

The Starlight of Shadows

A Yurvanian Transition Novel

by Nicole Lieger

Chapter 1

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

Tendrils of ambiguous aroma teased Amalai's nostrils, an impudent earthy call somewhere between lust and decay, enticing to the point of nausea. But Amalai knew how to be a companion to the pale, ghostly flowers, and how to coax their disturbing essence into a vial. She sighed contentedly as another colorless blossom fell into her hand. Just one or two more, she thought. The rest she would leave.

But then monkeys shrieked, and birds flew up in alarm. Amalai instinctively ducked into the ferns as whoever it was drew near, tearing through the undergrowth just a few paces away. When Amalai peeked out again, she saw three figures stumbling away between the trees.

Silently, she followed.

They were cadets, Amalai realized, carrying something large as they hurried back to the Diamondtip garrison. They quickly reached the edge of the forest, where a meadow led down to the back of the fortress. As the cadets approached, a door in the wall of the courtyard opened, and two guards came out across the bridge to meet them. Soon, another soldier followed from inside, and another. An agitated little group had formed by the time Amalai reached them. She waited on the fringes of the small crowd, slowly and unobtrusively moving forward until she could catch a glimpse between the uniformed backs.

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

A large cloth covered his body, and Amalai did not know if she could truly see the shapes of crushed and mangled limbs underneath or if this was her imagination running wild. She averted her face. But she did not leave.

The soldiers surrounding the stretcher mumbled. Some growled and cursed under their breath, some kept pushing the cadets with their questions. Until one of them lost it.

"I swear! I saw it with my own eyes!" His voice broke. He was a sturdy lad, with strong, bulging muscles, but his body was shaking.

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

But Kortid did not want to be calmed. "I am telling you!" he shouted. "I was the one who found him. And I saw! There was a black shadow at his throat, sucking his blood! That's a demon that killed him!"

Some of the soldiers fell into an awkward silence. But others still tried to soothe Kortid like a sick child.

"Then check his neck! Check his neck!" Kortid screamed.

The soldiers exchanged glances, until one of them pulled back the blanket with a short, measured motion. In the glow of a lantern, the neck of the youth shone like the pale moon, as white and immaculate as his face. It was not mangled, nor slit, nor marred by any other sign of injury. Only two small red dots were visible on the snowy skin, right above the artery.

The soldier jerked back.

Others leaned in more closely.

A hushed murmur began to weave through the group that had fallen silent in anticipation before. Questions and rumors rose up like a wave, but broke off abruptly when orders were shouted from the garrison gate.

All the soldiers snapped to attention.

They carried the stretcher inside.

The gate closed with a thud.

* * *

“But demons don’t exist! Everyone knows that!” Rebonya’s almond eyes shot fire at her fellow cadets.

The Diamondtip coat of arms shone dimly in the twilight of the common room. Over by the fireplace, Kortid told and retold the story of Hun’s death, and of the demon on his body. Several cadets listened with furrowed brows. Others kicked the wall or cried quietly, heads in their hands. Heated arguments had broken out in various corners.

“Demons are just a scare from the feudal ages!” Rebonya shook her head so hard it sent her black hair flying. “We’re not going to fall for that!”

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

“Yes, he did die!” Rebonya’s rage interrupted him. “And I can tell you which evil spirit killed him!” She pointed a finger in the direction of the main fortress. “That one! The spirit of sending people into danger for no reason, calling that ‘correction’.” Rebonya’s hand clenched into a fist. “Those ‘corrections’ never improved anyone’s conduct or character. They are just a way to hurt people, making them ready to do unto others what they have suffered themselves.”

The other cadet drew back a notch, crossing his arms over his chest.

Rebonya charged on regardless. “You may say Hun had a logging accident. But why did that accident happen in the first place? Why was he out there, cutting down a tree all on his own?”

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

* * *

“A demon.” Berqar took a few strides to the window, looking out between iron bars. The fortress lay cold and stern beneath the gathering darkness.

“A demon has appeared in the forest. And it has killed Hun.” That was how the tale had come to her, the commander of the Diamondtip garrison. It seemed like an omen, an oracle. A sign full of secret meanings, full of foreboding perhaps, or hidden promises. It was a call. Berqar felt it. But she could not yet spell it out.

She looked up into the dusky sky, at streaks of crimson hanging over the towers. Slowly, meaning began to come to her.

She saw the fiendish menace hovering over the soft, helpless town of Behrlem. An inhuman darkness, a force that would kill without mercy or reprieve. An enemy like they had never seen before.

A red-hot energy rose up in Berqar. This was it. Her quest was clear, and its power pulsed through her veins like magma. She turned around, a gleam in her eye that had not been there for a long, long time. But it was back now, ready to set a world on fire.

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Amalai leaned against the wall of her rooftop terrace, pulling the warm body of her lover closer to her chest. Lahoon eased into her. His torso was bare, leaving his butterfly skin to shimmer in hues of blue and turquoise. He looked for all the world like a fey lost in the terrene realm, but as far as any of them knew, he was as much a human as the rest of them. Yet the yearning for the otherworld ran deep within his soul, making him ready to clutch at straws. And that was how he had heard Amalai's tale.

Lahoon tilted his head back, looking at her with feverish eyes. "This may be the time. Maybe, just maybe, this is my chance to reach Fey." His voice was raw. "I will go into the woods tonight."

His gaze was out on the horizon, where the black line of the forest lay beneath a starry sky. "I have called so often. Prayed and waited, beckoned and lured. But the fay have never revealed themselves to me. Maybe tonight, I will at least get a glimpse of who they are."

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

"No."

An owl hooted in the distance. Amalai shifted a little. "Yes," she amended. Her fingers closed around Lahoon's hand. "But you and I have always believed in living audaciously, even if gently." The plants of the terrace rustled beside her in the language of leaves. Amalai leaned into their comfort as she squeezed Lahoon's hand. "I trust that your love for the fey will guide you well."

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

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

However, maybe that was just as well.

Lahoon was a seeker, but one who mostly relied on being found. All of his nature was to be an invitation, an enticement, an overture. He wanted to meet, and his way to do it was not to pursue, but to beckon, to charm, and to offer. So Lahoon sent his borrowed light out into the darkness without regrets. He even wanted to do more.

He listened closely. The voices of the night cooed and rustled, croaked and chirped all around him. Monkeys moved in the branches overhead, twigs cracked beneath his feet. Lahoon felt his way into the polyphonous symphony of the forest and let his own sounds chime in. Humming and

clucking, whistling a low, hesitant question, Lahoon moved on, letting himself be guided by the thick intensity of life and by his own quivering intuition.

It led him straight to the fallen tree.

The massive trunk lay across the edge of a clearing in a scene of devastation. Trampled grass surrounded torn branches, and deep furrows scratched the ground, bearing witness to past distress. But now they all lay silent in the black of the night. Only the muted glow of Lahoon's lantern spilled over the mighty tree that had died here tonight, taking the life of a boy with him.

Lahoon sank to his knees, touching his brow to the gnarled bark. For a long moment he remained motionless, feeling the breath leave his body, mingling with smells of wood and forest soil. The breeze whispered in the wilting leaves around his head.

He began to respond, to join in with his own rasping breath, with the sounds his own wind made as it moved through the cords in his throat. A gentle hum vibrated out, growing into a lament, a mourning that wove around the mystery of death, and into the looming shadow of the fey.

Lahoon's voice broke from his chest without his own volition now, a calling, a quest in the realm of ether. The pain over death mingled with his endless yearning for a life he could feel but never touch. He did not know if he spoke in words, or only in the shape of his melodies, the tone of his voice, the swaying of his body. But he knew he spoke. "Who are you? What is this?"

Lahoon leaned into the presence he felt but could not see. "You came here at a moment of death. Why?" His voice was raw. "Did you kill?"

He caressed the rough bark, looking for an answer, or for a better question. "Do you accompany the dying? Soothe the pain and guide the soul?"

Lahoon's finger caught on a cleft the ax had left. "Or is death the only moment you can cross between the worlds? Is that fracture in the fabric of being the portal you pass through?"

Lahoon's vision shifted. He felt the world around him grow denser, fuller, as if new layers of reality had opened up for him.

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

In the glow of the lantern a beetle ate a leaf. Lahoon could see the leaf dying, transforming into beetle. The delicate green cells dissolved and their complex structure evaporated. But all of the life-force remained, rearranging itself, turning itself into cells of a beetle. It became dark eyes and shiny carapace. The beetle sniffed the air with delicate antennae and took off into the night, vim from a leaf flowing through tiny muscles now.

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

And turned into a bat. The beetle cracked between small sharp teeth. Death tore another sharp, painful rupture into the fabric of life, like a scream. And then the beetle cells dissolved. They turned into a beating of leathery wings, into a mysterious being calling itself through the flurry of life.

Lahoon felt the bat leave and had a sudden vision of her death. The small, furry body lay sprawled on the ground. It became home to the beginnings of beetles, and to a microcosmos of beings so unfathomable Lahoon lacked the words to name them. The bat's body was a whole teeming, alien universe, until it had used itself up and died, falling in on itself, turning into soil, into the cradle of trees.

Lahoon licked his lips.

He could sense the passing that was in the forest at all times. The death, and the transformation. There were millions of rips in the tissue of reality. They were moments of instability, places where the unimaginable was happening, where shapes shifted and life-force passed from one to the other. If death was the portal through which the fay moved, then there must be myriad ways to cross over.

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

Lahoon shivered. Was he ready to die? To be eaten, to have his limbs and his life-force transformed into a fey? “No,” Lahoon whispered. “Not yet. I am not ready to dissolve, not even if it means melting into you. I wish to meet you first, as who I am now. I want to have this very body to feel you touch me. This very soul to know you with.”

All around him, the cracks in the essence of life shimmered like ghostly fireflies, like webs spun by the moon. With the gentle touch of a druid, Lahoon reached into that light or that darkness. It came up his hands like a gossamer veil.

When Lahoon lifted his arms, thick folds of starlight gathered above his fingers, leaving a gaping hole underneath. A passage, just large enough for a human to crawl through.

“Come,” Lahoon whispered into the tunnel. “Come.”

There was no movement, no living being Lahoon could perceive. He sang softly into the darkness, a ballad of welcome, of hope, of longing.

The sounds disappeared. There was no echo.

Lahoon’s soul cried out with yearning and need. His body was shaking. With a sleepwalker’s certainty, Lahoon raised the shimmering folds in his hands and, ducking in underneath, fell into oblivion.

Chapter 2

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

Hun was laid out in state. The shallow case around his body was as big as a bed and covered by a huge flag, with only his head showing. Rebonya glanced down at Hun's face from the corner of her eye. Her fist clenched.

But then the sign came.

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

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

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

Berqar had paused dramatically in her speech. Now she took up again in a low voice, but even her whisper could be heard in the utter silence of the hall. "An unimaginable peril towers over us, over the gentle, vulnerable town of Behrlem."

The fiery glint of torches caught on armor. Berqar's voice grew stronger. "Hun was the first to be taken, by an enemy as we have never seen before. An evil full of bloodlust and devoid of mercy!" She let her gaze roam over the assembled soldiers, calling out loud and clear now. "A force of darkness has torn away our comrade's life! May his sacrifice not have been in vain! Let his death be our rallying cry!" She tore the cloth off Hun's bier.

Hun was naked, his body mangled and covered in blood. A gasp went through the crowd, an indrawn breath in a hundred throats, a missed beat in a hundred hearts.

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

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

"War! War!" Berqar bellowed.

Slowly, the soldiers began to join in, as they were meant to, picking up her shouts, adding their own power until the ancient walls reverberated with furious fervor, the echo stirring up ghosts in the dungeons.

"War!!! War!!! War!!!"

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Lahoon woke. His head ached. Dreams and shadows danced across the back of his eyes. He groaned. He was answered by voices chirping, singing and rustling.

Lahoon opened one eye. A monkey hopped down to the ground before him and disappeared up the next trunk. The warm light of morning danced through the treetops. With effort, Lahoon pushed

himself up on one elbow. His body was stiff and sore. But Lahoon had no doubt. Despite all the images in his mind, all the pain in his worn body: he knew he had woken up in the same old forest, in the world he had always known.

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

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Exhausted, Lahoon leaned back against the wall of their home, looking out over the roof terrace. The first rays of sun reached the neighboring bath palace, giving all its colors a soft, warm hue. Lahoon regarded the golden yolk of the walls, the muted red of tile roofs proudly tilting upward at the corners. He placed a kiss on Amalai's curls and sighed. "It was powerful. It was magical. But it wasn't fey." He rested his head against the wall, closing his eyes. "Unless I have forgotten, lost consciousness." The wind caressed his brow. "Or unless the meaning of fey is precisely this. All these wonders I do remember. Perhaps fey truly is nothing other than the magic of the terrene realm, as you keep saying."

Amalai softly shook her head. "I say that only for myself. For me, every herb is a miracle and a living being. I don't need to see a little fairy sitting inside the flower to relate, or to be amazed. I am awed already by who the plants are, as themselves. I will never tire of the mysteries of this earth." She turned toward Lahoon. "But I fully believe in your path too, and I always have. If you feel the fey so strongly, I am sure that they do exist. And that you will meet them one of these days." She kissed his shoulder.

Lahoon pulled her close, a pained look in his eyes. "One of these days." A flock of birds rose and circled upward, higher and higher still, aiming for the distant clouds. Lahoon raked a hand through his hair. "Last night, it felt close. So close! But, no."

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

Lahoon caressed the round terracotta pot beside him and let the plant play with his fingers. The dead, dried-up body of a blossom fell to the ground. His hand tightened into a fist. "That boy died. He truly died, while felling a tree under dangerous conditions, because those were his orders. His 'corrections'." Lahoon swallowed. "They risked his life like that in the garrison." His lips were pale. "Really. What kind of place is that?"

Lahoon pushed himself up in a jerky move, pulling Amalai along onto the narrow balcony that ran around their house. He stopped where they could best see over the garrison wall into the courtyard. It was full of soldiers, standing in straight lines and neat squares in the early light of dawn, drawing and sheathing their swords in response to shouted commands.

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

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

in the same way, all at the same time, caught in some hopeless and endless repetition of servitude and brutality.”

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

Then he stopped. He kicked the balustrade. “It is not true! There is a way out. There was an exit, and we have gone through. We are out! Aren’t we? The Transition has happened! How come these remnants are still here?” He gestured angrily. “Why haven’t we gotten rid of this yet?”

Amalai raised one shoulder. “Because the Transition was not done in a day? Even though it had a few very dramatic days in the middle, I admit, where it all seemed to happen very fast. But in truth, the movement had built up over decades, if not centuries. At least that is how I believe it has won, and is winning still. By perseverance more than drama. And you can see that slow, steady, inexorable change right there.” Amalai pointed to the west wing of the fortress. It was empty. So were many of the stables and auxiliary buildings. They all lay still, lifeless, with their doors barred and their windows dull, no sign or sound emanating from them. Useless and forgotten, they yawned over at the onlookers, reminders of ages past when the number of soldiers had been enormous and all courtyards full of shouting and commotion. When Diamondtip had dominated the whole south.

Lahoon grunted. “I know. The garrison will be closed, like so many others across the country. And the cadets still here can’t even fill the rooms of the school anymore. It is all dwindling away.” He clenched his teeth. “Slowly.”

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

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

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

“Yes,” he rasped. “I guess so.” He took a deep breath. “It is just . . . that this place makes me sick. Apparently.” He turned around wearily. “Let’s go.”

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

Gureev carefully laid down a book he had been holding to his chest.

Rebonya got up to have a look. “What’s that?”

“Strategy and tactics. I am to read a chapter each week and hand in an essay.”

“Hand it in? To whom?”

“To Berqar. She will discuss it with me.”

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

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

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

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

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

Gureev said nothing.

Rebonya growled. “Huh. Never hope. She’ll use you in the end, just like everyone else. Like Hun.” Her eyes narrowed. “Even in his death, Berqar still used Hun.” She raised her gaze, eyes

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

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

Rebonya stiffened.

Gureev set the tome down with deliberation and came to face Rebonya. “Why are you here?” he asked. “What are you doing in this school? If you think you know it is all so very wrong?”

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

Gureev’s eyebrow rose. “Of course, so you said. But why did you come here in the first place? Why did you not stay with your family?”

Rebonya exploded. “Not everybody has parents who spoil and pamper you,” she snarled. “Some people actually have to leave, no matter what.” She shot Gureev a venomous look. “At age eleven, I managed to get myself out. ‘The Diamondtip School of Cadets’ sounded wonderful to me.” Rebonya crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I was a child. I had no idea. And once I realized where I had landed, it was too late. I just had to survive in here while figuring out where to go next.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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The buzzing and bustling of Behrlem had faded into the distance. As Berqar rode into a yard overgrown with thistles, the blackened walls of the farmhouse held the silence of a memorial site. Remains of a fallen roof moldered in a corner among ashes and charred beams. What had once been a lively homestead, teeming with ducks and goats and running children, was now a ghostly stillness, dead and abandoned.

Berqar dismounted. She stood facing the one part of the building that, in its innermost chambers, still had not crumbled, and clapped her hands in a short, precise rhythm. Then she remained motionless, her gaze fixed on the walls, her strained face betraying no other emotion.

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

Berqar did not move. All around her, the universe twisted in contortions of half-transparent images, writhing ghosts of a reality that once seemed solid. A thin, hungry wail wove into the wind, haunting this dream or nightmare of a world.

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

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

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Pramus stood in the burnt hall of the farmhouse like in a royal antechamber. “This is our quest indeed! Never has a moment called to us more strongly in all these years. The demon realm itself is reaching out!” His voice was firm, with only the slightest tremor betraying his excitement.

Berqar stood by the gaping window, her hand resting on the charred remains of a pitchfork. The handle was all black, but the tines were still long and sharp. “Will you go to the forest?”

“No. The demon is not there. It will reappear elsewhere. And when it does, I will become its master! Enslave it, make it my servant, bound to true power!”

Pramus raised his staff. “This is a door opening! I have spent decades seeking out the loyal ones, weaving the ties, tying the knots, so when the time comes, we will be ready! When the Restitution holds sway, mages will walk alongside princes once again, and generals in golden armor! People will cower in fear, as they should. With the force of staff and sword unleashed, power will once again lie where it belongs!”

Pramus turned with a flourish, making the embroidered beasts on his robes shiver. “It is lucky I was in Behrlem. We have to be quick. Feed the flame.” Dark eyes glowed at Berqar from beneath a broad-brimmed wizard’s hat. “My servant will be ready tonight, if only you create the opportunity.”

“But do we even know where?”

Pramus waved it away. “He’s got habits.”

* * *

“I can do it with you,” Gureev offered.

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

Gureev nodded. “I know.”

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

Gureev stepped inside.

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

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

Gureev went down on one knee, gently picking up the comb.

He ran a finger over it. Then he carefully placed it in the bag Kortid held out for him.

* * *

"You are early." The innkeeper scratched his head, looking at the five soldiers. "Garrison note said extra meat's being ordered, they running short in their kitchen. But it was not supposed to be ready until later." He tilted his head. "Can't take it off the spit now. Would be a shame." He gestured toward an empty table. "But never mind. Just you sit down here for a little while, and it'll be done before you know it."

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

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

Kortid was there. He had not recovered since the night he had found Hun's body in the woods. Every time the matter came up, he either walked away or talked himself into a fervor. As he was doing now, his face flushed, his voice vehement. "I am telling you! I saw it! That was a demon that got him!" The disbelief of the peddler spurred him on. Tenatetlan started drawing in guests from other tables, appealing to them for their opinion and judgment. But Kortid was on fire, and his tale stampeded across the tavern with the ferocity of a bull horde, drawing all his comrades along in its wake.

Tenatetlan began to waver. After her initial skepticism she swayed and got drawn into the fear and alarm that Kortid radiated. She became oil to the soldiers' fire. Now they were all raving. About the nature of the demon. The bloodlust. The danger they were all in, each and every one of them, any day. No telling who was next. No moment was safe. Any corner might be a death trap now, any time. Like this very moment, when you leave the inn to go home. The shadow might pounce on you from behind, sucking your blood dry. Where was their protection?

The air at the inn was seething.

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

* * *

The sun had set, leaving the summer air soft and warm, full of memories and promises. Amalai ambled across the roof terrace of her home, sipping a glass of nectar.

In the neighboring bath gardens, people idled in the pools or strolled around the winding pleasure walks. Lanterns of all colors were strung up between swing seats and blooming bushes, their reflections floating gaily on the water.

Amalai listened to the low hum of human murmurs mingling with birdsong and rustling leaves. Then a thread of music began to weave into the mellow air. Amalai smiled.

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

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

Then she froze. Surprised, she squinted down into the obscurity of her own garden. Something had moved there. Someone? She took a careful step toward the balustrade. There it was, no doubt. Someone crouched in her herbary, a black shadow between the bushes, hiding from the light. A noiseless, inscrutable presence, suddenly darting forward in furtive moves, rushing from darkness to darkness, from cover to cover. Disappearing into the night.

Amalai kept on staring. But she saw no more.

* * *

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

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

Gureev bit his lip. Images from his childhood rose in his mind. An old library full of polished wood and dusty tomes. A sunbeam falling through a skylight, pointing a golden finger at the greatest treasure of all: a heavy volume with gilt edges and large, embellished letters at the beginning of each tale. Gureev's small hand reverently turned a page. He saw the knight in shining armor ride out at him from a hand-colored painting, his head held high, his heart kept pure. Slaying dragons and protecting the innocent, that knight was the essence of a hero, a true prince. Gureev had learned the story by heart, the way the book told it, and the way his grandfather told it by the fireside. It had sunk into his dreams, into the core of his being.

And yet. Somehow . . .

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

i

Chapter 4

In the pale light of morning, the silhouettes of two fighters charged. Their bodies locked, drew back, met again, their moves deft and forceful, their swords flashing. In restless pursuit of each other, they lunged and danced, thrust and withdrew. Sweat ran down their chests as they crouched, muscles tensed, bodies poised, ready to lunge.

Then one sword fell to the ground. A thin cloud of dust enveloped it as it hit the sand. The fighter's arm came up in surrender. "Enough already," Gureev panted. He leaned against the wall of the courtyard. A forest breeze touched his sweaty skin. Gureev shook his head lightly as he regarded Kortid. "Give us a break. We'll still be exercising all day."

Kortid was just as winded. But nowhere ready to quit. "We need to prepare," he hissed with what little breath he had left. "We need to be the best fighters we possibly can. We must perfect our skill, train our mettle. And when the demon comes, we'll give it all we have." Kortid bit his lip. "And hope that it is enough," he spat out through clenched teeth. He gripped his sword more tightly. There was a gleam in his eye that did not yield to exhaustion.

* * *

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

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

But now . . . Things were disquieting, really.

Ojorsven wished that Nenimoria, his colleague, was here. But she was on leave with her family in the countryside.

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

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

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

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

At that moment, the door of the county house flew open and two people stormed in, stomping to a halt right before his desk. "Scribe Ojorsven!" Berqar bellowed, as if she expected him to stand to attention. Ojorsven did indeed get up, disoriented and a little apprehensive. He ran a hand over the neat side parting on his head.

Berqar charged on like a general before the battle. "Behrlem is in danger! There's a demon! It is a matter of life or death!" Her eyes were aflame. "I know the county house has no means to fight such a threat. But fear not! Diamondtip comes to your rescue! Soldiers will take up position right away. The town will not remain unprotected!"

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

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

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

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

* * *

The Diamondtip fortress rose up cold and unforgiving. Its stone was old as the mountains, but no longer wild and free. It was hewn and arranged to another's will. Subjugated, and subjugating in turn. With a mug in his hand and misgivings in his heart, Lahoon looked down from his balcony into a courtyard full of people made uniform. Arranged in neat, tidy squares, they marched forward, turned, marched sideways, stopped. A shout cut through the air, telling them what to do next. They marched again. Shout, stop. Shout, turn. Like puppets, ready to do whatever the string-puller commanded.

Lahoon shook himself. "Those soldiers. All the things they have done over the centuries in service to the feudals. 'Quelling peasant uprisings.' 'Subduing restive provinces.' Which just meant: bloodshed. Killing anyone who dared to say that maybe all people are born equal in rights and dignity."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he froze, staring.

The garrison gate had opened.

The soldiers were marching out.

* * *

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

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

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

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

Unleha pointed a finger at Ojorsven. “A youth got killed in the garrison when he was put into danger as a sort of punishment. That’s worth an inquiry! Even in their internal dealings, the garrison

must adhere to some basic standards and not subject people to violence of that scale. So here is something for the county to do: increase control over the garrison! Have an official scrutiny! But don't let the soldiers come out of the garrison and into town. That is exactly the wrong way around. There is no way we are going to tolerate this!" Sparks gleamed in her dark brown eyes.

Ojorsven drew himself up high, looking very dignified in his blue caftan and silvery dhoti. "There will be a vote, of course," he pointed out. "Within one moon, as is stipulated. We put the poster up directly. What I have signed is only an interim authorization, to cover the period until the vote. So." He twirled his impressive black mustache. "No need to get all worked up. If general opinion is as you say, no doubt the interim measures will end as soon as the moon is new again."

*

"It's outrageous!"

They walked down a quiet, peaceful lane, and the sun bathed Unleha's dark face in golden hues and gentle warmth. But none of that calmed her down in the least. With well-aimed force, she kicked at a pebble and sent it flying off the road.

Then she glimpsed the soldier standing guard at the next corner. Now that was all she needed! She charged straight at him. "Buzz off!" she shouted into his face. "You are not welcome and have no business in this town! Be gone! You're the evil spirit here, the one and only! And we'll have you out before you know it!"

The soldier was young, only a cadet. He stiffened, eyes narrowed, his hand instinctively moving toward his sword. But at that moment, another soldier stepped out of the doorway, his face open and searching, looking from one to the other. "What?" he asked.

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

"Why not? It's his fault too! He does not need to be a soldier. He chose to go into that system, offering to take orders. He should know what we think of it. And he should know he's personally responsible for his actions." But Unleha allowed herself to be pulled along, just shooting a venomous glance back at the uniformed pair.

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

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

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

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

She tapped her fingers against her thigh. "It was a coup. An attempt to overthrow the current rules in one swift move. And Berqar has succeeded, for now. But she doesn't stand a chance overall. Society is a long-term thing. You can't change it with just one single act. Berqar will never be able to hold out for long." Amalai's eyes narrowed. "The Transition is strong. And we will prove that right here and now."

* * *

Deep in the dungeons, Berqar was down on one knee before the mage. Blood-red lightning flickered around her as she held her head up high, her sword upright before her, in the pose of the eternal warrior. She stayed perfectly still, even when the thunder died down and the colors changed.

With a turn of his staff, the mage beckoned her to rise. Pramus's voice echoed through the vault. "You bring honor to your name. One first foray, and a sweeping victory!"

Flickering torchlight licked up into the darkness. Berqar's eyes caught its spark. "The soldiers have a presence in town, like they have not had in ages." Her shoulders straightened. "We'll be on every street corner, every day. People will get used to seeing soldiers on their doorstep, in uniform, and on duty. Making it their business to ensure everyone has come home safely. Asking questions about the neighbors. Concerned questions, of course. Followed by good advice, which may over time turn into small admonishments. And outright orders," Berqar concluded triumphantly.

But she had more. "Some citizens will complain, resist, or get aggressive. There will be civil unrest in town, which calls for a strong hand to keep the peace." She tilted her chin up a notch. "I have declared war. First inside the garrison, where I can do so without fail. Now it will take time and skill to let that tremor ripple out into society."

Berqar still held the sword in her hand. "All the soldiers know the danger. They have seen the mangled body, the demon's legacy. They will pass on their alarm until the whole town takes it for granted that we are in a state of emergency, in exceptional danger, needing exceptional measures."

Pramus's dark eyes glinted. "Very good. But move carefully. Our first sally was victorious. Now we will lay siege and appear to be doing nothing, while in fact we are preparing the ground. Until the time is ripe for us to lunge again."

* * *

At midday, a sun sail shaded the roof terrace. Stretched out languidly between empty dishes, Amalai let a bean cake disappear into her mouth. A satisfied sigh escaped her. "We'll not let the soldiers rule our lives. Not even indirectly."

Lahoon's face was still clouded.

Amalai interlaced her legs with his. "It is easy to get drawn into a warrior world just by constantly worrying about them, or figuring out how to fight them. But we know what we'll do. We'll vote them out. And in the meantime, we shall go on being ourselves. I won't sit here all tense and fearful, living in battle mode as they do. Life is still luscious and enjoyable to me, and I'll relish every single moment best that I can. As I have been doing for decades."

Lahoon reached for his lute and let a few doubtful notes drift out. Voices from the neighboring bath gardens mingled with birdsong and the familiar far-off noises of Behrlem, the rustlings of a country town, the sound of home. They reassured him. More courageously, Lahoon began to play himself a path back into his own life.

Amalai listened, and memories of luminous colors and night gardens came back to her. Suddenly, she remembered.

"Lahoon." She turned to face him. "There was something in our garden last night. Someone. I saw it from the terrace. A dark figure darting from cover to cover, disappearing into the night." Amalai shifted. "What do you think that was? Who could possibly be lurking in my herbary?"

Lahoon tilted his head, his hands busy with the lute. He let an explanatory ripple ring out. "Perhaps it was a couple from the bath. You know how people tend to withdraw into the last corners of the park to make love. So perhaps some of these lovers got lost and withdrew a little too far. And

when they realized afterward that they had ended up in someone else's garden, they wanted to leave as quickly and unobtrusively as possible."

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

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

* * *

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

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

Chapter 5

Lahoon woke. It was well before dawn. His heart was raw. He tried to go back to his dream, to the forest, to the portal. To the fey who had called to him from beyond, who had danced her magic, who had summoned flames of moonlight.

Lahoon lay still for a while. Then he got up, slipping out of the room so quietly that Amalai did not wake.

He found himself in the usual disarray of his studio. Cautiously, he made his way between the shadowy shapes of easels, between frames and paintings leaning against the wall. Lahoon sat down on the floor, pulling up a cushion to the low table. In the soft glow of a lantern, he got lost in his drawing until streaks of rose and amber began to fill the sky.

A creaking floorboard made Lahoon look up. Amalai came up to him on quiet, naked feet. He smiled, leaning a tired head against her hip.

Amalai buried a hand in his hair, looking down at the paper. “Dreams?” she asked in a sleepy voice.

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

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

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

Amalai let a strand of inky hair flow through her fingers. “Hmm. Yes. If Varoonya was of no use.”

Lahoon sneered. “It wasn’t. I was so excited to go to the capital, and ‘the Academy of Magical Arts’ for sure sounded promising. Like the right place. But, no.” He scowled derisively. “At the academy, they would not notice a unicorn walking down their corridors, nor a ghost sitting on their lectern. They have no perception, no knowledge, no interest. No tolerance, either. They are firmly of the opinion that fey beings do not exist, and they have convinced the rest of society to agree with them. So that’s it. Nothing else to be done about it. Not at the academy. They have dismissed the fey along with the old mages, saying it was all fraud and illusion.”

A deep sigh escaped Lahoon. He pushed away from Amalai and stood up. “I must find another way. I can feel the fey in my heart, but I don’t know how to reach them. I need help.” He ran a hand through his hair. “And I will try to get it wherever I can. Even if it seems unlikely, or ugly. I just have to try.”

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

Lahoon’s hands held on to the frame of an easel, clutching it tightly. “Yes. Pramus.”

Amalai’s shoulders tensed. The silence between them stretched.

Lahoon stared down at his fingers. “I know this is awkward. He is a mage, even now. After centuries of oppression, of people cowering before demons and their masters.” He swallowed. “It is

a grim heritage. Who would still want to walk in that tradition?” Lahoon’s knuckles turned pale as his grip on the easel tightened. “What path would I take, asking to be apprenticed? Who would I become?”

He raised his head, his eyes wild. “But what if Pramus truly can find demons? What if this is my only chance to see at least one kind of fey?” Lahoon’s voice was raw. “I know this is dangerous. And it may be very wrong. But as long as there is a slim chance that it may be right, or at least help me forward a sliver of a step, I must try.”

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

* * *

Berqar pulled a torch from a sconce and advanced deeper into the gloom of the armory. Swords glinted along the wall like rows of deadly teeth. But the beast was asleep. No jaws would snap shut just yet, no ravenous bite tear into enemy flesh.

Berqar let a finger trail over the cold steel. She could sense the strength, the unyielding power lying in wait. She turned. In the shadows at the back, two halberds crossed in silent salute. Beneath them, an oil painting hid its colors in the dark. Berqar stepped up to it, raising her torch.

A windswept plain surrounded by mountains lay before her. The storm tore the last leaves off the trees and sent clouds scurrying across a crimson sky. The ground was strewn with the bodies of unknown soldiers who had fallen by the thousands, their limbs distorted, their blood soaking the dirt.

In their midst, a glorious general let his steed rear up high. His cloak billowing in the wind, his eyes shining proudly, he held his saber in a determined grip, ready to rip open the sky if he must. An inaudible war cry broke from his throat, echoing through the scene of death and destruction around him, and down through the centuries until it reached Berqar. Her spine straightened imperceptibly. Berqar held her head up high, the gleam in her eye much, much deeper than a mere reflection of flaming torches.

* * *

Unleha crouched among the ferns. Along the far side of the bath gardens, a huge copper tube snaked through the greenery like a sleeping dragon until finally, down by the creek, it rose up in a tower of coils. Its aged skin was spotted with dust and lichen. Only a few patches of metal still lay bare and gleamed as gloriously as a sunset.

Unleha bent over a globe at the tower’s foot. In deep concentration, she listened to the low thumping sound coming from within, a drum that was deep and regular like a heartbeat. Magic was pumping the waters up into the spirals, as it should.

Unleha pulled out her wand. As an artificer, she was the type of specialized magician who could handle such traptions, as well as the countless others the bath used for all its needs and purposes, from heating the waters to illuminating the gardens. She carefully took the lid off the pumping traption before her. The late evening light caught in a gossamer web of spun glass, fine as a spider’s threads—an intricate design connecting precisely marked points on the globe, where pure crystals glinted in between.

Unleha held her hand before the delicate wonder, an amethyst in her open palm. Her lips moved and dark vowels rolled off her tongue, ending in a grating lisp, the perfect pronunciation of an ancient rune. At the touch of her wand, the stones began to dance. From the heart of the spidery labyrinth, another amethyst floated out.

The pipe gasped and spluttered, choking on water caught in mid-motion, on swirls of upward and downward and roundabout currents. But the new crystal had already drifted in among the arabesque crisscross, never touching, never disturbing any of the fragile threads. Neatly and naturally, it lodged itself into place.

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

She touched her wand to the midst of the ethereal web and let another incantation roll over her tongue, arcane words of power and meaning. The amethyst heard. A spark flared up in its transparent heart, then ran swiftly and purposefully along the threads, lighting up crystals along its way. Each one glowed with its own color, and with the force of a spell held deep within. Unleha leaned forward, her eyes narrowed in concentration.

“What are you doing?”

Unleha whipped around. A girl with a black fringe and eager eyes stood behind her.

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

The light faded from the sky, just leaving an inkling of deep blue on the horizon and a last stroke of purple on a cloud. The air grew soft and mellow. Amalai idled in the garden, saying good night to the plants that were still up, plucking a leaf here and there, breathing in the scents of the summer evening.

Then she froze. There it was again. A rustle, a shadow. A dark shape darting forward, hiding between the bushes, flying on. Without thinking, Amalai stepped right into its path. And collided. Violently stumbling backward, she grasped for a hold, and her fingers closed around a human arm. No ghostly shadow, no smoky demon dissolved under her touch. Regaining her balance, she found herself staring into dark almond eyes.

“Um. Hello,” Amalai said.

The girl before her glared. Then she tore loose in one frantic move, but that made something slip from her grip and hit the ground with a thud. A book, Amalai saw. Like a hawk, the girl swooped down and picked it up. “Keep quiet!” she hissed. Then she turned and ran. No more than a fleeting shadow, she bounded across the garden into the night. A few more crushing, rustling sounds, and she was gone.

Amalai looked after her. Then she followed, one slow step after another. She reached the hedge that hid the garrison wall and brushed a questioning hand against the leaves. Then she slipped through. Edging along the other side, she felt twigs scratch her back while the rough stone of the wall chafed her probing hand.

Until her fingers caught.

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

*

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

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

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

As she entered her chamber, Gureev looked up from his book. “You’ve been out,” he commented.

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

“You’ve been out a lot lately,” Gureev persisted.

Rebonya froze. Silence filled the room. Expectant silence.

“Oh, no,” Rebonya prayed. “Oh, no. Not Gureev too.”

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

“I was in the courtyard,” Rebonya murmured.

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

The expectant silence was back in the air. Rebonya writhed inwardly. What now?

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

Gureev stood up rapidly. “In fact, I have not,” he said, his voice scathing. “As you might have noticed. You’ve had a disrespectful look on your face every single minute I have shared this room with you. Not to mention the things you’ve said. But I have not reported you. Nor have I pointed out your frequent absences to anyone.” Angry lines ran down his brow. “But maybe I should, now that you mention it. It might be my duty. You could be a danger, a subversive element.”

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

She sat up on her mat. Then she even stood up and made a small step toward Gureev. “I am, alas, not involved in some secret plot to overthrow Diamondtip. All I do is get on with my life. The life that I truly wish to lead.” She looked down at her feet, then raised her eyes to meet Gureev’s. “I am preparing for the Academy of Magical Arts in Varoonya. I borrow books from an artificer who has studied there. I watch her work and ask questions.” Rebonya dropped her gaze again. Her voice softened. “So. I am no danger to anyone.”

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

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

Gureev went on in measured tones. “Being an artificer is useful. A good occupation. I respect your endeavors, and your fervor for study.” He hesitated. “But it is still against the rules. Soldiers, including cadets like us, are not allowed to leave the garrison on their own.” Gureev drew himself up straight. “There are reasons why such rules exist. And why we are actually expected to follow them.”

He looked at Rebonya, letting that silence hang in the air again.

Rebonya pulled at the cuff of her sleeve. “Well,” she muttered. “In fact, that is one of the few rules that I agree with myself. In principle.” She cleared her throat. “However, I was not strutting around town as a soldier. I went out discreetly, in civilian garb, going directly to my studies and straight back.” Images of the collision in the herbary came to her mind, and she cursed inwardly.

But she kept on talking. “Truly, I am no danger. I am in danger, much more likely. Of expulsion. Or of being ordered into correction, to some horrible task, like Hun.” She crossed her shaky arms over her chest.

Gureev had gone silent. He turned away.

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

She looked up at Gureev, her eyes pleading. “I do not know if this is enough for you. Truth, and a promise. Please tell me if it is. For even though I can’t tell what exactly my punishment would be if I got discovered, I really hope that it will never happen.” She cleared her throat. “And in that sense, I will indeed be grateful if you do not report me.”

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

Rebonya scoffed. Then a rueful look stole onto her face, together with a tiny lopsided smile. “Yes. I intend to let it show. If you truly won’t report me, I admit you deserve it.” Her nascent grin grew more pronounced. “I am not in the habit, I am afraid. Showing gratitude is an untried challenge to me, but I will go at it valiantly. And should I succeed, I am sure it will be a valuable lesson for me, one of the most useful skills I have ever learned in my years at Diamondtip.”

Chapter 6

“Strategy and tactics.” Berqar paced the officers’ quarters while she lectured. She paused beneath a large oil painting that had recently found its way to her wall. A general beneath a crimson sky, astride his rearing steed, blood and corpses at his feet. Berqar turned around, a spring in her step.

Gureev had put his essay back down with the book. Now his eyes were dark and earnest as he listened.

Berqar relished his attention. The fire in her voice grew stronger. “Our battle is not only one of the body, but one of the mind. And of the heart too.” She puffed out her chest. “For a warrior to reach glory, it takes more than sheer force and brutality. The right ruler needs to be cunning, scheming, just as much as any fiend.”

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

* * *

Dawn rose in misty pastels, framing Diamondtip’s stern towers. Inside the cadets’ chamber, Gureev rolled up his mat conscientiously, never casting so much as a reproachful glance at the sloppy heap of a bed Rebonya sat on as she buttoned up her shirt.

But Rebonya had comments of her own and was not holding back. “The right ruler!”

Gureev had given a very limited account of last night’s lesson with Berqar. Nevertheless, Rebonya’s eyes had narrowed to angry slits. “Do we have rulers? In this day and age?”

Gureev paused. Then he straightened up, turning away. “No.” His ears burned. “Of course not.” But he still attempted a rescue. “Berqar was speaking historically. Or metaphorically.” Gureev cleared his throat, touching the worn binding of the tome. “Also, these are simply terms used in the book. Berqar was referring to that. She did not mean anything by it.”

* * *

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

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

Lahoon chuckled. “We will see.” He pulled Amalai close. “Toan is a nice town. Much like Behrlem, really. Except that my presence there is rare, and people tend to give me much more

attention whenever I come. I am really looking forward to the concerts. And I will surely sell a painting or two. So even if I may not return rich, I will at least be satisfied.”

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

*

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

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

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

They left the horses by a copse of shrubbery and carefully approached the edge of the ravine. It was full of scrawny bushes with dark leaves and long, thin needles of thorn. Amalai reached out to one that had managed to crawl up over the edge and picked a berry, black as night. As she squeezed it, she felt the juice run over her fingers and a rich, pungent scent sting her nostrils. She jerked back. This was deewelarque, no doubt. Amalai turned around, her face beaming. “Wonderful!” She gave Precetlan an enthusiastic hug and Naleewa another.

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

“They are. We should certainly not eat these berries. But they can give enormous power to certain potions, if used wisely and competently.” Amalai hesitated. “They can also cause wild, feverish dreams. Hallucinations. Or clairvoyance, some say.” Amalai looked down into the ravine. In between the bushes, bare rocks punctured a fall that led down into invisible depths. Yearningly, she let her gaze roam over the innumerable deewelarque in the cleft. “I would love to be able to reach those. I would love to.”

“Hmm. There may be a way to get in, from below.” Precetlan pointed, craning his neck.

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

It was not exactly comfortable. They climbed over rocks and boulders, scratching their knees, squeezing in between thorny deewelarque. They moved on, farther back into the ravine. Sheer cliffs now rose up on both sides, and the towering mountain plunged everything into gloomy twilight. The humans turned quiet, as if taking care not to awaken the place.

A trail of soft, green grass appeared beneath Amalai’s feet. Like a silky thread, it wound across the otherwise hard and stony ground. Amalai raised an eyebrow and let herself be lured on, ever more deeply into the realm of shadows until she came up against the cliff.

At Amalai's feet, the grass spread out into an inviting carpet. Cautiously, she knelt down, parting the long blades before the rock. Crystal-clear water bubbled out, running over her fingers with the cold freshness of glaciers. "A spring!" Amalai turned around to beam at her companions.

And froze mid-motion.

A dark shadow lurked in the bushes behind Precetlan.

Precetlan looked over his shoulder and jerked.

The dark shape emerged from the deewelarque and turned out to be a thin little man in black clothes. His hair was black too, and his skin pale as the moon. He stopped moving when he saw the shocked faces, but said nothing.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Verlem." His fragile body bowed a fraction. "Will you follow me?" He held Amalai's gaze for one endless moment. Then he turned and began to walk toward the cabin.

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

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

And Amalai ran. She scurried along the grass trail, stumbling but not falling, and on across the shrubbery. She scratched herself incessantly on the deewelarque but did not care. Her lungs were burning, her breath ragged. She hurried on blindly and was surprised she even found the way out. Scrambling over the last rocks, she made it through.

Once on the open grassland, she charged on, then threw herself down behind a lone boulder. Her pulse raced, and her whole body throbbed painfully while a whirlwind raged in her soul. Amalai closed her eyes to let the storm inside blow out. She stayed where she was, sprawled on the ground in complete disarray. For a long, timeless moment, she knew nothing else of the world.

Then she sat up with a jolt.

Naleewa and Precetlan! She had just left them there. Abandoned them to a situation that had aroused such a strong sense of danger in Amalai that she had run with all her might. If it was that bad, how could she possibly have left them behind? But there was nothing else she could have done. She had only had one last moment in which to run herself. If she had stayed an instant longer, come one step closer, she would have been lost.

What should she do? Amalai clutched her hands. Then she turned and embraced the boulder, the solid, reassuring presence of ancient rock, and prayed for strength and guidance.

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

Amalai slumped onto the ground and exhaled.

*

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

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

She tried to explain. And failed, mostly.

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

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

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

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

Precetlan gave her a look. So did Naleewa.

"I've never heard of any magician able to do that," Naleewa finally stated. "But really, even if he could, why would he need to lure us with magic? Verlem is a hermit who collects herbs and berries. What could be more harmless than that? Of course we trust him. What do you think he wants from us? What could he want that we wouldn't willingly give?"

"I don't know," Amalai said wretchedly. She was exhausted, and could still feel the turmoil within. "Let's go back," she suggested weakly.

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

In silence they rode back the way they had come.

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

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

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

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

"Myths and fairy tales," Amalai's inner voice said, "tell of more than one kind of magic that can irresistibly attract people. There may be spells and potions, but there's also fate, prophecies, the stars. Like lovers destined to be together."

Amalai was not sure she wanted the voice to continue. But it did, in a quiet tone, in an inexorable manner. "And then there are also legends of the fey. Of otherworldly beings, some of whom have the ability to lure humans, just through their presence or their willpower. Like nymphs." Amalai turned her head aside. "Like vampires."

Chapter 7

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

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

Amalai began to hum a little, heading on into town. Soon she reached the bustling streets near the center. Amalai was retying a scarf over her unruly curls, but even with her hands in motion about her head and colorful cloth ends dangling before her eyes, her subconscious mind noticed.

Someone was watching her.

Amalai turned around.

The soldier on the corner quickly looked away. But then she secretly glanced back over her shoulder again, and Amalai knew instantly. That was the girl. The one she had caught in her garden. So she was a cadet?

The girl knew Amalai had recognized her. Her eyes grew wide, filled with—fear? Or pleading? Amalai intuitively made a calming motion with her hand. The soldier girl watched her suspiciously, but with a shimmer of hope in her eyes now. Amalai sent her a cautious smile and a nod, and the girl's body relaxed.

Still Amalai approached at an angle, keeping her eyes averted, the way she would do with a wild animal. And she felt a familiar sense of triumph rise in her heart when the girl did not bite or bolt, but allowed Amalai to come close.

With her last step, Amalai also drew the attention of the second soldier, a black-skinned youth who stood poised and upright. Amalai cleared her throat and introduced herself to the pair of them. She was rewarded with words of greeting and two names: Rebonya and Gureev.

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

That brought an instant gleam to Rebonya's eyes. "No, they were not!" she responded a little hotly. "But there is an exceptionally good reason for this change of rules, as you may know." She crossed her arms in front of her chest. "We've had it explained to us at great length. A terrible demon is threatening Behrlem, and no one but us soldiers can step in to save you all. So fear not. We are here for you. We are your protection."

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

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

Rebonya gave her a knowing look. “Fear not. We are here for you regardless. We will even fight nonexistent demons. So that you are safe, and under our protection.”

“Ah.” Amalai nodded. Her interest in Rebonya increased by the minute. “And how exactly will you protect us, when the demon comes?”

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

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Gureev had waited until Amalai was well out of sight before making his remark. In contrast to his measured tones, Rebonya practically stomped her foot.

“But demons don’t even exist! They never were anything other than magical illusions, scares from the feudal age!” Rebonya shot a spiteful look at Gureev. “And so I am not surprised to see you doubt and waver. To see that you have some liking for such tales.”

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

Gureev turned toward her. “You always have all your explanations ready. You never listen, never consider. You simply rule out all other possibilities, and that’s that.” He raised a fist before his chest and then let the fingers open. “At least I am uncertain. At least I can admit that I do not know. Have you ever been ready to do that?”

* * *

Kortid’s hand dug into his pillow.

}}} Darkness crept into the forest from all sides. Beings of the night awoke and spread their wings, turning their senses toward those who lingered, those who trespassed in foreign realms. Ferns whispered as Kortid passed, touching his knees, holding him back ever so briefly. From the bark of old trees, faces watched him with inscrutable expressions. A spider hung from a thread above his head.

Kortid stumbled, just catching himself on a rough trunk. Blood ran down his hand. Kortid hurried on. He had to find Hun, to bring him back home before night fell and the forest swallowed them whole.

He called out in a subdued voice. Hun did not answer. The woods did, however, with a thousand murmurs and rustles, with gray, waving fingers and darting shadows between the roots. Kortid licked his lips. He walked on, his eyes searching the gloom. The undergrowth was thick all around. A fallen tree blocked his way. Kortid sat down on it, swung his legs over—and landed in hell.

A scream tore from his lungs. Right before him, Hun’s naked body lay on the ground, mangled and covered in blood. A demon crouched at his throat. At Kortid’s piercing cry, the demon cringed and transformed into a flag that blew away into the night. {{{

Kortid woke with a gasp, his hands clenching the sweaty sheets. His heartbeat was quick and shallow. He bit his lip. Limbs tense, shoulders hunched, Kortid stared out into the darkness of his chamber, at Hun’s empty mat, and at the images replaying in his mind without pity or reprieve.

* * *

Amalai roamed the forest. Birds and monkeys commented on her presence, calling down at her before retreating into the crowns. The afternoon sun lit up leaves from behind, making them shine a bright young green.

Berries and bark filled Amalai's basket, together with roots and shoots. She had even found the mushrooms she needed for one particular ointment the baths requested. A good harvest. Amalai could have turned back and gone home.

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

She did not stop.

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

And then she was out.

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

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

And here she was.

She could see the first of the deewelarque bushes, the ones that had managed to sprawl on to the edge. She could sense the darkness beyond.

Amalai walked toward it, halfway, then halted. She remained still, looking up toward the boulders, the deewelarque, the rise of the cliffs. The wind took up once more, tugging at her clothes and blowing her skirt into a billowing sail, then letting it fall. Amalai stood without moving.

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

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

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

utterances, singing with them in as hushed and secret a tone as they did themselves, weaving in sounds that came from she did not know where. They were her own sounds, the ones she had within her body to talk to the wind and the leaves.

Amalai did not feel time pass. But she did see, eventually, how the mountain's shadow moved across the meadow. The sun had almost gone down behind the crest, and evening was creeping into the highlands on all sides. The pale moon had grown well past a sickle.

Amalai turned. She walked away with a few hesitant steps at first, then more firmly, until she moved with a clear, steady stride back toward her human house and her home. She had to get back while there was still light enough.

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

She did not see Verlem.

Chapter 8

“How old were your parents during the Transition? When all the feudals were sent into exile?” Rebonya asked.

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

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

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

But then he turned and answered. “I did not grow up with my direct ancestors. Those were more like aunts and uncles to me, not parents. I spent the winter moons in town with them sometimes, when I was older. They were kind and interesting, just not as close as parents.” Gureev ran a hand over his kinky hair. “It was my ancestors’ ancestors who became my parents. They were the ones who gave me care, love and attention day after day.”

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

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

Gureev turned his head to look at her.

“Tell me about the estate,” Rebonya mumbled.

A warm glow came into Gureev’s eyes. “It is beautiful land. Soft, rolling hills, a few orchards. Mostly fields, vegetables. Some pastures. The estate itself is not terribly large. A few dozen people lived there.” He paused. “It is in Zonzelon. All the feudal families have been spread out over different counties in Jovaden, as you probably know. Without contact. So my parents have never seen any of their friends again, nor their families, except those closest few who were exiled with them.” A bitter edge came to his voice. “And of course, the few dozen people on the estate were all our prison guards, even if they tried not to look it. They kept up appearances, as if we were some random genteel family spending time on their modest country estate.”

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

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

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

The common room was almost empty. A few lanterns gave a golden sheen to an old coat of arms here, the curved lid of a trunk there. At the far wall, two cadets sat hunched over their writing,

enveloped in an amber glow beneath the black square of a window. Other than that, there was only Gureev, his gaze firmly locked onto the page of his book.

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

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

Rebonya turned and went back into her chamber before Gureev could reply.

* * *

Light slanted in through the windows of the Toan temple library, playing on the worn limestone floor, on the winding elegance of the pillars. The whole room was bathed in mists of dust and sunlight, suffused with pale gold and a quiet sacredness. Lahoon wished he were dressed in white so that he could blend in, so he could be another figurine of honey and ivory in this beautiful tableau. But then the temple servant came back, and all of Lahoon’s attention shifted to the treasures she carried.

“Thank you!” Lahoon gratefully received a heap of books and scrolls and took them to a mat by the wall, where he settled down. The stillness of the temple enveloped him. As he unrolled the first bamboo scroll, the dust of decades and spirit of centuries welled up to greet him. He reverently ran a finger along the first painted slip, sinking down into tales of old.

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

Lahoon mumbled hasty words of gratitude for being allowed to leave his heap of unfinished quests until morning. He grabbed his bag and hurried to the Summerstar, the oldest tavern in Toan, where his concert was about to begin.

* * *

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

Rebonya smiled as she pushed through the high ferns. Before her, a small cottage lay hidden among the bushes, its tiled roof overgrown with moss. The yellow coating on the walls was tarnished and crumbling, as was the dark green paint on the shutters. It looked homey, secret and magical all at once, Rebonya thought, and like the perfect place to spend the afternoon. She knocked on the door.

“Hmm?” came a voice from inside. Rebonya pulled the door open a crack and slid in. Unleha stood bent over a workbench, looking down at a scroll covered in intricate lines. All around her, the disarray of magic piled up: glass threads and crystals, wooden cases and instruments with ticking cogwheels, half-covered by scrolls and papers.

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

Rebonya stepped closer gingerly and peered inside. A labyrinth of nearly invisible threads glinted back at her, interspersed with shiny crystals glowing pale green and deep purple. "What will it do?" she asked.

"Don't tell, don't tell!" Veertan begged Unleha. "I'll show her!" She grabbed Rebonya's elbow and pulled her out of the cabin.

In the garden, lights were growing dim, and the trees blended into one black outline beneath a lavender sky. Veertan waded a few steps through knee-deep weeds until, among the vines and the bracken, she found an open patch of moss and set the traption down.

Rebonya squatted beside the girl, leaning forward in anticipation.

"Watch this," Veertan whispered. At her touch, a column of blue light shot from the wooden case, a clear, incandescent beam cutting through the dusk. Amid the waving fern and the fading evening sky, the glow seemed almost otherworldly.

Unleha came to crouch beside them. "Never seen anything like this, right?" She winked at Rebonya. "Nobody has. It's an entirely new form of putting light together. No way any of our old magical lanterns could ever have produced a beam like this."

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

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

"Did they not tell you when they ordered it?"

"No. I did not speak to the people directly. I only talked to Tenatetlan, the peddler, who wanted it for somebody else. I think she even ordered several of these, asking all the artificers she could get hold of. But anyway," Unleha switched topics suddenly, "there is another bit of good news, have you heard?" She sent her beaded braids flying with an energetic turn of her head. "The scrutiny has started, the one about Hun's death. So the county scrutinizer will be showing up in the garrison soon. In the Diamondtip School of Cadets, to be precise, to ask how it could possibly have happened that one of the youths got killed." There was a wicked gleam in Unleha's eyes. "And whether perhaps anything needs to change within that system to make sure it does not happen again."

* * *

Kortid wielded his blade with strength and precision, cold metal flashing in the evening light as he spun around to parry an invisible enemy, then lunged for another. Straw puppets winced as the sharp point touched them, withdrew and came again. Sweat ran down Kortid's face, but his eyes were fierce and steady. He turned only when his companions called him. This was the hour. Time to move out of the training court and into the streets of a dusky town.

"This is the last time we go out unprotected, thank goodness." Kortid squinted up at the pale round moon rising in the sky. He deftly sheathed his weapon. "Soon we'll have magic by our side." He pressed his final words out through clenched teeth. "We can only pray that we will survive another night alone."

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

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

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

"No, you cannot!" Kortid screamed. "You know nothing! All you have is stories and conjectures. Theories. But I saw that demon! Directly in front of me, sitting on Hun's dead body." Kortid's face was pale now, and every muscle in his body hard as steel. Images of night came unbidden to his mind, of a dark forest and a mangled body. Hun's lifeless face stared back at him.

Kortid's breath had grown ragged. He fixed Rebonya with feverish eyes. "Don't you dare!"

Chapter 9

Dark clouds hung over the town square of Behrlem, turning the late afternoon into a gloomy dusk. Every now and then a ray of light fell through the cracks and a silver brightness flared up dramatically, tracing the outlines of billowing clouds. But it soon got swallowed up again by mountains of rainy gray that plunged the whole town into shadow.

The soldiers stood in formation at the far side of the plaza. A small, orderly squad occupied the center, and around them, individual soldiers formed a wider circle. That was a very loose boundary, but still a boundary that no one dared to cross. The townsfolk kept their distance as they watched.

Within this arena, one soldier after the other stepped out of the central squad, solemnly approaching Berqar. Each received a polished wooden case, bowed in reverence, and turned to march back into the formation. Each one, except the very last. Gureev, receiving a special command from Berqar along with his case, took up position outside the orderly lines of the squad and remained, singled out and alone, in front of the first row of his comrades.

Berqar stepped back.

Light drained from the circle, leaving the soldiers to drown in darkness. But then sparks poured in, gentle as starlight at first, soon growing as strong as a fire, as bright as the sun. The spectators cringed and turned away, protecting their eyes with raised arms.

When they were able to squint out again, their pupils slowly adjusting to the returning twilight, they saw a mage stand in the fading glimmers of gold, his long robes swirling.

Pramus.

Imperiously, he raised his staff.

All the soldiers went down on one knee, raising their wooden cases before them like sacred offerings. Pramus held them all with the power of his gaze. Then, with a turn of his hand, he made the soldiers touch the cases, all at the same time, all in the same way. A forest of light shot up, bright blue beams piercing the gloom and reaching for the clouds.

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

The soldiers still knelt. For a moment, the spirit of the eternal warrior became visible in the air, larger than life: dark, slim, beautiful, wielding a sword of light with immeasurable grace and power.

The apparition faded.

When the mage tilted his staff, the soldiers rose as one, sheathing their swords. They marched off into the falling night.

* * *

“She is trying to get you,” Rebonya told Gureev. She turned over on her mat to look at him. “What do you think? Why were you singled out to stand in front of everyone? Like someone special. Visible not only to us soldiers, but even to the people of Behrlem.”

Rebonya shook her head. “Everybody was meant to witness. To see that traptions may just be banal things giving light, but the arcane art of a mage can bring forth real, earth-shattering magic. He gives swords the power to ward off demons. And while it takes loads of us unknown soldiers to do the fighting, there is one above all others who is destined to be the lone hero. You. It was no coincidence that dream warrior at the end looked like a Gureev.”

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

* * *

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

“They’ve used us.” Tenatetlan pressed out her words through gritted teeth. “They sent out inconspicuous middlemen to ask me, as a peddler, to ask you. That is how they solicited the services of dozens of artificers who would never willingly have produced lies and illusions. Swords of light, indeed! What an affront to the profession of artificers!”

An involuntary grin spread across Unleha’s face, her black cheek dimpling. “The traption is great, though,” she conceded. “I had a lot of fun making it. To think that one can put together a beam like that! Amazing method, really. Totally new approach to light. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“They abused you!” Tenatetlan spat out venomously. “Who do they think they are? They spit on you! Every time they wave their ‘magic swords’ around in town it’s another slap in your face! Will you let such an insult go unavenged? Do you have no pride at all?” Tenatetlan’s eyes were on fire. “You have to show them! Fight back!”

* * *

Kortid placed the wooden case gingerly beside his mat. He let his hand glide over it, feeling the smoothness. He took a deep breath and pressed down. Light flared up. The ghost of a smile came to Kortid’s lips as he regarded the bright blue beam. He leaned back, cautiously releasing his hold on the sheath.

Kortid slid in under his covers, his face turned toward the room, making sure he could sleep with one eye open if need be. Checking that the sword was well within reach and that he could brandish it in an instant.

He lay still, listening to his thoughts.

It was at nighttime that the danger was greatest. He was sure of it. When the demon struck again, it would be in the darkness. Which was why there must be no darkness. They must have light at all times, and the swords out and ready. The soldiers could never be defenseless, not for a moment. Especially not at night, and not on a night like this, when the full moon was swallowed up by black clouds.

Kortid bit his lip. He turned back toward his blade, toward its unfailing brightness, its promise of power and safety. A deep sigh escaped his chest. This was how it should be. They must be ready

for combat. With the swords' magic by their side, they might stand a chance. Including the chance that the demon might not even dare to draw near.

The light would keep them safe. Even if people did not see it that way, thought it exaggerated, or let their little comforts of the moment blind them. Like preferring to sleep with the lights off.

"Fools," Kortid hissed through gritted teeth. "Risking their lives without a thought! Closing their eyes, even if it means never opening them again."

* * *

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

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

She felt the love and the yearning.

She thought of Lahoon.

And she thought of Verlem.

* * *

Through the dense green of the forest, Amalai walked up toward the highlands. Again, and again. She had given up arguing about that with herself. She just went. For another fleeting moment, another immeasurable hour spent with the wind and the grass, the mountains and the deewelarque, the sky and the wildflowers. For a presence, for a whisper of the fey.

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

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

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

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

She saw Verlem.

He was there. He had been there all the time, every time. Amalai had known it, even on that first evening when she had not seen him. But he was there. Verlem was watching her, sensing her. Feeling her presence, just as she was feeling his presence. Or the presence of the whole mountainside, the grasses, the thorny bushes. Amalai could not distinguish between Verlem and the

wind, or the scents of the ravine. But she did not care. It did not seem to matter. Or, somehow, to amount to the same thing in the end.

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

And Verlem was there.

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

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

He was sitting there now, his feet planted on the ground, his legs falling open slightly, his hands joined loosely around his knees. His eyes were turned toward the nodding wildflowers, toward the forest down below.

Amalai could see his profile clearly. The soft light of the afternoon lay upon his features, touching his tender white skin, outlining the contours of his cheekbones. His hair was fine and wispy, drawn back from his brow, with only a few strands falling loose.

With his fragile body perfectly still, he seemed as quiet, as inoffensive as always.

Amalai felt her heart beat fast. But she had

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