. “Do the Towers not give you most of what you need?”

“They do,” assured Cheid. “It's just that..there's a girl..”

“Ah,” muttered Roderic and leaned back in his chair. He gave Cheid a stern look. “I suppose you are at that age. I hope this new found relationship isn't impacting your studies?”

“No. I'm staying with the lectures,” replied Cheid, hoping the master had not heard of the few times he'd missed them. The one time he had missed a session with Roderic he had later explained it as being sick and the man had not questioned further, though now he might have suspicions.

“It's good to be interested in the other gender,” Roderic continued. “But I must warn you, what you have now might not last and you could end up hurt. Trying to make sense of women is much harder than learning magic at times.”

“I'm not expecting to marry her,” said Cheid, feeling a bit hurt that the master had been so blunt to belittle the relationship, but at the same time realizing even he didn't take it that seriously yet. As far as he could tell he was just having fun with Satu and the same was true for her. Nothing more serious had developed yet.

Roderic chuckled. "Are you certain she does not feel that way?"

Cheid hesitated. He realized Satu had not given him much idea where she wanted the whole thing to go. Marriage might well be on her mind given the passion with which she came after him.

"I see," said Roderic with a small smile. "Ah, to be young again."

Not the reaction Cheid was expecting. He didn't quite know what to say in return.

"All right, Cheid. When I get a job and if I need an assistant, I'll take you with me. The pay isn't much, but I suppose you'll take anything you can get?"

Cheid nodded. "Even a few coins more will help." He didn't care about the pay. He'd have a use for them, certainly, but they were just a bonus. Eventually, he'd get close enough to get the information he wanted.

"Just remember. No matter what, your studies come first. I don't want to wake up one day and find out I've wasted all the time I've put in you."

"That won't happen, master," assured Cheid.

Roderic nodded. "Now then, what were we going to do today?"

The lesson went on as usual from there on.



Orend frowned at his little brother. He wasn't displeased with him, but the story he told was unbelievable and at the same time worrying. He knew the young man from the Bendest family and while the rumour about his adventures in the brothels circulated among the nobility, it was hard to believe he would do something as stupid as what he had done last night.

"And has the emperor heard of this?" asked Orend with slight concern. Knowing the emperor, there would be dead bodies.

Loren shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sure someone has told him already. If the young Bendest wasn't out of the city this morning I doubt he'll make it out alive. Even if he did the emperor might send some assassins after him." He took a sip of the wine in his cup and took a comfortable position in the chair. The sunshine landed through the windows of Orend's study and revealed the clouds of dust that danced in the air. His brother must have been digging through some old

books for there to be so much of it in the air.

Orend nodded grimly. "If the princess had not done what she did he would certainly be dead by now."

"That's a thing that makes me wonder. Why would she show mercy to someone like him?" Loren pondered.

"Why not?" asked Orend. "You know what she has been through. That has made her sensitive to such matters. I doubt there's a person in this world she'd want to see dead or go through the same ordeals she has."

"Perhaps," said Loren and took another sip of wine. "I just can't shake the feeling she was feeling responsible for what he did and was trying to save him from death as best she could."

"Are you saying she somehow made him do it?" asked Orend with slight disbelief. It did not seem like something the princess would do. More importantly, why would she do such a thing? And why would she use such a manner to shame a young noble?

"It's possible," said Loren and leaned forward. "Think what she accomplished last night. Someone who was supposed to marry her is now on the run and exiled from the empire. She scared off one person standing in her way to the throne."

"But how could she make someone do a thing like that?" asked Orend, though he had a nagging voice in the back of his head that it was magic.

"Magic," replied Loren without hesitation.

"But she's no wizard," countered Orend.

"She sent that maid-in-wait of hers to pick something up a few days ago. She returned with some sort of package. Last night Eleria wore a new pendant around her neck. It could be a magical item."

"Those are very rare," noted Orend with a frown. "And expensive."

"Not for a man like Theoden," said Loren and leaned back once more. He glanced around the room, noting the pile of old books by his brother's desk. The source for the dust was found.

Orend had to admit he was right. Theoden could get his hands on just about anything he wanted, even magical items, as rare as they were. He had pushed the princess on the path she was on and helping her on it was no doubt on his

agenda.

“But what does she hope to accomplish with this?”

“She’ll use it to ward off all the would be husbands,” replied Loren with confidence. At the very core it was a simple plan, but he feared people would catch on eventually. It would be highly suspicious after happening enough times. At the very least it would earn her a questionable reputation. No doubt there would be rumours about her being cursed and other such nonsense.

“And if no one is willing to marry her she will become the empress when her father dies,” Orend finished the thought. It was a clever plan, but ran the risk of ending in bloodshed if enough young men were put through similar humiliation as the young Bendest had been. The suspicions would eventually become too great and the emperor would have to do something.

“If the noble families don't band together and get rid of her before then,” said Loren. “If enough of them get shamed that will happen sooner rather than later.”

“She is playing a dangerous game.”

“And she has no idea how dangerous it is,” said Loren in a sad voice. “She thinks she knows, but I don't think she fully realizes what is at stake and the lengths to which the families are willing to go to to get what they want.”

Orend cursed. “Does she not care about the position she puts *us* in?”

“I don't think that has entered her mind at any point,” said Loren with a small smile. “She's too focused on not getting married off to someone.”

“Theoden must have considered it,” muttered Orend. “It's all part of his plan. We might fall even if the princess succeeds.”

“At the very least you and I will be busy looking after her instead of putting our noses in places that might diminish the old bastards influence.”

Orend glared at his brother. Calling Theoden a bastard was just the sort of thing that had brought all the complaints and anger about the younger man on to his desk. Then again, the old man was playing a clever game. But why the sudden hate against a family he in the past supported? Had they grown too strong and began threatening his interests?

“Have you not gotten anything more out of her? What does she really plan to do?” demanded Orend. He did not like wading in the dark, waiting for the next

disaster to suddenly appear. He much preferred having at least a source of light to shed some of the darkest shadows from the path.

“She isn't telling me anything, just as before,” replied Loren. “I think Marja is our best chance of finding out anything more.”

“The maid?”

“If you can call her that,” said Loren. “Eleria confides in her much like she would in a friend. I don't think there's anyone more close to her.”

“Doesn't that make her unlikely to tell us anything? She sounds like the type who'd keep her mouth shut.”

“I don't think she fully approves of Eleria's plans,” said Loren. “If she thought she was in real danger she might confide in me in order to keep her safe. She cares for her deeply.”

“She would need to think the princess is in danger,” noted Orend. As it stood she did not look to be in any immediate danger, but over time that would change. But would it then be too late to hear what her plan was in order to change anything? Lying to her was an option, but would she fall for it?

“It would need to be a believable threat,” noted Loren, echoing his older brothers thoughts. Sometimes it bothered Orend how well their minds synced up despite the differences in their personalities. It seemed to imply that underneath it all he was just as unpolished as Loren was.

Orend shook his head. “We shouldn't do this. Stirring the pot with a made up threat will only further make things difficult. What if the princess takes the threat seriously and does something on her own? It could end up hurting us more than helping.”

“It has its risks,” admitted Loren, not wanting to throw away the plan just yet. He admitted lies could be tricky things. If you went too far with them they'd trip you at the worst possible moment and send you falling off a cliff that would leave you dead or at the very least friendless. At the same time, if told right, they could give you access to things you would otherwise not have. In this case the plan Eleria was cooking up.

“Too many risks,” said Orend with a firm voice. “We can't risk the princess not trusting us any less than she does now. We can't protect her at all if it gets to

the point where she thinks we're trying to manipulate her.”

“Then we are left with relying on my charm,” said Loren dryly and gave his brother one of the grins he knew to annoy him.

“The gods help us,” muttered Orend and gave his brother a glare.

The two spent a bit more time talking about family matters before going their own ways to tend to their duties.



Raenim looked on with concern as Theoden coughed as if his lungs were coming loose. Even though the years had brought some more grey hair on the emperor they had treated his old friend and long time advisor far worse. He looked to be on death's bed and Raenim could not help but feel sad to see his once strong companion slowly wither away.

He took a gulp from his cup of wine and turned his gaze to the warm fire crackling in the fireplace.

They were in the emperor's private quarters. Nothing official, just two old friends sitting by the fire enjoying the evening. The empress was in the next room with her court ladies doing what ever they did to pass the time. Raenim had to admit he had never shown much interest in what she did to keep herself occupied. It was rare for her to even be so close to him. That was not to say he did not love her, far from it. It was one of those rare political marriages that actually turned into one of love.

“My apologies old friend,” wheezed Theoden from his divan and sipped some water. The healers had told him to leave the wine and ales to younger men. They had even recommended goats milk to him, but there was a limit to how much an old man could bend.

Raenim waved his hand dismissively. “Getting old does not go without its curses and even an emperor is not safe from them.”

Theoden grinned. “There does seem to be more grey about you than before.”

“That's what my wife keeps telling me,” muttered Raenim and turned his gaze from the flames. He buried his bare feet deeper in the soft rug at his feet. Sitting by the fire, barefooted, brought him back to his childhood and the times

his father had told him stories of the past glory of the empire.

He took another sip of wine.

Theoden shuffled in his divan, seeking a better position. The trouble with divans was one side of you body going to sleep. “I take it you have heard what happened at the party?” he asked as he straightened a leg with a wince and a loud pop from his knee.

Raenim looked grim. “I did.”

“I take it you are not pleased?”

“Of course not. Anyone who treats my daughter like that will find me less than pleased with them.”

“And the way she handled the situation?” asked Theoden and looked keenly at the emperor.

“Soft,” replied Raenim and sipped some more wine. Had the young man not ran away as Eleria had suggested he would have been at the arena, fending off lions or some other exotic beasts. “I suppose she can't be blamed for that. Gods know what she has been through. She has probably seen enough evil from men to want to keep herself away from such things as much as possible.”

“I know you probably have assassin hunting that young man by now,” said Theoden. It wasn't an accusation, merely an observation that what Eleria had done did not change things in any noticeable manner.

“I decided not to,” admitted Raenim.

“Getting soft in your old days?” asked Theoden, genuinely surprised. It was contrary to the reputation that had taken decades to build up and uphold.

“What would Eleria think if she found out I had the young man killed despite her wish to see him live, admittedly in exile and under harsh terms, but still alive?”

“You worry she would think less of you?” asked Theoden. The conversation had ventured into private territory the emperor rarely shared even with him. The relationship he had with his daughter was one of those things that got mentioned in passing, but never was much revealed from underneath the surface. It was a distant relationship as far as anyone looking from the sidelines was concerned, but there was depth to it that was hidden behind layers of other distractions.

“I fear she does not think much of me as it stands,” said Raenim in the sort of painful voice only a parent could produce when talking about their children who they had little contact with, but still loved with all their heart. “It has been eight years, yet we do not know who robbed her childhood from me. From us.”

Raenim glanced to the door leading to the chamber where his wife was. The news had been devastating to her and even after Eleria had been found alive the scars still showed. For two years she hoped, at times despaired and mourned the loss, and those memories still haunted her. She reluctantly let Eleria live an independent life, but for the first years after her return there had not been a moment she could go without her mother being right there next to her.

“What sort of emperor can not even find those who harmed his daughter? How can he fail to bring justice when it is needed?”

“An emperor is powerful, but he is not a god. You do not know everything. There are plots and plans that are so well crafted even someone with your resources can not hope to uncover them.” Theoden took in a deep breath before coughing again.

The grey haired emperor pondered the words. It was true, of course, but he had gotten used to the fact few things were out of his reach. More than anything the feeling of helplessness that had gripped him upon hearing the news still haunted him. He had hoped finding the culprits would have eased those doubts, but when all the investigators came back empty handed and with no clues to go further, the effect had been the opposite. There were times when he questioned the decisions made out of fear of them having an adverse effect on Eleria. Perhaps that was why he had not sent the assassins like would have been the case in the past.

“Maybe I am getting too old to rule,” said Raenim in a quiet voice.

“Who else would do it?” asked Theoden and gave the emperor a curious glance. The answer would reveal a lot about his mindset and thoughts. “Eleria?”

Raenim nearly choked on his wine. He coughed almost as badly as Theoden had only moments earlier as he tried to clear his throat. “Eleria?” he finally asked in disbelief.

“That is what will happen if she is not married,” reminded Theoden.

“That'll tear the empire apart,” said Raenim and looked even grimmer. “The noble families would eat their first born before letting a woman rule. That's not to say she couldn't do it if they let, but they won't. They'll see their own name on the throne and ignore everything else. It'll be civil war and many will die in the shadows and in their own beds.”

There was a silence. Only the crackling of the fire broke it.

“I need her to marry. For the sake of the empire and for her own safety,” the emperor finally continued. “I won't live forever and when I die and she is unmarried the assassin blades seeking her heart will be too many for the Kalunta brothers to protect her from.”

“So far the suitors have been less than acceptable,” reminded Theoden and took a gulp of water. “If the trend continues, have you made preparations to keep her safe?”

“Are you saying we'll have nothing but bastards like the young Bendest?” asked Raenim with a snort. “It wouldn't surprise me given the decadence of the highest families.”

“All the more reason to ponder my question,” noted Theoden. Even a little push to make the emperor give his part in ensuring her ascension to the throne would go a long way. He did not need to know of the plan his daughter was executing, all he needed to think was of her safety after his death.

“The legions follow the emperor. She would have them at her side, at least,” pondered Raenim before slumping back in his chair. “But they're not the sort to be able to protect her from assassins. I'm not sure about some of the captains either. They're loyal to me, but would they follow my daughter? I'm not certain.”

“There is still time to ensure she'd have the legions.”

Raenim nodded. “I will have to do at least that much. No harm in it.”

“If I may make another suggestion,” asked Theoden and proceeded after a nod from his friend. “Talk to Skander. Having the Towers stand beside her if such a thing happens would be an immense benefit and ensure her safety. Nothing like a dozen elementalists to keep you safe from assassins.”

“Skander.” A small smile passed Raenim's lips. “That man doesn't know how to age.”

“He looks the same as he did fifty years ago,” agreed Theoden with a frown. He had to hide his envy for that fact. What he wouldn't have given to live as long as the old wizard had. “Probably a hundred years ago too.”

Raenim chuckled. “He's no admirer of mine. He does not approve of my harsh methods.”

“Exactly why he might take it upon himself to see that Eleria rules safely. She represents an opportunity to change things and move to a softer touch in ruling.”

“This is all pointless talk anyway,” said Raenim and gulped down the last of his wine. “She will be married. There will be no struggle for power.” His voice was determined and the look in his eyes as passionate as a young lovers.

“Does not hurt to prepare,” reminded Theoden. “No harm in it.”

The emperor gave him a glare, but the old man met it with a calm stare of his own. It wasn't the first time they disagreed on something. It was one of the things that marked their friendship. Few were the people who could talk to the emperor as Theoden did and even fewer were those who came out on top at times.

“Fine. I'll talk to Skander,” agreed the emperor.

Theoden smiled.

“But I will also make certain the next suitor meets Eleria as soon as possible,”

“Of course,” agreed Theoden with a nod.

The emperor rang a small bell to call in a servant. He wanted more wine to help smooth over the flair of emotions that was raging inside him.

The talk continued long into the night, but with less serious matters.

Chapter 22

Cheid snapped awake as something cold pressed against his lower back. A shiver ran down his spine. He frowned as a giggle sounded out from behind him. Turning to his other side he came face to face with the smiling Satu.

“I wish you didn't do that,” said Cheid and tried to look as serious as the situation allowed. He pulled the blanket tighter around himself.

“Do what?” she asked innocently, her head half buried under her own blanket. The narrow bed left mere inches between the two.

“Put your cold feet against my back,” replied Cheid with a frown that wasn't as deep as it could have been. “It's not a nice way to wake up.”

“Is there a nice way to wake up?” asked Satu with a coy smile.

“In the past I would have said no,” started Cheid and watched her expression change from a smile to a more serious one. “But looking at you I have to say there is and it's right here. Despite the cold feet.”

“You could warm them up,” she suggested before giving Cheid a soft kiss.

It was a struggle. That seemed to be defining attribute of Cheid's mornings these days. Every time she was there he started to feel like the world outside the room meant very little. Revenge for his family? The thought of touching her smooth skin washed even that away, even if only briefly.

“There's nothing I would love to do more, but alas, there are things I must do today,” said Cheid and planted a kiss on the tip of her nose. The way it crinkled every time he did that was one of the many small things he had grown to love about her.

“Not even a little rub?” she asked with a faked expression of sadness.

“I can't. Today, I can't be late. Master Roderic has agreed to take me on a job,” explained Cheid. It had been more than a week since the promise had been made, but it was a lot quicker than he had hoped for. Even more so when the job took him straight to where he wanted to go. He could only hope it would take a lot of time to finish the job given. The more time spent at the mansion of the

family the more chances there were to hear something of interest or discover a weakness.

“What kind of job?” asked Satu and watched with a small frown as Cheid slipped from under the blanket and started getting ready.

“I don't know yet, but it's for one of the noble families so I'd expect it'll be interesting,” replied Cheid as he pulled on his robe. His bladder was nagging for relief, but that could be done on the way to the dining hall. Missing breakfast was not a good idea on a day you knew you'd probably not have a chance to eat until evening.

“In that case you should do your best,” said Satu and gained a more serious expression. “If you impress them now then when the time comes they might seek your services.”

Cheid grinned. “I know. I'm not going to mess up an opportunity like this.” For multiple reasons, he thought to himself. “I'll get a portion of the payment. I'll treat you to something nice when I get the money.”

Satu lit up as if someone had just told her the best news of her life. “What do you have in mind?” she asked eagerly and shuffled to the edge of the bed while resting her head against her arms. Her feet swung up in the air behind her.

“It's a secret,” replied Cheid and checked he had everything needed with him. He gave the woman a mysterious smile and received a stuck out tongue in response. He laughed and crouched down to give her a quick kiss.

“Just don't keep it a secret for too long,” she muttered, but seemed satisfied by the kiss.

“I won't,” assured Cheid and put his hand on the door-handle. He glanced back one last time. “You better not be late for class either.”

“I won't,” she replied, doing her best to mimic Cheid.

He gave her a smile and left the room.

The dining hall was not crowded. One good thing about being woken up by cold feet was that it often happened earlier than he usually needed to wake up. Whether she did it on purpose to keep him from being late or just to tease, Cheid did not know, but it was an unpleasant way to be pulled from sleep in either case.

The kitchen hands were still putting up the breakfast. Cheid still managed to grab himself some freshly baked bread along with some leftover meat from yesterday and a few slices of cheese. He chugged down the sandwich with some cold water before heading out to the entrance hall. Roderic had asked him to meet him there. Apparently there was not much equipment or books to carry which suggested they were going to do something the master knew well and had done before.

Whether that would mean a boring day or an interesting one he could not tell.

The reception hall was not as empty as the dining hall had been. The first ones looking to meet up with a master or other wizards or elementalists were already crowding the area and the students tasked with guiding them were busily making queries and guiding people to the transport discs or through the doors to the other towers.

Cheid found himself a quiet spot where he had a good view of the discs going up and down. Roderic would have to come from there and spotting him would be easy. He glanced around at the students. He remembered well how it could be on a busy day. You'd be walking all shift with little rest, but in return you might be earning enough coins to buy something good for yourself. The younger students didn't have many other ways to earn extra money so those who needed it were happy to toil for it while there were those less keen on it that were happy trade their shift to someone else.

All in all it was a system that benefited everyone involved.

Roderic came down on a disc and Cheid parted from his place the moment the transport stopped.

"Good morning, master," Cheid greeted him.

"Ah, good to see you are on time," said Roderic and handed him a heavy book. It was the only thing the old wizard had with him. Cheid didn't complain. He was the student after all and the master had his perks.

"I wouldn't be late for something like this," assured Cheid and took his place next to the older wizard as they walked across the reception hall.

"I like your enthusiasm," Roderic complemented and pushed open the door

leading outside. "Though I fear today will be a mundane day."

It was a sunny day. Over the last week spring had been making progress and some of the snow had given way as the temperature rose. A week or two more of such weather and there'd be no snow left and the grass would start turning green.

"It is still my first time on a job like this," said Cheid.

"Ah, so it is my boy. I forgot," said Roderic and started over the bridge with a brisk pace. "I remember my first time going on a job with my master. I was so nervous I couldn't eat anything in the morning. I had high expectations and stood waiting in the reception hall a good hour before we were supposed to leave."

Cheid listened to the master and nodded at times. He had a habit of reminiscing about past times when there was nothing else to do. Some of the stories were interesting, some were fun, while other were outright boring.

"Can you imagine my disappointment when we arrived at the noble house and found out what we were doing? All we were summoned for was to fix some broken mystic lamps." Roderic chuckled. "In hindsight I should have known to expect something like that. It is a rare commission that asks for something interesting."

"Am I going to be disappointed today?" asked Cheid. In his mind there was no chance for that given how many things he had to look forward to. Even if the actual job turned out to be boring there was still the excitement of getting close to his enemies without them even knowing it.

Roderic adjusted his robe, pulling the collar tighter around his throat as a gust of wind blew down the river. "It's nothing special, but it's not fixing mystic lamps either. I think you'll like it."

The streets of the city were more empty than usual, but the time of day was early as well. Most workers were still at home in bed or getting ready to leave for work while many of the artisans were only starting to open their shops. Even the taverns were still making their breakfast menus.

It took the pair little time to arrive at the transport point. The guards looked sleepy, still waiting to be relieved of duty by the morning shift. They didn't bother to harass either of them much since Roderic had the proper credentials and

assured he'd keep a close eye on Cheid. Wizards in general got away with entering the nobles layers with a bit more ease even if they didn't have a pass. A mere common worker would have a harder time with it since the nobles were particular about keeping thieves out.

They were joined by a bunch of servants on their way up. While Cheid had made the journey on the smaller discs that serviced the Towers, he had not made many on the large ones that kept the city connected. He had not had much reason to go visit the nobles layer and the memories from his childhood were vague at best. He had not spent much time in the city anyway.

The view of the still snow covered city was breathtaking in the morning sunlight. Rooftops glittered with ice and snow and the dull grey that dominated the city in the summer was a mix of white and light grey. It gave the city an elegance that even the elves would have appreciated. The only thing breaking the whiteness was the brown water of the river. The water flowed quick enough that it never fully froze over.

Then the darkness of the short tunnel swallowed the view. Cheid blinked a few times to see a ghost image of the city before it finally disappeared.

The darkness did not last long as the disc popped out of its tunnel and into the sunlight of the nobles layers. The guards there didn't bother checking anyone leaving and Cheid ventured onto the streets with Roderic.

The feel was very different from the commoners layers. Where streets there were lined with tall buildings and store fronts, on the nobles layer all you saw were stone walls and the occasional gate or front door – depending on how the mansion was built. At most you could see snowy tree tops peek over some of the walls.

The streets were emptier and narrower, but there was still room for two coaches to pass each other with no problems. The street lamps were paced in even intervals and built to last with decorative elements.

It was like a different city all together.

Cheid remembered where the mansion of his family had been and he thanked the gods they were going in a different direction. He did not want to see what had become of the place. Probably in the hands of some other noble family,

completely ripped from anything that he might have remembered.

“First time up here?” asked Roderic as they rounded a corner and headed down a street.

“Yes,” replied Cheid as he continued to look around. Saying anything else would have brought about questions he did not feel like lying to. If the master wanted to think it was his first time seeing the walled gardens and other wonders that dotted the area that suited him just fine.

“It's a dreary place, isn't it?” noted Roderic and glanced around with a slight frown. “They've built walls to separate themselves from everyone on the outside.”

“They're nobles,” replied Cheid. There was nothing more to it. Nobles did not want to mix with anyone, not even other nobles unless they absolutely had to. They wanted privacy in their homes and walls had the added benefit of making the lives of assassins just a little bit harder.

“Still, these wall lined streets are lonely to walk. The layer below is so much more..alive.”

Cheid was uncertain how to react to the masters words. It wasn't often that he spoke of how he felt about the city and how it had formed to be. Part of it was probably lack of opportunity for it. “There is a certain appeal to the crowds, I suppose.”

“You don't understand. When the nobles do not see how the common live they come to expect everyone has it as easy as they do. These walls are just a sign of them creating a world of their own they want no one to pierce.”

“Why does that matter?” asked Cheid. “Even if they knew the difference in life styles, would they do anything to change it?”

“Perhaps,” said Roderic.

“Doubtful,” added Cheid. Despite having lost the life of nobility at a young age he knew how some of them could be. They'd take coins from a beggars cup if they thought they could get away with it.

“You don't have much faith in them, do you?” asked Roderic.

“They have given little reason to have it,” replied Cheid, trying not to sound bitter.

Roderic examined him for a moment. “You would do well to keep that to

yourself when working with them. They might not be the most pleasant types, but they're among the few who can afford to pay for our services. Building contacts among them is important if you want to be financially successful.”

“I will do my best to impress them,” Cheid assured just as the master stopped in front of a decorated iron gate. There were horses running across it with men mounted on them. A small creature that looked like a wild boar was running ahead of them.

Roderic reached out and pulled the heavy rope hanging next to the gate. They could hear a bell ring inside. They waited. It didn't take long for a servant to peek through the iron gate and asses them both.

“Ah, master Roderic. On time as always.” The man had a pleasant voice, the sort you'd listen to for hours without getting annoyed by it. “And I take it the young man is your assistant?”

“Yes. Cheid, this is James, the head servant for the family.”

“A pleasure to meet you, sir,” said Cheid and gave the man a smile while hugging the book tightly.

“Likewise,” said James and gave a nod to his side. The sound of a lock clicking came before the gate opened outside. He motioned for both Cheid and Roderic to enter and they did. It was a small space covered by a roof and a wooden gate on the other end. It served to separate the outside gate from the inner one and insulate the nobles further from the world beyond.

“The master will be pleased you could make it on such short notice,” said James as he guided the pair through the wooden gate. A garden – that would be a sight to behold in the summer – opened before them with neatly laid out gravel paths, fountains and flowerbeds and trees trimmed to various shapes. Even underneath all the snow the care and attention paid to the garden was evident. On the opposite side of it they could see the actual mansion rise up three stories high with white pillars decorating the front.

Still, as they walked through a cleared path, the snow covered trees and frozen fountains made their own pitch for beauty and managed to capture their eyes more than once. Cheid looked around, feigning the sort of open mouthed gawking any commoner would have displayed the first time seeing something like

that. In his youth he had seen many gardens and some had been far more glamorous than the one they were in now. The imperial gardens being among them. But the Cheid he was now had grown on a farm and the closest he would have gotten to a well tended to garden would have been his mothers little herb plantation behind the house.

James led them at a brisk pace and they soon found themselves in front of the massive oak doors leading inside the mansion. He pushed one of them open and motioned for the two to enter. Roderic went in first with Cheid coming in close behind. James followed and pulled the door shut.

“You can leave your boots here,” James instructed and showed them a rack. “The master is very particular and does not want melting snow on the floors.”

“You don't expect us to walk around bare footed do you?” asked Roderic with a frown. His voice made it clear that was not going to happen no matter what the master of the house said. Wizards were a bit odd in their placement among the ranks of society. They weren't nobles – though there certainly was the rare few who had noble blood in them – nor were they mere commoners. At times it was difficult to tell where they fell in the ranks and whether they should abide by the rules set for peasantry or not.

“Ah, fear not master Roderic. There are suitable shoes for indoor use for loan,” assured James and disappeared behind a small door.

Cheid gave his master a look. Roderic shrugged his shoulders and took a seat in a nearby chair and started working the boots off his feet. Cheid followed his example and soon they were both standing there with only their socks on. They placed their boots on the rack and waited for their guide to return.

James returned from behind the door with what looked to be two pairs of slippers. “These should do,” he said and presented them to the guests.

Roderic eyed the open build of the things. “I'm glad I didn't put on the pair of socks with the hole in them,” he muttered grumpily and grabbed a pair.

Cheid did his best to hide the small smile that tried to cross his lips. The master looked to be in a bad mood over the entire things so his humour might not have been enough to handle it. The slipper fit surprisingly well and were more comfortable than they looked, though the fact they were a toe revealing design

made Cheid conscious of the fact that his socks were not looking the cleanest.

“All ready?” asked James and eyed Roderic as he stood up and took a few tentative steps with the slippers.

“Show the way,” said Roderic and gave Cheid a glance to get the book. He did as implied and followed as James led them to the actual manor and its stone floor corridors. Paintings, statues – all sorts of things that made the place look richer – lined the walls and Cheid played his part as he looked at everything with the sort of slack jawed awe that was expected.

“I see the floor warming is still working,” noted Roderic as they progressed along a corridor that seemed to run the entire length of the manor. It wasn't until then that Cheid noticed the floor was unusually warm. Even through his slippers he could feel a bit of heat. Had he wanted to, walking bare footed would not have been a problem.

“Oh yes,” agreed James. “The floors are still heated. The problem is the main bath. We don't get any hot water there.”

“Oh? Hm,” Roderic fell silent for a moment. “If I remember correctly they're dealt with by different elemental spirits. It must be that one of them has gotten loose.”

“You mean there's an fire elemental loose in the house?” asked James with a worried voice.

“No, no, no, not an elemental. A spirit.”

“What's the difference?” asked James, still looking timid. You couldn't blame him for it. A loose elemental could be very dangerous and – if angry – wreck the entire mansion they were in before being subdued.

“The spirits are weaker, more benign. That's why we use them and if they get loose they'll just find a cosy corner in your garden and stay there until they can return to their own plane,” explained Roderic. “There's nothing to worry about if one is loose.”

“Even if it's a fire one?” asked James. “I'd think one of those could start a fire if they wanted to.”

“Bah. It's probably feeling cosy up in one of your fireplaces. Nothing to worry about,” assured Roderic. James looked unconvinced. For Cheid and his master

the presence of an elemental spirits in the wild was a natural thing, but for someone not well versed in the secrets of spell casting it was an unknown that they didn't want meddling in their lives.

Cheid was starting to get a picture of what they were there to do. It seemed the mansion had some sort of water circulation system powered by elemental spirits. It was unusual and likely very expensive to maintain because any time something broke you needed to call a skilled wizard like Roderic to fix it. It was one thing to gather inanimate fire and power from the planes and quite another to pull an sentient being out of them. Spirits were the weakest of them, but still strong enough to lift the discs at the Towers. Even small ones were enough to make water boil or move it through pipes at considerable speed.

It sounded like more trouble than it was worth, but it made for some good bragging rights among the nobility. Not many could claim to have heated floors or hot water baths that didn't require servants to carry bucket after bucket to fill the bath.

"Ah, I almost forgot," said James as he opened a door that led to the baths. There were several marble laden pools there, though they were all empty. No one wanted to have a cold bath during the winter. "The master is occupied today due to the visit of a certain Earl, but he sends his regards and hopes the problem will be fixed promptly."

"Don't you worry James. With the help of my assistant I'll have this fixed in no time," assured Roderic as they walked through the baths and passed through another door to land in a small room where a bunch of pipes converged into what looked like a complex maze. There were a couple of square boxes attached to the pipes and a large wooden container took up a large portion of the room.

"Well, here's your work-field," said James and retreated to the doorway to watch. Cheid glanced at Roderick, expecting him to shoo away the nosy servant, but he made no motion to do such a thing.

"Don't you mind James," said Roderic as he examined one of the metal boxes. "No one is left unattended while in the manor, not even the Earl that's visiting. There are a lot of places to get lost and many more places where you shouldn't stick your nose."

Cheid felt the sharp sting of disappointment upon hearing that. He had hoped for a chance to loiter around the manor with work as an excuse, but now that hope had been completely crushed. Under the watchful eye of James it would be nearly impossible to get any spying done.

“Ah, yes. Problem found,” declared Roderic and opened one of the metal boxes. It was empty and the inside walls of it were covered in fine soot. “The fire spirit is gone. The water passing through the pipes leading to the baths isn't getting warmed. We'll have to summon a new one.”

Cheid perked up. Summoning an elemental spirit was beyond his current training and getting to witness a master at work was a great opportunity to observe how it was done. At least the trip would not turn out to be a complete loss.

“You ever witnessed a summoning?” asked Roderic and gave Cheid a look as he prepared the box by cleaning its insides with a piece of cloth he had dug from some pocket.

“No, master,” admitted Cheid.

Roderic nodded. “That's to be expected. Open that book, flip to page about midway through. It's all explained there.”

Cheid did as told and began to leaf through pages. Had Roderic not continued preparing it all he might have paid attention to the words on the page, but as it stood he spent most of his time pretending to read while watching the master work.

“What does it say to be careful of?” asked Roderic and gave Cheid a glance.

“Not giving in too much to the powers involved,” replied Cheid, thanking the gods he had actually read that part instead of skipping over it. “It warns that, despite the instructions here being accurate, there is always a risk that you will pull through something other than expected if you do not focus fully on the task at hand.”

Roderic nodded. “Good. You were actually reading.”

Cheid did not bother replying to the comment, but instead continued reading the book as if the jab had gone unnoticed. Roderic continued to make preparations, mostly in the form of finding a good position for himself as well as

the empty metal box.

“All right. Cheid, put the book down,” Roderic finally said as he had laid out the box where he wanted it and gotten into a comfortable standing position himself. “I’m going to summon the spirit, but I want you to pay attention to what I am doing, not with just your eyes, but also through the power inside you. You can feel what I am doing, right?”

Cheid dipped into the pool of power inside him and weaved some of the strands from the elemental plane of fire into it. Out on a whim he added water to it as well. There were elemental spirits from the water plane in the room so keeping an eye on them would not be a bad idea even though the two opposite elements would put greater strain on him.

Having completed the weaving of power strands Cheid opened his eyes and looked at the master. While he couldn't actually see what the master had built around himself he could sense the powers moving around him.

“Do you feel?” asked Roderic and made a gesture with his hand. Cheid felt a tug and ripple emanate from the old man and run across the room. When you focused on feeling out others using powers it was easy to get a sense of what they were doing and even track them down over a distance. When so close it was possible to essentially tell everything they were doing even though the actual strands of magic were unseen.

“I do, master,” replied Cheid and frowned slightly. There was a distracting sound coming to his ears from somewhere. Instead of focusing on the master he put his efforts towards finding out the source of it. It drew him to the pipes and the water flowing through it. Nudging a bit more power from the water element he reached further and focused on hearing it. The noise soon turned into audible voices, whispers carried with the water. There were servants chatting about the latest gossip, moans from a kitchen hand and a serving boy who had sneaked into a lining closet for a private moment, footsteps and most interestingly, the conversation the master of the house was having with his guest.

Cheid had to fight to hide the smile that wanted to brighten his face. He could hear everything going on in the manor! Had it been simply water running through the pipes that would not have been possible, but there was magic mixed

in because of the elemental spirits and the water carried with it more than it should have. And it all flowed through the same little room.

“Focus now,” said Roderic in a stern voice.

How the master had spotted his wandering attention, Cheid could not comprehend. He was in the middle of summoning yet still had the wherewithal to keep an eye on his young student. There was no denying that a master stood high above the abilities of even a talented student. It made Cheid wonder just what sort of power Skander could wield if he so chose. But he turned his attention back to the summoning and what Roderic was doing.

He knew now that there was a way to spy on the people he wanted to.

All he had to do was ensure spirits kept disappearing to get access to the place. Though given the complexity of the system and fickle nature of the creatures it was guaranteed to happen at some point. What it would require was him being there alone. Roderic was observant enough to notice if he tried to really spy.

Cheid put his attention to learning as much about the summoning as he could. The faster he knew how to do it, the quicker he'd be working alone in the room and the sooner he'd be able to spy on everything going on.

It was a goal worth waiting for.

“Are you ready?” asked Roderic and gave him a stern look. When it came to magic there was no fooling around and distractions were the last thing you wanted.

Cheid nodded and focused on the task at hand.

“Keep yourself ready. Keep James safe in case something goes wrong.”

“I will, master.” Cheid glanced at James who was still at the doorway, looking on with the sort of interest only an bored servant could. Having confirmed where the man was, he turned his attention back to what Roderic was doing.

He could feel the increased energy he drew from the strands of magic. Cheid watched as Roderic's fingers danced in the air in a pattern that seemed to make no sense, but to the master it likely did as it helped him concentrate his efforts. It didn't take long for the energies to release in a wave that washed over Cheid as if he had been laying on a beach, too close to the water.

Cheid blinked a few times and let go of the strands he had gathered. He focused on the small flame figure standing in the box Roderic had so carefully placed. The master examined what he had summoned and nodded approvingly right before the flames disappeared. He closed the box and started to put it back in its place.

“Why did it disappear?” asked James. He had crept next to Cheid for a better look.

“The spirits only show themselves if ordered to,” explained Cheid. You couldn't see the large spirits that lifted the transport discs at the Towers, much less small ones like the one trapped in the box.

“Ah, I see,” said James and glanced around. He looked worried, perhaps thinking about the loose spirit in the manor.

“Well, that's that,” said Roderic, having placed the metal box back in its place among the pipes. “Now, about the payment..”

Cheid was happy to see more than a few coins line his pocket when they returned to the Towers. Plenty to treat Satu to something nice.

Chapter 23

It had been a good plan, or so Eleria had initially thought. Now, she was starting to doubt whether it was and whether it was even going to work. The biggest downside, for her personally, was the over protective nature of the Kalunta brothers. After the incident with the would be suitor they had added guards around her and put stricter restrictions on where she was allowed to go and under what circumstances.

The second part that had her doubting the plan was the fact her father seemed unaffected by the incident and was insisting she meet the next young noble as soon as possible. She had hoped for some breathing room, a momentary break for him to stop to consider who to present to her next. The plan looked like it had almost backfired as there was increased rigour coming from the emperor to get her married.

Then there was Loren. The man had done nothing but pester her about the details of what she was doing. It had come to the point where she was considering ordering him to stay away from her until he could return to being his old self, but it was too drastic a step to take lightly. She had decided to bear with it until the plan saw its end. She could not deny the calming effect having him around had. She felt more secure with him there than by having twenty of Oughund's men surrounding her, even if he was being an insufferable busybody with his questions.

Wrapped in a thick fur cloak, Eleria stood on a balcony and looked on at the imperial garden. There was still too much snow there for anything to grow, but even then it was a better view than what she had from her chambers. It had been Marja's idea. Ever since the ball she had not been able to leave her chambers much. Part of it was the endless stream of ladies of the court coming to show their support and satisfy their curiosity regarding the scandalous event. If she heard no more gasp for the rest of her life she'd die happy.

The cool outside air felt refreshing after spending so much time indoors. Eleria took in a deep breath and let it out with a cloud of mist.

"This was a good idea," she said and gave Marja a small smile. Dressed in a similar thick cloak, the dark haired woman returned the smile.

"It's not just about the fresh air, my lady," said Marja and gave her a conspiratorial look. "We can talk freely here."

Eleria glanced around and found her to be right. Oughund was standing well away as were the other guards, even though there were some down in the garden to keep an eye on things as well.

"What is it that we have to talk about?" she asked. There wasn't much they couldn't talk about in her private chambers. There were no guards there, at least not yet.

"Your plan?" asked Marja and gave her a look. "You've heard what your father has coming your way."

"We're keeping to what we planned before," said Eleria in a firm voice. "If he wants to send me to meet another suitor so fast then it will just be a re-enactment of what happened earlier. That will play into my plan just fine."

Marja gave her a good look. Anyone else might have missed it, but she had spent enough time with her to notice the subtle changes in the lines of her jaw. "This bothers you, doesn't it?"

Eleria hesitated. "Yes," she finally admitted. "We're lucky my father left the poor man alone. I don't want people to get hurt over this."

"But they will, if you continue on this path," Marja pointed out.

"This boat can't be turned," replied Eleria and leaned against the balcony railing. As she did so she pushed down some snow that left behind a glittering trail of flakes. "I can't stop now even if people get hurt."

Despite the young noble escaping, his family was not as fortunate. While the emperor had no gone to extreme lengths to make their lives difficult there were small things that had surfaced to cause them trouble. A little financial trouble for a family was something she could live with.

Marja sighed. She had made several more attempts to persuade the princess from the course she had chosen, but had met with no success. A burst of laughter down the corridor caught her attention and she leaned through the doorway to see who it was. She saw a group of young men walking their way. She

recognized the man leading the group and ducked back outside onto the balcony.

“Brace yourself, your highness,” she said to Eleria who was in her own thoughts, staring blankly at the snowy garden. “You will have a chance to meet your next suitor sooner than you thought.”

“What do you mean?” asked Eleria and stood up from leaning against the railing. The pendant around her neck felt cold as it made contact with her skin once more. She had grown accustomed to wearing it almost daily. It wasn't bad to look at nor was it too expensive looking to be worn every day.

“He's coming this way with a group of his lackeys,” said Marja and motioned in the direction from which the boastful laughter echoed down the corridor.

The first reaction Eleria had was to have Oughund turn the group away, but as she thought about it more she came to the realization that she had no need to wait for a formal party. The less people witnessed the misbehaviour the better it was. It could be quietly hushed away and the family would face much less shame.

“Why don't we go meet them?” she asked and gave Marja a sly smile.

“Are you certain that's a wise idea?” asked Marja with a frown.

“Better than shaming him in front of all of the nobility,” said Eleria and made her way inside. She looked both ways down the corridor and spotted the group just as they came in contact with the first of her guards. They were having an argument with them about whether they had the right to pass.

“It's all right. Let them through,” she called out. The guards turned to look at her, then Oughund who was in the opposite direction making his way towards the scene.

Eleria turned to glare at the burly man. He gave her one look and then another at the guards holding back the group of youngsters.

“Are you certain?” he asked and turned back to look at Eleria.

“Yes! He's the next man my father plans to marry me off to. There no reason for him to want to hurt me.”

Oughund looked hesitant. “With what happened with the last one, I would not be so sure, your highness.”

Eleria glared at him the best she could, but there was no give in him. She bit down on her lower lip. “Will you let them through if I let you stand nearby?” she

finally asked.

Oughund took a closer look at the young men. None of them looked particularly threatening. Most were the lanky sort and looked more suited for a dance room than for anything else.

“No need for that, your highness,” he finally admitted and motioned to the guards to let the youngsters through. He started back down the corridor the way he had come from.

Eleria watched the group get closer. They spent a moment chastising the guards that had held them back, but all of them grew more serious as they approached her. They knew full well who she was and that a misstep could land them in hot water. Marja emerged from the balcony and pulled the twin doors shut before taking her place just behind Eleria.

“Your highness,” said the man leading the group and made a sweeping bow before her. It was a bit grandiose, but so were many other things the young men of nobility did. All to impress the ladies.

“Young lord Greyfan,” said Eleria with a smile and as pleased a voice she could muster. The Greyfan family was not known for their pleasant habits, but in public they were always impeccable gentlemen. What went on behind closed doors were mere rumours that could be shrugged off as just those.

“What bring your highness out here?” the young man asked and gave her a teeth baring smile. His sand brown hair was cut short and the blue silk attire he wore was at the top of the fashion list.

“I came to admire the garden,” said Eleria and glanced out the window.

“But your highness, it's covered in snow. What beauty is there to see?”

“There is beauty even in winter,” said Eleria, somewhat disdainfully. How anyone could be blind to it was beyond her. Maybe he had not spent much time looking, but instead spent most of his time inside, drinking wine with his friends in the warmth of a crackling fire.

“If you say so, your highness,” replied the young Greyfan. He had made no effort to introduce the three men standing behind him, but Eleria cared little for them anyway. Probably some minor nobles that flocked to him, hoping some of his influence would rub on them. Either way, they were hanging back and giving

the Greyfan the stage. They probably knew about him being the top candidate for marrying her.

“Have I told you about the hunting trip we are planning?” he finally asked as the silence started to grow long.

“No. Please do. A good hunt is always the highlight of any day,” replied Eleria. She pulled a hand inside her dress and put it on the pendant. Enough pleasantries had been exchanged. She activated the spell and muttered the words under her breath while listening to the young Greyfan ramble on about how he and his friends had been out for a walk to make arrangements for the great hunt.

As the last time, it took a bit of time for the spell to take effect. Eleria started to worry it would hit one of the lackey behind Greyfan, but eventually she could see the change in his eyes. The spell was taking effect.

Suddenly, mid sentence, the man raised his hand and landed a solid slap on Eleria's cheek. The burning sensation quickly crawled over her skin and her head felt woozy at the force of it. The sound of the slap echoed down the corridor.

“Get on your knees, wench,” the young Greyfan demanded and raised his hand again. Stunned by the slap, Eleria was unable to react. The men behind the crazed youngster looked as stunned and shocked as she did. All she could do was watch the open palm turn into a fist as she failed to comply with the ludicrous demand.

Marja shoved her out of the way and the clenched fist hit her in the stomach, driving all the air out of her lungs. She fell to the floor, gasping for breath. Shouts came from both ends of the corridor and the friends of Greyfan finally snapped awake and grabbed hold of him before he could make his way to Eleria. He still had his hand clenched in a fist and looked ready to deliver the blow that had been meant for her.

Where the lanky youngsters failed, the guards succeeded as they tackled the young man to the ground along with his friends and – after a struggle on the floor – tied everyone up, even his friends.

Eleria had recovered enough from the slap to reach for the pendant and deactivate it. She then stumbled over to Marja and knelt down next to her. “Are you hurt?” She put a hand on her shoulder.

The woman gasped for breath a few more times before nodding.

“Get them out of here!” roared Oughund as he arrived on the scene.

“No! I..” the young Greyfan started, but was silenced by a solid punch from the big northern man. Blood started running from the young man's nose.

“Shut him up and take him away!” Oughund shouted and the guards scrambled to make it so.

“I'm so sorry,” Eleria whispered to Marja as she leaned in closer to her in a protective manner.

“It's all right,” Marja assured and gathered herself some more. With one hand she nursed her stomach. The hit had been hard and she could still feel the effects of it. She suspected it would hurt worse in the morning.

“Is she all right?” asked Oughund as he turned to face the two women. He looked genuinely concerned and angry at the same time. For a moment Eleria feared the anger was aimed at her, but she soon realized it was not the sort of man he was. More likely he was angry with himself for being talked into letting the men through.

“I'm fine,” assured Marja with a slightly muffled voice. “Though I bet this will hurt in the morning.”

“And you, your highness?” asked Oughund and gave Eleria a concerned look. The slap had been hard and her entire cheeks was glowing red. It tingled all over, but it seemed minor compared to what Marja had received.

“I'm all right,” said Eleria. She was more concerned for her maid-in-wait than herself. She had been prepared to take what ever came her way from the use of the pendant. At no point had she considered Marja to be in danger. And now that she had been hurt she could not help but feel guilty because of it.

Oughund gave both women an appraising look. The shouts of the young men being dragged away still echoed in the corridor. “These young noble men seem to be lacking in common sense and manners,” he finally noted and stared at Eleria.

“Yes. I don't know what they're thinking,” replied Eleria, feeling the weight of the man's look. She turned her attention to Marja once more, unable to face him.

“Interesting that this lapse in manners seems to always happen around you,” noted Oughund as he offered a hand to help Marja stand up. She gave the

man a thankful smile and placed her hand in his huge palm.

“What are you implying?” asked Eleria and gave the man a glare as she stood up and gave Marja support.

“Merely an observation, your highness,” said the man and let her take care of supporting Marja. He did not seem comfortable touching her for too long. Not that he was afraid of women, just that it seemed improper.

“Perhaps they do not wish to marry me,” said Eleria as she started down the corridor with Marja.

“Then they are bigger fools than I gave them credit for,” said Oughund and started to follow her. A complement of guards followed, though their ranks had been diminished by the need to escort the offending noblemen out.

“What will you do with them?” asked Eleria. The fact the men had been dragged away left her feeling like the punishment would be far worse than what had been given to her first victim. The chance for her to save the Greyfan from the worst of it had passed by too quickly.

“They’ll spend a night in the cells. Then they’ll get to plead their case in front of the emperor, if he has time for it so soon,” said Oughund.

Eleria felt a lump in her throat. There’d be no mercy from her father, not after the first case slipped away from him. She had to do something for the fool or he’d end up in the arena.

“I will have to attend that to state my side of the case,” she finally said and hastened her steps, dragging Marja with her towards her quarters.

“I will ensure you are informed of the time, your highness,” assured Oughund and continued to trail the pair all the way to the door leading to Eleria's quarters.

As soon as the door closed and the two women were alone Eleria let all the emotions free. She started to sob.

Despite being in the condition she was, Marja was quickly by her side and guided her to a seat and wrapped a comforting arm around her.

“I’m so sorry. I never intended any harm to come to you,” Eleria sobbed, the tears rolling down her still sore cheek.

“I know,” Marja assured. “But the plan you’re playing through is not going to

always go the way you want it to.”

“The young Greyfan. He's going to get killed. Because of me!”

“Your father is not known for being lenient,” said Marja, more as a statement than anything.

“I have to stop it somehow. I have to save him. He's not responsible for his actions,” said Eleria and dried her tears on a napkin Marja handed her. All the fur she had on was starting to get hot so she stood up and got rid of the worst of it.

Marja looked for a more comfortable seating position. The punch made her feel like her stomach had just received something spoiled. “You could tell your father everything,” she suggested.

Eleria paled. “If he found out what I've been doing I'm not certain it would not be me in the arena facing off the gladiators.”

“He wouldn't do that. You're his only daughter,” said Marja with a confident voice.

Eleria shook her head. “He can not know. He must not know.”

“Then there is not much we can do to help the young Greyfan,” said Marja. As much as she tried no plan came to her. What could be said in defence of a man who struck the imperial princess and her lady-in-wait in front of multiple credible witnesses? His friends were no doubt telling everything they knew to save their own hides. Even if the princess was to talk on his behalf it would not take away what he had done and the emperor was unlikely to let the incident slide.

“There has to be something,” muttered Eleria, not wanting to face the consequences of her actions. It was starting to look like she would not be able to go through with what Theoden had talked her into.

Marja had nothing more to add. She had offered all she could think of. Instead, she rubbed Eleria's shoulder in a comforting gesture.

“I'll speak on his behalf,” Eleria finally said and stood up, looking determined. “I don't know what I'll say, but I will speak so he does not end up dead. Perhaps I'll be able to hit a soft spot with my father.”

Marja looked at her with slight admiration. She could not completely ignore the fact she had landed the young man in trouble in the first place, but at least

she was doing her best to get him out of the mess. “Then we need to come up with a speech,” she said and stood up. There was a desk near the fireplace that had an ink fountain and pen as well as paper on it.

Eleria gave her a smile. “Thank you.”

Even after taking a fist for her, the woman had laid no blame on her lap. Instead, she had done all she could to help her out of the situation. Who could hope for a better companion?

“No need to thank me, your highness,” said Marja as she took a seat behind the desk and dipped the pen in the ink. She took out a sheet of paper. “I think we will have to start by greeting everyone present, don't you think?”

Eleria nodded and the two women put their heads together to write an influential speech.



“Then it is settled?” asked Raenim and eyed the old wizard sitting in the chair opposite to him. He had spent the morning talking with the man, hoping to convince him to support Eleria should the unfortunate circumstance ever arise that she would be forced to take the throne. Despite being pushed to it by Theoden, he had been reluctant to talk with Skander. There were past events between the two that had strained their relationship, but being the emperor and a master of the towers, they had to meet from time to time to discuss matters.

“It is, your highness,” agreed Skander, though he did not seem too eager about it. He had demanded many things in return, some Raenim had agreed to because they did not cost him anything more than ink on paper, but some had been more difficult things to find an agreement on. The emperor had held his ground and Skander – having the inherent desire to help Eleria should she need it – had eventually given in on some of the demands. That did not mean he was walking away empty handed. Far from it.

“Now, if you'll excuse me, there is a certain young noble that has done something to need my attention,” said Raenim and stood up. His private study was no place to hold a hearing. That would happen in the throne room, as was

proper, though the participants had been carefully pruned. He did not want the details of the case spreading too far. The fact Eleria had requested a chance to speak worried him somewhat, but he could not deny her that right. And there was a part of him that was curious to hear what she had to say. Would she condemn the fool of a noble or would she try and save him, despite what he had done to her?

“Ah, the case of the young Greyfan?” inquired Skander as he stood up and straightened his robe a bit. Even while meeting the emperor he had not changed into anything fancier than his usual grey robe. There was even a stain from a failed experiment down by his right foot.

“Word travels fast it seems,” said Raenim in a dry voice and headed for the door, not waiting whether the wizard followed him or not. He shooed away a servant that was lingering by and paid no mind to the four guards that snapped to attention and started right after him.

“Faster to some,” said Skander. He had followed the emperor, seemingly with the intent of coming along to the hearing with him. He walked a respectful few steps behind him, ignoring the guards just as well as the man before him.

“Your resourcefulness does you credit, Skander, but do not let it find you in places you should not be,” said Raenim. How the wizard always seemed to know what was going on – even when by all logic he should not have known anything – was one of the reasons the emperor did not trust him fully. He had never done anything to deserve that distrust, but a man who could know of someone being pregnant before the woman did was unsettling to anyone.

“Ah. You are correct your highness. There are times when things can turn..unnerving for some.”

Raenim grunted in response without slowing his pace. It was a long walk to the throne room.

“Your highness, if you do not mind, may I attend the hearing?” Skander asked. When he wanted to, he could be polite.

“Why?” asked Raenim and stopped. He turned to glare at the wizard while ignoring the guards who clanked to an abrupt stop. He knew the old man well enough to know he did nothing without a reason or some plan behind it.

Skander shrugged his shoulders. "I have just agreed to give my full support to your daughter should the need arise, yet I have seen very little of her, know very little of her. I understand she is to speak at this hearing? I would very much like to hear what she has to say, considering the situation."

It seemed like a reasonable proposition. If he was to help Eleria should she need to take the throne it would be helpful if the wizard had at least some idea what she was like.

"Fine. Just don't interfere with anything. You're there to observe. Not to take part," said Raenim in a firm voice before turning around and heading for the throne room once more.

"As you say, your majesty," replied Skander and followed close behind. The guards rattled on the move again as they followed their ruler. The doors of the throne room were swung open as Raenim approached. The guards standing by saluted him as he stormed past with a nod.

The large hall was empty save for the scribe and Theoden. Others would come when the session started. Raenim walked straight to his throne and took a seat as the scribe and Theoden gave him bows in respect, though the old man barely bent his back and made more of a nod before retiring to his divan.

"Master Skander. What brings you here today?" asked Theoden as he saw the wizard enter.

"Curiosity, Lord Theoden. Curiosity," replied Skander and positioned himself close to the old man.

"About what?"

"The princess."

"Ah. She has caused quite a stir as of late," Theoden admitted. He had not expected the plan to go exactly as it had unfolded so far. He had hoped the incidents would have been less attention grabbing and more subtle. If there were any more cases the emperor would start to become suspicious, if he was not already.

"It is a mystery what has gotten into the young noblemen," said Skander and observed the wrinkly man before him. He had a feeling more was going on than what the rumours said, but so far all he had were vague feelings nagging him

that something was not right.

“Indeed. Let us hope the rest are more sane than the two the princess has had to endure,” said Theoden and leafed through the documents laying out the accusations. It would be difficult to save the young Greyfan from the emperors wrath. A shame, but a small price to pay for seeing Eleria on the throne, in his mind. He could only hope her determination was not wavering over it.

The doors swung open once more and a stream of guards entered along with a bunch of youngsters in chains. The young Greyfan led the group with his back straight. He was followed by his friends who looked a lot more meek and cowered as if trying to escape the grim expression with which the emperor was eyeing the group.

After the guards came August Greyfan, the father of the young man on trial. His grey hair was well groomed and his costume was spotless with its fine silk shirt and the golden necklace bearing his family crest around his neck. After him came Eleria accompanied by her lady-in-wait and her personal guard. She wore a purple dress accompanied by a similar coloured cape around her shoulders. She walked past the accused who gave her a pleading look and made her way to her father. She gave him a slight curtsy before stepping to the side and taking her place next to the throne.

Skander paid close attention to her and the emperors reactions. The mixture of emotions ran across his face quickly, but not fast enough for the wily wizard to miss them. There was a frown of disapproval that melted into one of a loving parent and then solidified itself into the usual façade he wore that made it hard if not impossible to tell what he was thinking.

Theoden cleared his throat and propped himself up with the help of a servant. “Your majesty, the charges laid out against the oldest son of the Greyfan family are as follows. Putting hands on the imperial princess, addressing her in a disrespectful manner and assaulting her. His father, August Greyfan has asked for a turn to speak on his son's behalf. The princess herself has also asked to be heard in this matter, if it pleases you, your highness.”

“I grant both requests for turns to speak,” said Raenim and eyed everyone in the throne room. There were more guards than actual participants in the trial,

but that was the way things often worked with security.

“Very well, your highness. I believe it is Lord Greyfan who has the first turn.” said Theoden and lurched back onto his divan. His part had been played for now. There were no witnesses to hear. Their written statements were enough and when you assaulted the princess in front of her guards there was no need to bring forth questions. You were guilty by her word alone.

“Thank you, your majesty,” said August and stepped forward. He had a strong, booming voice that seemed out of place with his thin build. No doubt he could have shouted from the end of the imperial parade grounds and be heard clear as day on the other side even over thousands of troops marching. “Firstly, I would like to extend my sincerest apology to the princess. What my son has done is reprehensible and brings shame to our family.” He gave Eleria a slight bow and a sympathetic look.

Eleria gave him a graceful nod in acknowledgement of the apology.

“As I said, the action of my son are reprehensible. I'm not going to deny the facts of the case, there are far too many witnesses to do so. What I will ask for is leniency for my son. He is young and young minds make mistakes. This was a grievous one, that I will no dispute, but I am certain there is some judgement that can be made that will both see him punished yet not rob the Greyfan family of its heir,”

August turned his attention towards the emperor. “I plead with you to show mercy to my fool of a son, your highness. He has made a mistake, but I hope you will see through this all that he has learned from it.” He turned to look at his son and frowned at him. Immediately, the young man turned to look ashamed and regretful.

“I also ask for the release of his friends. The testimonies say they tried to stop my son. There is no blame to be placed on them in this matter,” August continued and grabbed some rolled up parchments from his servant. “I have written pleas from their families here. They regret to have been unable to come to their defence in person on such short notice.”

A servant parted from next to Theodon and took the parchments to him. The emperor would look at them later, if he so chose.

Skander watched everyone's reactions with the sort of intensity an owl would a field mouse rummaging in the darkness. Most of his attention was on Eleria, or more precisely the pendant she was wearing. There was something very familiar about it, but he could not quite put his finger on it. He put it in the back of his mind to look through a few books for it. He was certain he'd seen it depicted somewhere and that it was more than just a pendant.

"You've spoken well," said Rhaenim and nodded to August. "I will consider your words in my decision."

"Thank you, your majesty," said August and bowed. He retreated as close to his son as the guards allowed.

"Then we shall hear what my daughter has to say about all of this," Raenim declared and everyone turned their attention to the pale skinned woman. She looked a bit hesitant as she made her way in front of the throne and the accused on the other end. She looked around and gave everyone a slight smile.

"Thank you, father, for this opportunity," said Eleria. Her voice felt thin in the large hall, but carried far enough for everyone around her to hear what she was saying. If you looked closely at her, you could see a darker spot on her cheek. A bruise from the slap she had received, reminding everyone why they were there.

"You must be wondering what I am going to say. Will I try to drive the nail into young Greyfan's coffin or will I try and persuade my father to spare his life?" Eleria looked around once more and gave August a reassuring smile. "I realize that I have been at the centre of two very similar cases in a short amount of time. I wish I knew why these events took place, but I do not. At the same time we must consider the reputation of the man involved here. He is known for his correct behaviour and, indeed, at the start he was courteous with me."

Skander frowned and paid close attention to her. What she was saying made little sense. Why would the accused act in such a way and then suddenly turn violent with no reason?

"Then he suddenly changed," said Eleria and looked down. "He started saying things that were more appropriate for an upstairs room at a tavern. He turned violent. It was the same thing that happened earlier. Given that this has happened to two men who have come near me, both of whom are known to be

upstanding noblemen as they were considered possible husbands for me, there is only one conclusion that can be drawn. I am to be blamed for their behaviour.”

“What do you mean?” demanded Raenim in a loud voice. He sounded furious.

“You must admit, father, that this young man was, in your opinion, a suitable husband for me. That means you thought him a well mannered and trustworthy man,” said Eleria and motioned towards the young Greyfan. “You are not one to make a mistake like that and you're far too well informed for anyone to fool you. That leaves only one variable to explain their behaviour and that is me.”

The emperor leaned back in his throne and rubbed his chin. The argument was something he could not completely dismiss, even if it was his daughter being painted as a destroyer of good men. It was something he did not want to believe to be true.

“What is causing this, I do not know,” Eleria continued. “But something is influencing things around me. Perhaps it is the same forces that tried to kill me eight years ago. Instead of coming at me directly they are trying to destabilize the empire by making me unable to marry. If this is indeed the case then there can be no blame put on the young Greyfan.”

Skander rubbed his beard and squinted for a closer look at the pendant. What the princess was saying had jogged his memory. He was certain something was indeed influencing the men that got close to her, but it was no outside force. It was herself. But it was possible the pendant had been a gift to her and she was completely unaware of the power it held. But someone needed to activate it and they needed to be close to her. He turned his attention to her lady-in-wait. She was always close to her. She'd have the opportunity for it, but would she do something like that?

His first instinct was to say something, but the emperor had made him promise only to observe. Thinking on it a bit made him realize that talking to the princess first might be the better way. She was sowing seeds of doubt, perhaps enough to save the young Greyfan from being torn to pieces by lions.

“You are presenting a most disturbing idea, daughter,” said Raenim in a grim voice.

“That it is, father,” Eleria admitted. Inside she was fidgeting, eager to be done with the speech. It had been a risk to take it in the direction she had, but it was the best she and Marja could come up with – short of telling the outright truth. This way the blame went to someone else than her personally and that was the way she wanted to keep it. Whether her father would find the theory credible was another thing.

“But how would these people affect things?” the emperor asked, sceptical if such a thing could be done.

“We are in luck as we have a master from the Towers amongst us,” said Eleria, taking advantage of the surprise appearance of the wizard. She had little doubt he would confirm that such things could be accomplished with magic. It was a risky question to pose to him as it was always possible he recognized what was going on. In hindsight, wearing the pendant might not have been the best idea, but it was habit by now. “I am certain he can offer us some insight into it.”

Raenim glared at Skander who gave him an innocent smile in return. How could he have known the princess would ask his opinion? She had no idea about the promise made between the two.

“Very well. Let's hear what master Skander thinks about this,” said Raenim, though he did not sound too eager about it. “But keep it short and understandable for those of us not versed in the art of magic.”

Skander gave the emperor a slight nod before clearing his throat and taking a few steps to get closer to the princess and the centre of everyone's attention. “What the princess has suggested is certainly possible,” he started and gave a good look around the room. “But it is not easy. Magic like that can only be performed by those who have the gift for Free magic and even they would have to be close by. The other option is a magical item, though those are rare and expensive. Such an item would also have to be close to the princess – perhaps even on her person – and it would still need to be activated by some utterance of words.” As he talked about the items he made certain to give the pendant around Elerias neck an examining look. She showed no signs of panic over it, though there was a slight frown on her face.

“That means, if her suggestion is true, someone close to her is working

against her,” said Skander and let the room drift into silence. He had said what he planned to say. What would be done with the information was up to the emperor.

“As you see, father, what I have said is possible and given the efforts put towards getting rid of me earlier I would not put it past those working against me,” said Eleria and gave a nod of thank you to the wizard.

Raenim rubbed his chin. He had been given a lot to consider. If there was magic involved the the young man could not be fully blamed for his actions. Was it enough to let him off the hook fully? Would it make him a viable candidate to marry Eleria? No. The doubts would still remain, but enough points had been raised not to warrant a sentence to death.

“Is there any way to find these magical items or the people using magic?” asked Raenim, directing the question to Skander.

“Certainly, your majesty, but only when they are being used. If it is an item and a powerful one, then it might be felt even when inactive, but I doubt it is something of that magnitude. You would need someone watching the princess every moment she is awake, sensing for magic. It is not an easy task for one wizard. You would need more than a few to cover an entire day,” explained Skander.

Even more to consider. Raenim sighed and rubbed his temples. He then focused on his daughter. “Is there anything more you would like to say?”

“No, father. I have said what I came to say,” she replied and gave a curtsy to the emperor before retreating next to her maid-in-wait.

“Then everyone has spoken?” asked Raenim and gave Theoden a questioning look.

“That is correct, your majesty,” said the old man without bothering to get up from his divan.

“Then I will announce my decision,” said Raenim and waited for the scribe to be ready with his ink. “In this matter I find the friends of young Greyfan completely innocent. They are free to go.”

There was an audible sigh from the group of young men. Smiles appeared on faces that had been pale and scared mere moments ago. The night in the

dungeon was quickly forgotten as the idea of freedom and not ending up in the arena washed over them.

“Further, August Greyfan is to take custody of his son. The young man is to be confined within the wall of the family city manor for no less than five years. After that he is free to return to the court and society in general.”

The old noble looked pleased. “Thank you, your majesty.” He gave a respectful bow and after a glare his son joined him. The guards did not waste time in showing them out of the hall.

“Stay,” said Raenim as Eleria started to head for the door. She stopped and turned to regard her father with a questioning look. The door to the throne room slammed shut and all that remained were the guards that had come with the princess and the emperor as well as the scribe, Skander and Theoden.

“You have raised a concern and I must address it,” said Raenim.

Eleria looked concerned. “What do you mean?”

“If you are being influenced by magic we must find out who is behind it. This is something the Kalunta brother can not handle so we must find someone else to fill in that gap.”

“Who?” asked Eleria with narrowing eyes. They were private enough that she was willing not to be as respectful as she would have been in public.

“Skander, I trust this is something I can leave in your capable hands?” asked Raenim, though his tone made it clear it was not so much a question as an order.

Skander looked surprised. He had to admit to wanting to investigate the situation, but at the same time there were many other duties pulling for his attention. Some of them more acute than what was going on in the palace. Still, the chance to get to know the princess better was an opportunity that was hard to pass. “It would be an honour, your majesty,” he said and bowed slightly. He gave Eleria the most friendly smile he could muster.

The look he got back was not anywhere near as warm.

Chapter 24

The single coin rattled in the beggars otherwise empty cup. Cheid ignored it and continued on. The snow was gone and the air was getting warm enough that the winter capes had disappeared from the picture and been replaced with lighter ones. The ice covered, slippery streets were once more filled with people and the warmth was enough to have brought out the less fortunate from the warm underground levels to bother those that had gotten a better slice of life.

Cheid had no time for them.

Since winter Roderic had made more and more frequent use of him to cover the small jobs he was asked for. For the young man that was a welcome change as he got to put his skills into practical use. On top of that he got paid for it and learned a few new things on the side.

He had surprised even himself how well things had started to go. In late winter he had not been able to summon even the smallest of elemental spirits, but now it felt like routine to him. Even Roderic admitted to being impressed at how quickly he had managed to learn the skill and muster the power to do it. Still, he did not let him work alone on anything important because of Cheid's age. The rules of the tower prohibited it.

What's more, Skander had started to show an interest him. Whether that was a good thing Cheid still had doubts about, but the old wizard had summoned him to his chambers more often than before and it was never to simply chide him for something he had done. He had even taught him a few small things here and there.

Cheid suspected it had something to do with how much Skander spent time with the princess these days. Several months had now passed with her not making a single appearance without Skander at her side. There had been no public explanations as to why the wizard was there, but Cheid had sources besides the public rumours. Even though the imperial palace and especially anything pertaining to Eleria was hard to come by, he still heard things here and

there. He knew Skander was guarding her from something, but what that was was a mystery to everyone.

All of the things happening meant he had very little time to spare for anything more. What little extra time he had was split between being with Satu and finding out more about the names that had popped up in the information he had bought. At times he feared too little time was being spent with the red haired woman. Which was the reason he was on the streets now with a package stashed in one of his robe pockets.

Nothing soothed a neglected woman more than a little time and a present.

He'd also had time to meet a disgruntled servant from the Cedfeng manor. So far he had had no luck getting to work alone in such an important place, but servants could have a loose tongue if enough gold flashed before their greedy eyes and the masters had slighted them the right way. The one he had talked to had been deducted pay for someone else bumping into him and causing a platter to fall, shattering some fine crystal glasses. It had not been his fault, yet he had been punished. The deducted pay meant he was in need of gold and offering up a few words seemed like an easy and harmless way to do it.

To the man Cheid's questions must have seemed inconsequential. He'd wanted to hear who had visited the manor recently, who the lord had met and what the servants were gossiping about. It was all harmless information until you combined it with what Cheid knew. He had expected the family to still be active in their attempts to rid the empire of Eleria and he had been right, at least in so far that they had not severed ties with the wizard that had been involved in the attack and that they were still meeting with those who helped them organize the first attack.

Every small piece made the picture clearer and Cheid was fast approaching the point where he'd be able to go after the culprits in some capacity.

But first he'd have to soothe Satu.

He made his way towards the central market square. It was a place he seldom visited. The memory of his father haunted him every time the large cobblestone covered area opened up in front of him. He'd hear the crowd's screams mix with his own shouts and every glare from the sun made him think of

the executioners axe coming down to end the life of his father.

Now he was met with a busy spring market day. While there were not yet produce from that year making it to the stalls, there were exotic foods from the south along with the assortment of jewellery and other hand made things that attracted people. There were boots on sale along with new ploughs, though it was questionable who would walk all the way to the centre of Ramyn to buy one when they could just talk to the local blacksmith.

It just went to show you could find just about anything there, even if it didn't make sense if you thought about it.

Cheid pushed through the crowd and past the temple of Salvius. He had grown familiar with the library inside and the monks and priests were very helpful with answering questions and finding volumes for him. He could have saved quite a few coins had he bothered to get to know the order earlier, but hindsight always made for a disappointing viewpoint.

He rushed ahead to a small tavern not far from the temple. A red rooster sign hung above its door and there were some tables and chair laid out in front of it with several occupied by weary shopper looking for a cool drink or a bite to eat. It wasn't hard to spot Satu from among them. Her red hair stood out like a torch in darkness. She wore the robe of a student of the Towers so even though there were a few young men eyeing her with the sort of interest young men would have in a woman, she was left to sit alone. Cheid suspected she had had to make a few of the more eager ones run away with singed clothes.

“Satu,” he greeted her before leaning down to give a kiss on her cheek.

“Cheid,” she said with a smile and watched him take a seat opposite to her. She had a pint of something in front of her. Cheid suspected it to be something stronger than water. “You're actually early for once.”

“I am?” asked Cheid, feigning surprise. He looked up at the sky to see where the sun was. “Must be the longer days messing up my sense of time.”

“So what have you been up to today?” she asked and took a sip from her pint. She turned her green eyes to look at him and it was hard for Cheid not to smile just for seeing her face again.

“I had another talk with Skander this morning,” he started. “Then I went

shopping a bit and listened to some rumours.”

“What did you talk about with Skander?” Satu asked, eager to hear what the master of the middle Tower saw fit to discuss with someone like Cheid. It was not often that such a young student got to spend so much time with him.

Cheid shrugged his shoulders. “Nothing special. Nothing to do with magic. I don't know. Something seems to be bothering him and talking to me seems to help it a bit.”

“A man like him probably has a lot on his mind and plenty of those things would keep you awake at night if you knew them.”

Cheid nodded. “No doubt, but I think he's the sort of man who can deal with it.” He gave her a look. “So what have you been doing?” It felt best to steer the conversation away from Skander. The conversations had with him were not something to be shared idly even with her.

Satu shrugged her shoulders and sent her hair over her shoulder. She'd been growing it longer ever since winter and it now reached well down past her shoulder blades. “I had an early lecture. We learned how to summon small fire elementals.”

“Oh, that sounds interesting,” said Cheid eagerly. He could only wish to attend such a class. It was different for those who only studied one element. They could focus all their effort in to finding more ways to draw power from the plane and as a result they could do more demanding things quicker than those who had to divide their attention. With time things would change.

“We had to cut it short because one of the students failed to maintain control of the elemental they summoned,” said Satu and sighed.

“Was anyone hurt?” asked Cheid. Even if they had summoned only a small elemental its powers were far above the mere spirits he had been dabbling with. One suddenly running out of control could easily kill a few people, even wizards.

Satu shook her head. “Just some burnt skin and dented pride, thankfully.”

“Well, that's good.”

“What I'm upset about is that it cut the class short. Just when we were getting to interesting territory.”

“They'll hold the class again, won't they?” asked Cheid. One accident wasn't

going to delay it for more than a day or two.

“In a week!” complained Satu and took a sip of her drink. “I’ll have to wait an entire week for it.”

“That is an unusually long time,” admitted Cheid. His hand went to the pocket of his robe and started feeling the package inside. Maybe the gift would soothe more than just the issues she was having with him.

“The master said he needed to revise some things about the method used. That’s why it will take so long.”

“It’s good that he’s careful. I’d hate to see you get hurt because of an inept student next to you failed to maintain control,” said Cheid and looked her straight in the eyes. He knew they practised in the protected chambers, but they couldn’t contain everything. There was always a risk. He hoped his expression conveyed the genuine worry he had over her safety.

Satu gave him a smile. “I suppose so.”

It felt like the right time.

“There’s something I need to apologize for,” said Cheid and grabbed the gift in his pocket. The questioning look from Satu encouraged him to continue. “I know we’ve not seen much of each other recently and it’s mostly my fault. Too many things going on and even though you are important to me I’ve had to neglect you. I can’t apologize enough for it, but I hope this will at least tell you that I care.” He pulled out the small package and put it on the table. It was nothing but a piece of cloth tied together with a string.

With a bit of hesitation Satu reached over and grabbed it. She untied the string and unfolded the cloth. Cheid looked on with anxiety that was relieved somewhat as her eyes widened upon seeing what was inside the wrapping. She lifted out the pendant and let it glimmer in the sun for a moment. It wasn’t gold or silver, such things were far beyond what Cheid could afford. It was a simple leather string with a polished iron carving hanging on it. It was shaped like a flame.

He wished he could have offered her jewellery made from gold or silver. He felt as if though he was undervaluing her with such a simple gift. Maybe some day, he thought, and promised to himself that if he could ever afford it he’d get

her a pendant that would complement her beauty.

“I know it's not much,” said Cheid in a low voice, slightly ashamed that he could not offer her better.

Satu examined the flame. It was well fashioned and there was detail in it that could almost capture the beauty of a dancing flame. She didn't care that it was only iron. “I love it,” she said and held out the pendant towards Cheid. “Help me put it on.”

Cheid stood up and rounded the table with the pendant in hand. Satu pulled her hair to the side to allow him to put the leather string around her neck and tie it up properly. The iron flame hung slightly above her bosom, in perfect sight with most things she wore.

“I don't blame you for the lack of time we spend together,” she said as Cheid returned to his seat. “Gods know I have less time on my hands these days as well.”

“It still makes me feel guilty that I don't see enough of you,” said Cheid, though her words had made him feel a bit better. At least she wasn't blaming him completely for it nor did it seem she was overly upset about it now.

Satu tilted her head slightly. “Maybe we need to make some time. Spend an evening together, a night like we used to so often.”

“Just say when,” said Cheid. A brief panic ran over him as soon as the words left his lips. Had he already agreed to something? A quick flip through his memory left most of his days for the next week free of anything but lectures, though there was always the chance that Roderic might have a job for him. The master would surely understand if he explained the situation.

Before Satu could voice her opinion there was a commotion among the market going public. A wave of whispers ran over it like a gust of wind would over a field of grass. It made the pair look around, hoping to catch a sentence here and there to piece together what was going on. It turned out there was no need for it.

“The princess!” came a loud shout from the crowd. “The princess has been attacked!”

Cheid felt a chill run through him. Had he taken too long to unravel the

identities behind the initial attack on her and his family?



“How long are you going to be tailing me?” asked Elria as she walked the corridor with her entourage. Marja was there in her usual place, a few steps behind her, as was the ever present guard led by Oughund. The latest addition was Skander who somehow found time to be by her side when ever she ventured anywhere out of the ordinary with other people around.

All through spring the old wizard had followed her as faithfully as her own shadow and in the process ruled out one person after another as having an influence on her. It made Eleria feel nervous and she had stopped wearing the pendant as often. The wizard had asked questions about it, but she had managed to dodge them. Still she could not shake the feeling Skander knew exactly what was going on. But why didn't he tell her father if that was the case? Could it have been he wanted her to succeed?

The old wizard had spent a lot of time talking to her. He had been most interested in her views on slavery and abolishing it. He had even offered a few suggestion on things she could do, small things that wouldn't be too hard to push through, but would still make things better for anyone living that life. Those conversations had made her think Skander would be a man she didn't want hating her, but rather helping her. As such she tried to keep her temper in control and tolerate him always being close even if it meant her entire plan was put on halt.

Conveniently, her father had stopped pushing suitors on her. Why the sudden change in attitude Eleria could only attribute to the fear of magic influencing things. Her father might have wanted her to get married, but he was not willing to sacrifice the first born of every high family for it. Then there was her reputation to consider. There were already rumours going on about her effect on men and more incidents would only make it harder for everyone involved.

“As long as your father deems it necessary, your highness,” replied the old wizard. He was walking right next to her. He never seemed to care for proper placement within her entourage and walked where ever he pleased. In the

beginning Eleria had chided him for it, but it had fallen on deaf ears and eventually she had given up. She could have demanded, but Skander was a man in a position that was both confusing and intimidating at the same time. It was reason enough for her to leave him be over something as trivial as walking order.

“Or as long as you wish to keep me company?” asked Eleria with a sly smile. She wore a cape suitable for the spring warmth. It was one of the rare times she was going outside the imperial palace. Opportunities for it did not come often, even less so after she had implied of the involvement of magic.

She had gotten word that Theoden was getting worse in his old age and the whispers were that he did not have much time left before leaving behind the worries of the material plane. She wanted to see him at least one last time before having to attend his funeral. She needed some reassurance that the plan would not fall apart without him. Carrying the burden alone seemed like more than she could handle.

“While your company is the highlight of my days, I must admit I have other things I could be doing, but this is a duty the emperor has seen fit to put on my shoulders and it is my duty to bear it,” replied Skander. The group passed through a doorway and onto the parade ground. There were groups of soldiers there, practising formations. The shouts of the sergeants echoed through the open space even over the countless boots beating the stone. Weapons clinked against armour as the soldier went through their paces, switched directions and made mock attacks.

“You make it sound like you haven't enjoyed it,” said Eleria and gave the wizard a look. She noted the hole the hem of his robe had. Yet another testament to the fact how little the man cared for who he was with, or rather their titles. He seemed to treat everyone pretty much the same, be they peasant or royal. He did use peoples titles if they had them, but there was no awe behind the words coming out of his mouth. An imperial princess seemed to be the same to him as a barmaid from a tavern by the docks.

“I must admit that there are conversations we've had that will be remembered,” said Skander and gave her a smile from behind his beard. Eleria could not help but feel like she was being blackmailed into remembering all the

things she had told the wizard that she wanted to change. Was he going to look over her shoulder every step of the way if she became empress and make sure she wouldn't go back on her word? More importantly, was he working to make that happen? From what Eleria could gather, her view on how the empire should be fit into Skander's vision much better than what her father had created and what any noble marrying her would push for. Given his attitude it wasn't beyond the realm of possibility that the wizard would act covertly to support her. The delays in his investigation into the source of magical influence seemed to indicate that was what he was doing. He wasn't a man who could be fooled for months. He should have figured out there was no outside influence on her.

"I am glad to hear your time spent with me has not been all boring," said Eleria and glanced behind at Marja. The maid gave her a reaffirming smile. They walked past a group of soldiers practising sword use. They were in pairs, facing off with each other as opponents. Instead of sharp blades they used dull training swords that were still heavy enough to leave behind a bruise if a hit landed, but not heavy enough to break bones.

"If I may ask, why this visit to Theoden?" asked Skander and gave her a curious look. "There is an age gap between you that would have me think a young lady like you would find better company."

"Theoden is a long time advisor to my father," replied Eleria. "And he has helped me greatly as well. He might not have been the one to rescue me from the southern monsters, but he pulled me into the light from a place so dark that I could never have made it on my own."

It was something she rarely talked about. The memories were too painful and the subject matter too private. When the Kalunta brothers had saved her and returned to the imperial palace it had been a huge celebrations all around. There had been attention on her that then slowly tapered off and left her isolated due to the policies her father put around her. Few had been allowed to see her during the first months, few had witnessed what two years in slavery had done to her.

Theoden had been there for her.

The old man had visited often and never judged her. He had shared stories and helped mend the things broken inside her. Along with Loren the two men had

had a great impact in shaping her into the young woman she was now, but it was Theoden that she had to thank for her sanity.

There had been nightmares and the mannerisms that fearing for your life inevitably brought about. Loud noises could have had her jumping and there were situation that still made her feel unwarranted discomfort. The guidance from Theoden had soothed away the worst of those things and she suspected her father had sent the old man just for that purpose, but at the same time she could tell there was genuine want to help in the man's way of doing things.

It was hard to imagine anyone more loyal to her father.

"I see," said Skander after carefully examining Eleria and her expression. She had little doubt the wizard had read every single emotion that thinking about the past had brought up, from the fears to the happiness. At least he had the good sense not to push further with the subject.

The guards at the transport point made little delay in their journey and the ride down on the disc was as uneventful as always. Eleria didn't like the fact she was shuffled to the middle of the disc and surrounded by a body of men that blocked the view almost completely. That was the one thing she had always liked about the disc rides, especially from the imperial level down to the nobles. There was beauty in the scenery that was hard to rival as the untold number of gardens opened up beneath you along with the magnificent manors followed by the glittering river further below, off in the distance.

Now all she got too see was polished chain mail and purple cloth.

The route from the transport point to Theoden's manor was a familiar one and it took little time even with her sizeable entourage. The gates were opened for her without her even having to stop. Theoden had made certain the servants were alert and aware of her arrival.

It was only a short while later that Eleria entered the study where Theoden was laying on his usual divan. He looked like he'd lost a lot of weight since last she saw him and there didn't seem to be much more than skin on his bones. It was clear to anyone who saw him there was not much time left for him in this world. Even as she had walked through the manor she had seen the mood of the servants. They knew what was coming.

“Don't you dare look at me with the eyes of my servants,” muttered Theoden from his seat in a grumpy voice. “They think I don't see, but I do. They're all waiting for my last breath.”

Eleria gave the man a warm smile as she took a seat opposite to him. “It is hard to ignore someone you love getting old.”

Theoden snorted. “Doesn't mean you have to be all gloomy about it.”

“It just shows the people around you care.”

The old man muttered something Eleria couldn't make out.

“How is the plan going?” asked Theoden, changing the subject. There was some concern in his voice. Perhaps he feared that his passing would make her waver.

“My father has stopped pushing suitors on me, but instead I am shackled down by Skander always being around,” said Eleria.

“Does he suspect anything? Skander that is.”

Eleria shook her head. “I don't think he has anything he could present to my father, but he certainly suspects something is going on and that I am behind it.”

Theoden fell silent for a moment. A wrinkle appeared on his forehead above all the others. “Is he here right now?”

“He is. I managed to convince you were not a threat.” An ironic smile passed her lips.

“Skander is an interesting person,” said Theoden and reached out for a cup of water on the table next to him. He moistened his lips before continuing. “He does not see eye to eye with your father. He has often voiced disagreement with the emperors decisions, sometimes more vocally than even a man in his position should. I believe he would not grieve if you were to take the throne.”

“Are you suggesting we bring him in on the plan?” asked Eleria with slight apprehension. He would certainly make for a powerful ally and could smooth over many wrinkles that would almost certainly crop up, but could he be trusted not to give everything away to her father? The emperor had given him a task after all. Would his misgivings towards him be enough to guarantee loyalty?

“It is something to consider,” said Theoden. “You need help and support and while the Kalunta brother do an admirable job of keeping you safe, they can't do

everything. As everyone seems to know, I will not be here for much longer. My support from the shadows will go away.”

“He does seem like a good man,” said Eleria, though the doubt in her voice was still evident. A wizard always had his own motives. The fact they sometimes aligned with those of someone else was pure luck. Was she feeling lucky?

“I’m not saying you should do it immediately,” said Theoden. “But you should keep it in mind. You need allies. You need to build that network. Skander has a lot to offer. And if you do get him on your side you will know there is not a more trustworthy man in the empire.”

Eleria couldn't deny the wisdom in his words, but at the same time she couldn't come up with a way to approach the matter with Skander. She couldn't lock away the fears that kept nagging at her over a possible betrayal by the wizard. “I’ll try to come with a way to include him,” she finally said, not wanting to commit herself completely to it just yet.

Theoden nodded. “This is why you will make a great empress. You listen to people, but still form your own opinions. That is what a good ruler does. Dictating from above without listening only works for certain kinds of people, people with reputations.”

“Like my father,” said Eleria.

“Like your father,” agreed Theoden and sipped some water. “Think what you will of him, but he has ruled the empire with an iron fist for many years. His reputation alone is enough to keep it all together, even without the legions. The people love him despite the sometimes harsh nature displayed. They've come to expect firm justice, but never injustice. The laws are followed and that keeps the people happy.”

It was no secret that her father had, at times, waded through seas of blood to get his way, especially at the start of his rule. There had been several attempts to dethrone him, but all had been beaten down without mercy. That had earned him a reputation that was still alive to this day and kept the empire stable. Right now people were simply waiting for him to die and expecting that to solve the problem of him sitting on the throne, if they saw it as a problem.

“I can't be anything like my father,” said Eleria. The task of running an

empire was a huge one and she'd have a difficult time of it in the beginning because the nobles would try to undermine her and there would no doubt be all sorts of attempt to sabotage anything she tried to do. That was if someone didn't simply storm the palace and end her life.

"No, but you will be yourself and I think that will be better than what your father has been. And I'm saying that without taking anything away from his accomplishments." Theoden frowned as his cup of water ran empty. He looked tired.

"So what's next in our plan?" asked Eleria, feeling like they had talked about her father enough for the day. It was a topic she wasn't too keen on exploring further and as she looked at Theoden it looked like the man didn't have much left in him. "With the suitor problem seemingly solved we can focus on other things."

"The allies," said Theoden in a raspy voice. He had motioned for the servant to bring more water, but it had not yet arrived. "You need to start gathering them."

"It will be hard," said Eleria, but shut up as the servant opened the door and came in to fill Theoden's cup with water. She waited until the old man could take a sip and the servant retire to the other room. "I can't do it openly or my father will intervene. I can't trust any of the nobility, save for the Kalunta brothers."

"Then you use the two brothers," said Theoden. With a shaky hand he put down the cup. It rattled against the table before finally settling down. He had to use both hands for even such a light object. "They know others, people they trust. It is likely they will be able to help you garner more support from trustworthy people."

Eleria thought about it for a moment. It did add a buffer between her and the rest of the nobility. The Kalunta's would support her, of that she had no doubt, and if they'd recruit the nobles it could even be done in such a way that they would not find out the true objective until the day for it came. The problem was getting the right opportunity to talk the two brothers into it. Loren was the easiest, she saw him daily and he was always asking what was going on. Orend would be a more difficult task though he would come meet her if she asked. Perhaps it would be best to invite both over to her chambers and talk thing over

then and there.

"I'll start with them," she agreed. There was no other choice that she felt comfortable taking at the time.

Theoden nodded approvingly. He looked like he could barely keep his eyes open.

"Do you need to rest?" asked Eleria with concern in her voice.

"That's all I seem to do these days," muttered Theoden grumpily. He was not taking the diminishing prowess of his body well. A man like him, who was used to rushing from one meeting to another and attend a party or two in the evening, being stuck in a divan and his own home was the worst kind of torture. Losing his freedom to move as if he were a slave.

"You should rest. You've done more than enough for others. Now it's time to tend to yourself," said Eleria and stood up. She was not about to let herself become a source of exhaustion for him. She walked over to the man, leaned down and planted a soft kiss on his forehead.

Theoden looked up at her with misty eyes. "Ah, if only I had had children. A daughter. Someone like you. I think I would quite enjoy that company now."

Married though he had been, the union had produced no children. But he had loved his wife and refused to abandon her for someone more fertile. By the laws he would have had that right as the marriage had been a political one and offspring was an expected result of such an affair. Failure meant arrangements could be made to ensure the continuity of the family line.

"I can visit you as often as you would like," said Eleria with a smile. Though she had a schedule she would make time for Theoden. It was clear there were not many moments left for the two to share.

"Next time we'll have some wine," said Theoden and glanced at the empty fireplace. "And we'll talk until the sun goes down. Damned my rest."

"I would like that," said Eleria as a servant entered the room. How he had known his master would need him was a mystery, but his timing was perfect none the less. While the meeting had been short Eleria felt it had served its purpose as she left the room and another servant took it upon himself to guide her to where her entourage was waiting.

Inside Theoden's manor he was the master and he had insisted no guard accompany her. Oughund and Skander had both protested, but in the end they had given in. It was after all almost as safe a place as the imperial palace and Theoden was the closest advisor to the emperor. He would do everything in his power to keep the princess safe, perhaps even more so than Oughund and the wizard.

"How did it go?" asked Skander as soon as she was guided to the small room he and the others had been waiting in. Some of the guards that had escorted her had had to wait outside as there was limited space in the room and there were certain considerations to having a few men on the outside.

Eleria shook her head. "I fear the next time I see him will be when he is laid to rest."

Skander nodded solemnly. "Age eventually gets us all."

Eleria gave the wizard a look. "You've managed to avoid it so far."

Skander smiled. "It'll eventually catch up with me. So far I have just been faster."

"If only all of us were as nimble as you," said Eleria in a dry voice and headed towards the doors leading outside. There she was joined by Marja who had stayed outside for the fresh air. The two exchanged a few words in private as they waited for the guards to assemble and take formation. Then they took their place in the middle of it and started towards the gates.

"So how did it really go, your highness?" asked Marja in a hushed tone. Skander was near by and she didn't want him hearing.

"We'll talk when we get to my chambers," replied Eleria. She didn't want to talk with so many people around. Even if Skander and Oughund didn't hear, one of the guards might and they were just as likely to report anything suspicious on her part as anyone else.

They walked past several estates as they made their way to the transport point. It was an intersection that merged four different streets where the attack happened.

All Eleria felt was something hitting her shoulder before falling to the ground. The shouts around her seemed to swirl away like water down a small

hole at the bottom of a barrel. She could see Marja above her with an anguished look as she pressed down on the shoulder that had been hit. Skander was there next to her with a grim look on his face. She couldn't make out what they were saying before darkness swallowed up everything.