

DOLL

GIRL

meets

DEAD

GUY

Lidiya Foxglove



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FOREWORD

Peoples of the Hidden Lands

If you hate long high fantasy world-building introductions, don't panic.

You don't have to read any of this to proceed. Anything important is in the story itself.

But if you're the type of reader who likes to keep every little thing straight, or if you put this book down halfway through and didn't pick it up again for months, you might appreciate this.

The Hidden Lands has three humanoid races:

The **Miralem** are telepathic and live in the north. They worship a moon goddess and have that classic fantasy vibe going on. Because of telepathy, men and women are fairly equal in the Miralem lands. You just can't suppress a powerful telepath, so no one gets the upper hand. When it comes to how they treat non-telepathic races, they have a more spotty record. The Miralem have an alliance with the dragons, the only intelligent and telepathic beasts in the world, and they are spread across several kingdoms: Laionesse, Avalon, Otaré, Kota, and Halnari (who betrayed their fellow Miralem to ally with the Daramons). Their average lifespan is 120-150 years, as long as they have access to healers.

The **Daramons** don't have telepathy and rely only on sorcery. Many of them follow a spiritual leader known as the Wodrenarune, the Hand of Fate, who is said to be a great prophet. Throughout most of history, they were definitely the

weaker race, with a shorter lifespan, but this began to change when the charismatic Kalan Jherin became the Wodrenarune about 140 years before the events of this novel. His people became known as the Kalanites. His most consequential act was the Ten Thousand Man Sacrifice, the most ambitious spell ever cast, when thousands of men gave their lives and blood to give a sort of invincibility to all Daramons. After the Ten Thousand Man Sacrifice, the blood of all Daramons was enchanted and would self-heal and preserve their lives in case of injury. Although far from perfect, this made Daramons much harder to kill, as they had to burn, explode, or otherwise lose a lot of blood. This spell affected all Daramons whether they were Kalanites or not, but there is one group of Daramons who live peacefully in the Miralem lands: the **Ven-Diri**, who follow a religion based on a pantheon of death gods and practice necromancy.

Fanarlem, meanwhile, are not born but created, by calling a soul into an artificial body made lifelike by magic. The Kalanites believe that only weak souls will submit to being summoned this way, and that these souls did something in a past life they must now atone for with servitude. At least, that's what they tell themselves to justify being assholes about it. If Fanarlem can get to the Miralem lands, they are free, but how much they are accepted varies wildly and many of them still work in menial jobs.

CHAPTER ONE

SORLA'S HAND trembled with excitement at the all-too-familiar gold seal on the letter. Her hopes had already spiked when she saw the twinkle in the eye of the mail courier.

“Well, what’s the prince have to say this time?” Alem asked. The courier never hesitated to wait around for the opening of an interesting letter.

Sorla didn’t really mind his prying, because she liked everyone to know she had the favor of the handsome, young, eligible crown prince of Laionesse. What other girl could say that, especially a Fanarlem?

Alem never pushed to hear the whole thing, he just wanted a tidbit. She slid her thumb under the seal and pulled it up, unfolding the envelope, savoring the moment. Her whole being quickened at the sight of the smooth and substantial cream-colored royal paper.

Two thick pages poked out.

The letters were never more than a page. Getting more excited by the minute, she skimmed it so she could give Alem his crumb of news and get rid of him, but as the words jumped out at her, she gasped.

“He proposin’?” Alem teased.

“He’s offering me a job at the royal bakery!” Sorla shrieked, completely unable to contain herself. “Making pastry for him and the king and queen!” She clutched Alem’s arm and shook it and he shook her right back.

“Well! Our little town baker is going to be famous! So you’re leaving us, just like that? No sympathies for the tastebuds of peasants?”

“I have to! Oh, fates...oh, I have to...” Finally, a chance to make something of herself in a larger city. Now the back door of the cafe opened and Grau looked at her.

“Is everything all right back here? Has someone sent us a bag of money? It’d damn sure come in handy.”

“No, Feirin—well, maybe, maybe in a sense, if...if things go well!”

Alem gave Grau a friendly nod, getting the idea that it was time for him to spread the word all over town and let the Thanneau family handle their own business.

“Is that from Prince Seldon?” Grau asked, with the tiniest hint of fatherly suspicion. “What is he saying? Why are you glowing? Do I have to make an assassination attempt?”

Reality crashed in and Sorla realized that Grau and Velsa would be extremely reluctant to let her go to the capital, even at Seldon’s invitation. They were very protective of her—too protective, sometimes, as if she hadn’t managed on her own without them. As if their entire family wasn’t a comforting sort of lie. She called them “Meirin” and “Feirin” like parents, but Fanarlem didn’t have parents.

“He’s giving me a job at the royal bakery.”

“In Laionesse?” His fatherly frown was now joining the furrowed brow. “Just you, by yourself?”

“I’m sure I wouldn’t be by myself. Seldon would have thought of safe accommodations. And you know me. Once I’m there, I’ll do nothing but work and sleep.”

Which was all Sorla did now. She was twenty-two years old with no one courting her, and no sign that anyone in this town ever would—nor that she would ever do anything but work, sleep, and live with her adopted family for the next hundred years. At *minimum*.

“Hmm,” Grau said, which just meant he was mulling over it all.

“Are you two coming back in? It’s the lunch rush!” Velsa cried, appearing behind him and then vanishing again. In her wake came Sorla’s pet wyvern Blueberry, who didn’t like it when anyone yelled at anyone else. He started flying around Sorla and Grau, chastising them with loud squawks for leaving the cafe in a lurch. Velsa was the one yelling, but Blueberry was smart enough to know that Sorla was at fault.

With a sigh, Sorla tucked the letter into the depths of her apron, knowing it wouldn’t be decided until the quiet of evening.

Well, that isn’t quite true, she corrected herself. I’m going whether they want me to or not. I have to. I’ll regret it for the rest of my life if I don’t, and who would say no to the crown prince?

CHAPTER TWO

SORLA LOVED her home and family and their little cafe with all her heart. The last thing she would ever want was to take it all for granted. She knew all too well what it was like to have nothing of your own and no one to love you.

She would never deny that she had all good things in abundance here, even in her most restless moods. She woke in her own room, tucked under a soft quilt that she and Meirin had sewn together one winter, with Blueberry's sleek head popping up the moment hers did, his bright reptilian eyes gleaming with excitement to start the day with his mistress. The room smelled slightly of wyvern piss no matter how much she scrubbed the floor, but it was somewhat covered up by the smell of baking pastries.

Sorla stirred before Grau and Velsa most mornings, by her own preference. She liked having a little time and space in the hushed darkness before dawn to do what she did best—make the pastries and breads that would soon lure in everyone in the neighborhood. At this time of year, while she didn't have much fresh fruit to play with, the long end-of-winter days would bring in a local crowd eager for hot coffee and Sorla's flaky apple tarts and nut buns. She was famous for the spring wild berry cake decorated with violet petals, and the spiced pumpkin bread she started making every year on the autumn equinox, and no sooner—there would be a line out the door that morning.

As with most days, they were busy not just through lunch, but up until sunset when Velsa finally locked the door and

flopped into a chair.

“Sometimes I think we’re a little too successful!” she exclaimed. “I’m tired down to my bones.”

“Don’t worry about that, bellora, I think we’re about to lose most of our business,” Grau said, with a small smile at Sorla to show he didn’t begrudge her the opportunity. But Sorla didn’t relax yet. He still had that worried furrow. “Our head baker is thinking of leaving.”

“What?” Velsa looked at Sorla. “Leaving? Are you two in on some plan without me?”

“No, no, nothing like that!” Sorla said. “I wasn’t planning anything. I just had a letter today from Prince Seldon and he wants me to work in the royal bakery.”

Velsa got a suspicious look, although she was trying to hide it and would have succeeded with anyone who didn’t know her well. “He doesn’t have enough experienced bakers?” she asked carefully. “In the capital?”

“Well, I think he wants to help me out,” Sorla said, and then she cursed herself. *I should have thought better about how to explain this!* “I mean, I think he would like to give good jobs to Fanarlem to bring greater equality to the kingdom.”

“And there aren’t hundreds of Fanarlem in Laionesse?”

“Well, sure, but none of them make my apple cake, or my savory tarts, or my pies, and I’m confident of that!”

Velsa chewed her lip. “Sorla, you certainly are an amazing chef and I’m sure you can hold your own at the royal bakery. And I want you to have those opportunities. But...it is...a little odd that the prince... I mean, how much free time does a prince have? And men can be...” She glanced at Grau.

“Men are the worst,” he said.

“You’re not,” Sorla said.

“No. I’m as good as it gets, and that concerns me.”

“Oh, come on! Don’t tease me. You’ve met Seldon. It’s not like he’s obsessed with me. He writes me a letter about three times a year and it’s only a page. If he had some ulterior motive, I think he’d write more than that. Plus, they’re very professional letters.”

Of course, it was a wonder that the crown prince took the time to write her any letters at all, and she thought about him constantly. She used to talk about him way too much with every letter he sent, but then she learned to tamp it down before she lost all her friends. Anyway, she was young and awkward then, and it was to be expected.

She had dreamed of him asking her to come to Laionesse for any reason at all, and what their reunion would be like. She imagined him telling her that he had never forgotten her since he’d met her on his official travels, and danced with her at the Feast of Maidens.

Sorla prayed that Velsa, being a talented telepath, had never picked up on any of that. While it was rare for even skilled telepaths to read minds, they did read feelings. Even Sorla, whose power was much weaker, picked up on feelings sometimes.

“I have to worry about you a little,” Velsa said. “Both of us do.”

“I’m not teasing,” Grau said. “Men are terrible. We’ve told you all the stories about how they would treat Velsa right in front of my face. It would be a dangerous delusion to think that Fanarlem women aren’t extremely vulnerable. Even in Miralem lands. If Velsa and I didn’t have as much magic as we do, life might be more perilous.”

“I’m not a naive child,” Sorla said. “And I never was.”

That was the one thing about pretending to have parents. Sometimes they started to forget that when they found Sorla, she was entirely on her own, and had been for years. She had more experience surviving all alone than they did.

“Yes...I know,” Velsa said, backing off. “We’re not going to forbid you from doing anything. And I know you have a lot

of experience in the darker side of the world, but...you've never been alone and...beautiful."

"I hardly think I'm beautiful," Sorla scoffed. "I'm not exactly turning heads here."

"I don't know..."

"Name one turning head," Sorla said.

"Ruven, and you know it. Just because he's marrying someone else... Well, princes can have consorts, but farm boys have to think of starting a family."

"Seldon doesn't want me for a consort. This isn't some skeezy place like Atlantis." Sorla huffed. "I know you'll worry, but just think—a royal baker! I'd send money home."

"You don't have to send money home," Grau said. "I'd certainly hope the two of us can manage without you. But we have to warn you about these things. One thing I learned when I left home is that the world can be astoundingly cruel and harsh, and the safety you took for granted at home might not travel with you. Maybe Prince Seldon has nothing but honorable intentions, but sooner or later you'll meet someone who doesn't. Someone who feels that attractive Fanarlem girls were made to be abused or exploited. People here *say* they don't think that way, but their actions don't always back that up—especially strangers."

"I know," Sorla said. "I do know. I'll be on guard."

A little doubt crept in.

It was true that Fanarlem were originally created to be enslaved—and Sorla had still spent more years of her life in bondage than not. Like nearly all Fanarlem, her bones were made of wood, and her skin was made of cloth, with wool stuffing, metal joints, and glass eyes. Without magic, she was just a doll.

But hundreds of years ago, flesh and blood people had discovered the magic that called souls into inanimate forms. Although it was said that the first Fanarlem was made to bring back the soul of a sorcerer's beloved wife, as far as history knew, the discovery had only heralded the birth of a slave race,

their production quickly adopted by the Kalanites of the west and south. Although the magic made Fanarlem mimic real people in many ways, they were also immune to cold, heat, and poison that could kill a flesh and blood person, and they felt only fleeting pain.

Like nearly all Fanarlem, Sorla had no real parents, no blood to share, and her memories began in some unknown early year of her life. She started out in a wealthy house, brought up to be the companion of two little girls. Sorla had played with them but also helped them dress, fetched their meals, cleaned their bedroom and nursery, and did everything she could to serve her young mistresses. Sorla had no memory of being taught to serve; it seemed she had been born to do it, but the reality would have been that someone showed her the ropes from the moment she could walk and talk.

After spending her childhood in the relative safety of the family, she had been sold off to be a servant-for-rent, losing her only home, and the love she thought they had for her. She was naive then. Not now.

In these dark days, Sorla had to learn to rely only on herself and snatch every small pleasure she could from life. Velsa had seen her and “rented” her on the spot, and from that point on Grau and Velsa treated her like family and scrimped the money to buy her. They gave her freedom, and then purchased her ticket to the real world—a more expensive body that gave her this so-called “beauty”.

Fanarlem who were made to work *looked* more like dolls, crudely fashioned. But almost as soon as Fanarlem were invented, sorcerers started honing the spells that gave them life—learning how to craft them better, and layer in powerful illusion to enhance their creations.

Before long, a small group of Fanarlem were made to be concubines and pleasure slaves. Into this rare tribe was Velsa born, crafted so finely that she almost looked real, but not too real either. Any man inclined to be attracted to Fanarlem at all might say they were more beautiful than anything real, and Grau had always looked at Velsa like he certainly thought so.

Of course, he also clearly loved her heart and mind, which was how it must be.

Even though her body had come from a concubine maker, she wasn't quite as beautiful as a true concubine, or maybe it was her personality, or maybe (probably) boys here just didn't think of any Fanarlem girl that way. It was the Daramon race who made Fanarlem to use and abuse, and they had since moved to the lands of the Miralem for a better life. Here, slavery was utterly illegal and immoral. Miralem men were also very different. On the whole, they were very respectful to women, and as she was getting older, she thought it might be nice if someone wasn't *just* respectful, although she certainly wanted that, but maybe also thrilled and excited by her.

"Well, in the end, you've always had a good head on your shoulders," Grau said.

Velsa nodded. "And we'd never want to keep you from making a better life for yourself. Or for this family to feel like an obligation and not something good." She sighed softly, as if she was trying to keep Sorla from hearing it. "We'll miss you very much. And you can come home any time, of course, if things don't work out like you expected."

"Is Prince Seldon sending a carriage for you?" Grau asked.

"No...he just asked if I would come to the capital to take the job... Nothing about transportation..."

"Well, that does bring up a genuine concern. Maybe he'll offer you a good position and a safe home once you're there, but how do we get you there? I'll put my foot down before I send you alone on a public coach. And I can't leave Velsa running the cafe by herself while I escort you."

Sorla's hopes and dreams plummeted before she quickly remembered her old motto: don't slow down long enough to let despair catch up. "I'll find someone," she said decisively. "I'll ask around. Surely someone in town needs to make the trip."

"You'll find a way," Velsa said. "Being a royal baker does have such a distinguished ring to it. And we know there's a

good Fanarlem maker there in case you need anything.”

“Yes, the very best,” Grau said. “I’ll write him a letter and tell him you’re coming so if you need anything—”

“Stop, stop!” Sorla said, embarrassed that her father was about to ask his pen pal, the Fanarlem maker of Laionesse, to watch over her, when she didn’t know the man at all. “I’ll be fine. And I don’t even know when I can secure passage yet. Just let me handle it. I don’t feel like I was ever a kid, but I’m definitely an adult now, and old enough to figure all this out myself.”

Grau and Velsa both looked like they wanted to argue this point, for twenty-two years old was considered old enough for courting and working, but the Miralem called the age of sixteen to thirty the “sunrise” adulthood, when the sun had not yet fully risen on one’s maturity, and it was normal for parents to be quite involved.

Velsa married Grau when she was eighteen, so they both had to stay quiet about it. Besides that, there was a war on and many young people had already grown up faster than usual. If the butcher’s nephew and the florist’s daughter could go fight in wars in their sunrise adulthood, Sorla could certainly work in a bakery right next to the royal palace.

“I’ll go ask Ruven if he’s heard anything,” she said, scooping up Blueberry to take a walk, doing her best to ignore the anxious clench in her innards that always rose up when she laid eyes on the first boy she had ever loved.

CHAPTER THREE

IT WAS a short walk to Ruven's from their cottage, turning away from the bustle of the shop rows to the farmland just outside the town. Snow still glowed thick and pale under clusters of dark evergreens in the dusk, and ice clung to the rocks in the stream beneath the plank bridge. Sorla gazed at the late winter landscape with fresh eyes, her lantern catching the sparkle of the frozen world, realizing she might be leaving it unexpectedly.

Blueberry flew ahead, excited to see his old litter mates and the other wyverns at the family farm. Ruven and his family raised the small beasts. Although wyverns looked like miniature dragons, they lacked the high intelligence and strong telepathic and fire-generating magic of their huge counterparts.

But they were smart. Smarter than dogs. They could be trained to do all sorts of useful tasks, and to guard their owners and homes.

They were too smart for some people, especially with their dextrous little hands. Sorla was a wyvern devotee for life, however. She loved teaching Blueberry new tricks and skills, even if it meant he could open cabinets and jars and unlock doors, causing occasional chaos. Grau had forbidden them all from lighting matches in sight of Blueberry, just in case he learned to set things on fire.

Sorla loved wyverns, and with all her being, she tried not to love the boy who raised them.

“Sorla? Hello!” Ruven was out flinging feed at a dozen wyverns who were clambering over each other in mid-air to catch it, when she came walking up with her punched tin lantern in hand. She opened the hinge and blew out the candle so she would have some left for her walk home.

Ruven dusted off his hands. “What brings you by? Joining us for dinner?”

“Hi, Sorla!” Ruven’s fiancée Elusha chimed in from behind him.

“I wouldn’t *invite* myself to dinner!” Sorla said.

“I’m inviting you,” Ruven said, grinning in the dusk.

“We made those delicious potatoes!” Elusha said.

“Oh,” Sorla said, thinking of Elusha and Ruven’s mashing the potatoes together and having a grand old time. Sometimes she envied them all for needing food and sharing it together. Fanarlem *could* eat thanks to magic, but they didn’t have to, and often her family was too busy feeding other people to share a proper meal.

“That’s tempting... I’ll have a tiny bit if you have enough. I’m sorry, I would have brought some pastry leftovers if I’d known. I really just wanted to get the word out about some business.”

“Business?” Ruven flung out the rest of the feed and tossed aside the basket. “You think about business too much. Just have a visit and relax.” The clean March air was full of the sound of wyverns chirping and snapping and growling at each other for choice bits. Blueberry dove in before Sorla could stop him.

“Blueberry! You can eat at home!” she scolded.

“Who cares? He’s home,” Ruven said. “You’re all welcome here anytime; you know that.”

“Does the business have anything to do with your letter from the prince today?” Elusha asked. “That’s so exciting! The prince must be awfully taken with you to write you all the time.”

“Doesn’t he just ask you about how he can help Fanarlem causes?” Ruven asked.

Oh, good! He’s jealous! Sorla brightened. Ruven and Elusha made a very cute couple. She tried hard not to feel jealous herself, but she would never forget how shocked she felt when Elusha showed up in town and got engaged with Ruven out of nowhere. Apparently they were childhood playmates, but Sorla *thought* Ruven liked her more than he liked the other town girls.

Instantly, she felt like the biggest idiot when this fair, shining flesh and blood woman had Ruven’s arm. Of course he would want to have children to work the farm, and all of that normal stuff. He never would have been serious about her.

She would be satisfied enough now if he just quietly pined for her and never forgot her until the day he died. At least that was something...

It didn’t help that when she met Ruven, she mistook him for a girl, but now he had shot up in height and his back was broad and muscular from physical work on the farm. His jawline and nose had traded the softness of youth for strong, masculine lines, but he still had beautiful lips and blonde bangs he was always shoving out of his blue eyes.

Elusha looked like she could be his sister, but when Sorla asked Ruven if they were related when she first appeared, he’d just laughed. “Of course not! We all look alike to you, huh?”

Ruven’s family greeted her warmly as they always did, and the heavy wooden table was so jammed full with food that some dinner plates hung off edges and the table cloth woven with orange and red flowers could hardly be seen. Steam rose from warm loaves of bread, root vegetables, spiced apples, and the famous creamy potatoes lashed with bacon—only one of many hearty recipes Myrini was famous for in town.

Even in her awkward solitude without a mate of her own, Sorla knew she would always feel at home here, as she did from the start. They were such kind people. Even though they’d never had Fanarlem as neighbors before, they welcomed Sorla and her parents from the day they arrived.

They all gathered round the table, parents and two younger siblings, all fair and merry and well-fed looking, excited to have any company as if it was an uncommon occurrence and they didn't invite in some neighbor or other on the regular. The fire crackled behind Ruven's father, and Myrini lit the beeswax candles. Sorla wondered if the royal bakery would be as comfortable as this. The royal palace, she recalled, was cold and grand with its huge rooms.

"So you got another letter from the crown prince today, is that right? Is he doing well?" Myrini asked. She always worried over whether the prince was 'doing well' ever since his oldest brother's assassination, as if she might have to go to the capital herself and make him some food to cheer him up.

"He's fine, I think," Sorla said. "He asked me to come work at the royal bakery."

The dinner table erupted into excitement. "The royal bakery!?" "Our Sorla at the royal bakery?"

"How about that! This calls for the dandelion wine!" Ruven's father said. Sorla didn't remind him that Fanarlem couldn't enjoy the effects of alcohol. He probably just wanted an excuse to enjoy it himself.

"So you're leaving?" Ruven asked.

"It's an incredible opportunity. I have to give it a try."

"You certainly do," Myrini agreed.

"The whole town will be in mourning not to have your pastries," Elusha said.

"I'm sure they'll manage," Sorla said modestly, enjoying every minute of it. "But I am looking for a safe ride to the capital, so I came to put the word out. If you need any supplies for spring plantings, perhaps..." Sorla tried to sound casual. She knew perfectly well that no one had to go all the way to Laionesse for supplies, but she hoped that Ruven might just do it for old time's sake. He was her friend, and he could be protective of her when the occasion called for it. There was a time, before Elusha came along, when he seemed like he'd do anything to make her happy...

Ruven's brows knotted in worry just like Grau. "I wish I could, but..." Sorla paused with her plate heaped with food she hadn't asked for. "It's a ways. And with spring coming on so fast, and the wedding, and..."

"Yes—of course. I understand completely. You're so busy at this time of year, for sure, especially this year. I'll find someone."

"I'll ask around for you," Myrini said. "Someone will be going to the capital before long."

"It just better be someone who will watch over Sorla," Ruven said.

Elusha nodded earnestly. "Especially with the shady characters on the road these days."

Elusha was so sweet. Ruven and Elusha were perfect together. By next year they would probably have a baby.

Sorla couldn't wait to get out of this town and—hopefully—find a life that belonged to her, instead of just crashing someone else's dinner.

CHAPTER FOUR

WORK USUALLY KEPT Sorla occupied enough that she didn't have time to worry, and that was one reason she always worked so hard. The other reason, of course, was that she just took pride in a job well done. She always had, thank the fates, even when her work had gone ignored.

And these days it was never ignored. She was always trying to outdo herself, and the locals usually bought every last bit of her specials, along with the old favorites, eagerly awaiting each season's bounty and throwing spare coins in the tip jar.

But this week she didn't have the enthusiasm for a new recipe. She was anxious and distracted, thinking of her charming prince of letters.

People said Prince Seldon wasn't handsome, but Sorla thought he was an uglyish handsome, more interesting than the usual kind. Plain white bread was good, after all, but also very boring. The prince was more like Sorla's savory red cabbage and juniper tart, which a lot of people didn't like, but the ones who did liked it more than anything.

Days passed and she couldn't find anyone to take her to the capital. Then, at the passing of another week, she worried that she had better answer the letter, at least. Seldon would surely wonder if she didn't even thank him for the offer.

She started to second guess herself as she rarely had before. Did the offer have a time limit? Maybe he would hire someone else to fill this open position. No—she read the all-

too-brief letter for the twentieth time that day—he was very clear. The royal bakery needed a baker, “and I think you would be perfect for the job, considering your background. If this suits you, please come.”

What if Meirin and Feirin were right after all and he did want her as a consort? What if he'd been waiting and biding his time? He never said anything like that, but what would she say if she got there and he offered that instead? Would it be very romantic or actually very horrifying?

I don't even have the right parts for that...

When Velsa and Grau got her this nice, realistic body Sorla told them not to give her womanly parts, because she knew Fanarlem were at higher risk for being raped. They still lived in Daramon lands back then, and the Daramons believed that Fanarlem were tainted souls who could only be redeemed by serving the cruelest whims of their creators, but men wouldn't usually bother if they realized their victim wasn't equipped for it. Sorla felt she was safe now, and yet it seemed both weird and impractical to ask for a trip to the Fanarlem maker out of nowhere, when no one was courting her. But she also got the sense she was missing out on certain feelings and private experiences that other girls whispered about.

In the very unlikely event that Prince Seldon did want to have sex with me, I suppose I would have some excuse for putting him off, and I could run home if I needed to.

She couldn't really imagine the prince turning into such a lecherous creature when she saw him again, however. He had always been respectful. If he ever did think of her that way, he would probably be slow...and tender...

“Hey! Daydreamer! Are you in there? I just asked for a black coffee?”

She looked up and Dalaran was standing right at the counter.

Ugh. Of all the people to catch her in an embarrassing daze of imagining Prince Seldon touching her. Thank the fates Fanarlem didn't blush. She poured the coffee. “Here.”

“What kind of customer service is that?”

“The kind you deserve.” Dalaran, the local necromancer, was nothing but trouble, and always had been. If he wasn’t outright on the run from someone he owed a debt to, or trying to borrow money, he was just annoying. Plus he rarely ordered more than a single cup of black coffee and left no tip.

“Ouch,” he said, smoothing his black curls. He just looked like trouble too, almost rakish but too sickly and sly to manage it well, with fangish teeth and clothes that could always use mending, cleaning, or the clasps lined up the correct way. “And here I came to help you out. I hear you’re looking for a ride to the capital.”

Sorla’s eyes widened with horror. “No! Not from you. Just drink your coffee in the corner.” She pointed to an empty table.

Mara, an older lady who was one of the many regulars, muttered, “Leave her alone, Dalaran. She’s not making any deals with you, not under my watch.”

“Nor in any other case,” Sorla said. “We all know your deals are devil’s bargains. And I’m not some desperate kid.”

“Hmph!” he said, leaning on the counter. “I’m not the one riding to the capital. And I’m not asking for money. This is just me being a decent citizen. I’m trying to help you out.”

“Nobody trusts you, Dalaran. Leave her alone,” Mara said, getting out of her chair now.

Sorla crossed her arms. “Who is it? Who is this mysterious person going to the capital?”

“You may have heard that my cousin Dorithan just came back from the front lines and I’ve been helping him recover,” Dalaran said.

“I haven’t heard that,” Mara said, and now Sorla wished she would step back out of it.

“I hadn’t either,” Sorla said. “You’ve never mentioned a cousin.”

“Well, we’re not close. That branch of the family doesn’t like me much.”

“So maybe they’re not so bad,” Sorla said. She genuinely disliked Dalaran, but the one thing she did like about him is that she could hassle him endlessly and he didn’t get upset. It was good practice for the travelers, who could be quite rude.

“Exactly,” Dalaran said. “He’s a good, upstanding sort of person and all that. And his family has more money too, so there’s a family home in the capital where he’s going back to recover. He’d be a good traveling companion. He’s quiet. Big guy, people don’t mess with him, but he would never hurt a lady. And he’s just seen the horrors of war. He’s in no mood to cause trouble. Just wants to get home as fast as he can.”

“The horrors of war,” Sorla repeated.

“Well, if that’s true, goddess bless him,” Mara said. “Assuming he fought on our side.”

“Of course he did,” Dalaran said, as he was of the Ven-Diri, a group of Daramons who had settled in Miralem lands and rejected the beliefs of their kindred. “All of my family are here, and devoted to old ways.”

“But why would they send the poor guy to recuperate at your house?” Sorla asked, but as soon as she said the words, she knew the answer.

It was confirmed by Dalaran’s long pause, unusually serious for him. “There’s only one reason they ever send ‘em to me,” he said.

The “visiting cousin”, likely sent to the only necromancer who would take him in these times, had arrived here as a corpse.

CHAPTER FIVE

“OoH...” Velsa winced as Sorla told her parents the situation. “I just don’t understand why the Ven-Diri do such things. Let the dead rest!”

“You’re one to talk!” Grau grinned. “I seem to remember you bringing me back from the dead once.”

“That’s different. You clung to life and gave me your consent.”

Grau shook a little more spicy sauce onto his rice and egg. “Bringing people back is just the Ven-Diri way, when they can manage it. They don’t look at death the same way we do. I’m more worried about sending Sorla off with any relative of Dalaran’s than the fact that he was dead for a bit.”

“Should we all meet with him?” Velsa asked. “We could sense him out with our telepathy, Sorla, and we should get an idea.” She paused. “Do the undead ever look...corpsey?”

“If they do, we’ll get a taste of what it’s like when the hill folk come into town and see Fanarlem for the first time and they’re not used to it,” Grau said.

“When you put it like that...,” Velsa said.

“But we’re not rotting,” Sorla said, “We’re not juicy or... waxen...”

“Bloated,” Velsa murmured.

“Yikes,” Grau said. “It can’t be that bad or no one would do it. I’m sure this man isn’t that mouse in the rain barrel.”

“No! You said you wouldn’t mention that mouse again!” Velsa cried. She really hated finding small animals dead.

“Skree! Skree!” Blueberry flew up and flapped his wings into Grau’s rice bowl.

“Curses!” Grau snapped as his precious egg rice went flying off the tips of Blueberry’s wings. The price of imported rice had skyrocketed since border trade at the river shut down, the humble meal turning into a luxury. “I was just trying to say that it’s worth meeting him, since you’ve had no luck otherwise. Either he’s a perfectly nice corpse or he’s clearly related to Dalaran and you’ll be back at the start,” Grau said, swatting Blueberry off. “Well, maybe this is a sign I should get back to work.”

“I’ll clean up,” Sorla said, since it was her pet destroying the place, as usual.

As Grau slipped out of dinner to get back to his potions work, Sorla looked at Velsa.

“Will you be okay here?” she asked softly.

“I swear that we do know how to survive without you,” Velsa said, with a wry smile. “The customers might be disappointed, but I’ve done enough of the baking over the years that I can keep the doors open, I’m sure.”

“I don’t mean it like that. But...it’s not what you love doing, and...Feirin is...preoccupied.”

Sorla certainly didn’t want to offer criticism on Grau and Velsa’s marriage, when they seemed as happy as anyone she’d ever known, and it was very hard for her to think badly of Grau himself.

When they first took her in, they were in the Daramon lands, and Sorla suspected Velsa had been created to be a concubine, even though her and Grau were pretending otherwise. She was too pretty, her movements too delicate and practiced, and she had a glimmer of fear in her eyes that hinted she was living a lie and could be in danger any moment.

But Sorla was in immediate awe of the man she would one day call her father. Of all the masters she had served,

sometimes the wives were the cruelest of all—but just as often, they were dripping with hollow compassion and miniscule kindnesses for Sorla before they told her what to do. The men, however, were usually absent and ignored her completely. They were the overarching masters of the household, often absent, coming home to dole discipline on the children, eat, and take their wife to bed, presumably in the hopes of creating more children to discipline.

And then there was Grau, at that time working for the city-state, participating in the mysterious daily work of a sorcerer, but then coming home every night to Velsa, spending time with her, talking with her and not at her, the two of them laughing and murmuring, and then even welcoming Sorla into their orbit. Grau bought cakes and joked around with them and reassured Velsa when she worried. He was protective of his family in a way Sorla had never seen before—like his spirit was a shelter.

However, it was his dream to develop potions for a living, and when they had all decided to open the cafe, that was Sorla's dream and she had always been the primary baker. Grau didn't do any baking and he was not that great with customers either. He didn't mind cleaning the kitchen or the dining areas, but Sorla usually felt the need to come in after him and do a better job.

Mostly, for the past eight years, he had been trying to develop potions that would improve the creation of Fanarlem. He had some success, but nothing that was really viable.

“I know I'll be doing most of the work here,” Velsa said. “But it's fine. Developing new magical methods is not quick work.”

“I just hope you get enough help. Running a cafe was my dream, not yours. And making potions is Feirin's dream. But I feel like you're getting stuck without any dreams.”

“My dreams aren't possible yet,” Velsa said. “So I don't mind putting them aside for now. I feel absolutely sure that when the opportunity presents itself, Grau will make sacrifices

for me too. Everything doesn't have to happen right this second."

"I guess you've always had more patience than I do..."

"Sometimes."

"What are your dreams, Meirin?"

"I have a few. I'm not sure which one will end up being right. I'm fascinated by the non-magical devices we saw when we lived in Nalim Ima...not the ones they're using to go to war with us, but the ones that make music...and the photograph... I'd like to know how they work." Her eyes flicked up toward the bedroom, where she kept a photograph of her and Grau, when Grau still had a flesh and blood body, before he'd been killed and had to become a Fanarlem. "Other times, I think that when Grau does develop some breakthrough potion for Fanarlem, I'd like to help him sell it. I'd like to help Fanarlem form stronger communities and work together to improve their lot, sort of like we've done here, where we all get together now and then, and we all know which business to patronize and which not to patronize, and so on. And other times..."

"You do have a lot on your mind already," Sorla said, somewhat reassured that Velsa had dreams of her own.

"Well, other times I still dream of just moving far away from everyone with Grau and having a cozy little house and a garden and two horses and minding our own business. People wear me out."

"I understand!" Sorla laughed, but even though Sorla knew all too well that the world was full of awful people, she thrived on crowds when they were the right kind. She was even quite good at turning somewhat difficult people around. She knew Grau and Velsa would never follow her to the big city, but it was the place she dreamed of being, as soon as she could get there.

"Grau doesn't always understand my fascination with machines," Velsa continued, more seriously. "And sometimes we don't have the same opinions about how Fanarlem's lives

should or could go in the future either. As you know, we have a lively debate now and then. But...we trust each other enough to disagree sometimes. You'll be meeting a lot of new people in Laionesse, and they'll probably have more diverse points of view than in a town like this, too...so if you carry one thing with you from home, I hope it's that. Not everyone has to agree with you, but they do have to be worthy of your trust.”

CHAPTER SIX

“YOU CAN USE your telepathy from out here, can’t you?” Sorla asked Velsa. “I think I’d like to meet him by myself. If I do decide he’d make a safe traveling companion...well, I want to see how we get along without anyone else in the way.”

“Oh no, you think I’m a meddling mother!” Velsa said, laughing a little.

“No, I think if he is really ghastly, two reactions will be worse than one! I certainly don’t want to judge him on his appearance and not his character. If you stay outside and use your telepathy from afar, you’ll be able to do that with a clear mind.”

“That’s very true. And we certainly do want to judge him on his character.” Velsa and Sorla stopped walking just outside of Dalaran’s home, a narrow building sandwiched firmly between two larger houses. He was just a renter of the shabby place. The dark curtains were always closed, but smoke trailed out of the slightly lopsided chimney.

“I remembered last night that I *have* met undead people before,” Velsa added. “The servants at Dormongara’s castle. They looked all right, just a little pale. It was their behavior that was sort of odd and dead inside. They were very servile.”

“Sounds like Fanarlem with badly damaged souls.”

“Yes,” Velsa said. “That was exactly it. Their souls were damaged to the point where there didn’t seem to be much left of them...”

“Well, quiet and servile might not be a bad thing for an escort to the capital.” Sorla shrugged, trying to make the best of it, because she just wanted to get on with her shiny new life. But nerves were giving her a funny, weak-kneed feeling.

She rapped the dragon-face knocker on Dalaran’s door.

“Ah—Sorla...good morning...didn’t expect you so early.” Dalaran was wearing a shabby robe that sat unevenly on his shoulders, black breeches, and wool slippers, with ghastly pale calves in between that were probably as horrifying a sight as any undead person. Sorla was embarrassed for him.

“It’s eleven!” she snapped. “You were sleeping?”

“I’m a creature of the night.”

“Except when I see you prowling all over town by day.”

Dalaran ran a hand through his mussed curls and regarded her with somewhat stupefied bloodshot eyes. “Well, I’m a creature of whenever I happen to be awake. Come in.”

“Oof. I should have asked to meet somewhere else.” Sorla whacked her hands down the front of her skirt as if to straighten herself out as a counterpart to Dalaran’s hovel. The ground floor of the building was a single room, with a large hearth for cooking and a few haphazard chairs. The alarming tools of a necromancer’s trade were crowding tables and shelves: skulls and specimens preserved in jars, sinister looking little instruments and leaky dark vials.

Sorla wrapped her arms around herself. *At least the floor is swept. And there is a surprising lack of cobwebs.*

“My cousin tidied up just a bit,” Dalaran said. “You’ll appreciate that, I’m sure.”

“Hopefully I’m not here long enough to appreciate it,” Sorla said.

The Ven-Diri always made her nervous. They were the only Daramons who lived among the Miralem, where they enjoyed freedom to practice their religion. They felt that the entire point of life was to dance with death, learning to communicate with the spirit world until it finally closed in on

them, at which point this transition was treated with intense pomp and ritual, with mourning stages that lasted for years.

They were also the only people who studied necromancy and knew the ways of bringing the dead back. Sorla had seen dead people, and the last thing she wanted to consider was stiff, cold flesh and dead eyes suddenly snapping back to awareness and struggling to move again.

The Ven-Diri might be allies, but they did tend to make everyone nervous.

“Dorr! Come down! That girl’s here!” Dalaran yelled upstairs. “Do you want some coffee?” he offered, and then he said, “Never mind, you don’t need to eat or drink.”

“I don’t think people offer visitors drinks because they show up with a desperate thirst,” Sorla said dryly, but the sarcasm was lost. Of *course* Dalaran would show the opposite of generosity. But she didn’t trust the cleanliness of his cups anyway.

Heavy footsteps thumped down the stairs. Their owner seemed to have a limp, and to be a large man, as Dalaran said.

Oh dear, he is going to be some sort of monster... Sorla lifted her face, vowing to greet him without fear.

The stairs in the corner twisted upward into the shadows, and from this twist came dusty boots and the long hem of a traveling coat. Then loose black sleeves, a pale face and dark, tired eyes. Although his pallor wasn’t exactly healthy and scar tissue marred his cheek from jaw to temple, Sorla’s first impression was that he didn’t look like a horrifying monster, at least.

No—definitely not.

She might have even dared to say he was as ugly-handsome as Seldon.

But...he didn’t exactly look *well*, either.

He came down the stairs the rest of the way and his limp was pronounced, and his face was the only visible part of his body. The rest of him was swathed in black, including gloves.

If he had anything to hide, one would never know past the gloomy fashion sense of the Ven-Diri.

The only adornments on his all-black ensemble were silver clasps on his coat and thin silver earrings in the shape of vials. She was pretty sure they meant he'd handled potions in the military, confirmed by the potion dart gun at his hip, while he had a long dagger at the other. He was nearly a foot taller than Dalaran and naturally broad. Sorla's neck creaked when she tried to look up at him, like her joints weren't even broken in for that angle.

She immediately looked down again. She hated how tall some people could be, when she was so small herself. In theory she should have been able to be tall too. Her body should be anything she wanted, but Fanarlem female skeletons only came in one size—five feet tall, just big enough to work and look somewhat grown up, but not one inch more. It was maddening. *Maybe when I've become an acclaimed baker to the royals and have saved my money, I can order a custom skeleton and stop looking up at everyone!*

“I'm leaving today,” Dorr told her without introduction, speaking like he was trying not to wince with some ache or pain, baring his own fangish teeth. “You can come if you like. It doesn't matter to me. I have a two-seater carriage and a good horse. I'll push as fast as I can. I might sleep outside, or in barns. It won't be fancy.”

“I don't need fancy,” Sorla said, a little warily.

She tried to probe his mind. Gently, because her telepathy wasn't very good, and she didn't want him to catch her. Although Daramons didn't have active telepathic abilities, some of them were still surprisingly defensive, and getting caught prying into someone's mind was an offense that would ruin any alliance before it began. Miralem tended to be less sensitive about it because they were prying right back. To them it was another way of sizing someone up.

Shock. Pain. Anger—lost friends—betrayal—how could they leave us out here to die...

His mind had just left the battlefield. She didn't know how long he'd been back from the dead, but apparently not long enough to shake such visceral memories.

"Didn't like what you saw, did you?" he said. "Well, don't worry. I won't hurt you and I'll stay out of trouble on the road. I have no taste for violence."

"I'm sorry for prying."

"You have to scope me out for your own safety. That's wise," he said.

His voice was hoarse, like he'd breathed in something toxic. While he might not be a monster, he was definitely an unnerving traveling companion. Here in their tucked away town, the war felt very far away. He brought all of its terrors right into the room, and his death and revival had clearly been hard on his soul. That, she could sense from even the briefest contact.

But he won't hurt me. I am sure of that, and if Velsa agrees, well...he's just a way of getting to my goal. Once I see Seldon and the royal bakery, the journey will be forgotten.

And then, I don't really want a traveling companion who looks too gentle either. Fanarlem do get kidnapped now and then. So maybe the fact that he unnerves me a little is perfect.

"I'll go," she said. "I just need to go home and get my clothes and things."

"That's fine," he said. "Just don't get too caught up in goodbyes."

Sorla swallowed at the thought of goodbyes. "I won't."

"Eat some of this soup before you go," Dalaran told his cousin. "And I'll pack the rest up."

"I don't want food."

"I don't care. It's an important part of the healing process. And you know what happens if you don't."

"I didn't want to come back."

"Everybody says that at first."

“You have packing to do, don’t you?” Dorithan said to Sorla in his rough voice, and she nodded and quickly fled. She wasn’t eavesdropping, but she felt guilt all the same.

She whisked out the door and Velsa was waiting right outside.

“You decided to go with him, didn’t you?”

“He’s not dangerous to me. If you agree with that assessment, at least.”

“I think he will leave you alone except to keep any other trouble away. But...are you sure? The poor man. It’s very hard to look into the minds of people who come back from war.”

“He didn’t want to come back,” Sorla said. “But maybe I can cheer him up a little.”

“You’re very good at cheering people up,” Velsa agreed.

“He said he didn’t feel like eating but I’ll bring him a chocolate cream tart,” Sorla decided.

The journey didn’t sound so bad if she thought of Dorithan not as a big, intimidating dead man, but as an unfortunate war hero in need of some reminders of why life was worth living. He was not unlike their first cottage here, which was full of dust and rodent droppings, but which Sorla soon had polished to a shine.

CHAPTER SEVEN

JUST TWO DAYS AGO, Dorr awoke from a living nightmare. He had been trying to scream, but his voice was ragged. No one was coming for him. He was a broken body in a puddle of cold mud. Another man was dying beside him—an enemy. Dorr had blinded him with poison.

Then an explosion tossed them both, and Dorr listened to the other man sobbing out, “I can’t see...I don’t want to die like this... Who’s there? Is anybody there? Please, somebody...please help... Meirin...Mei...Mei-mei...”

No one was there, except Dorr, who was dying himself. He thought about reaching out his hand, and taking the enemy’s in his own. But when he dragged his eyes down his body, there was no hand left to reach—there was barely an arm.

They would die slowly, in dragged out pain. They were both Daramons, with magical blood that would try to heal them until they lost too much.

“I’m sorry,” the man choked. Dorr would never know what he was sorry for, but it was easy to feel sorry in this moment. He was sorry to never see his family again, sorry for the pain they would feel when they heard, but they would take comfort in his bravery.

I was here to maim the enemy. That’s what they told me to do, and I did it.

His own vision slowly closed in, cold seeping into his bones.

Suddenly the withering cries were gone, along with the toxic, smoky smell and the bitter cold. He was safe in bed, surrounded by candlelight and the smell of herbs, completely disoriented.

He had never seen this room before. But he knew the smell of these particular herbs, and what they were used for.

“I wondered if you’d ever wake. I don’t know if you remember me. I’m your cousin, Dalaran. We were kids, last time we saw each other—at the Rithin’s Day fair. I stole the toy you were playing with, and you hit me.” A face looked down at him, with a family resemblance, but nothing comforting about it.

Dorr remembered this incident, yes. He was nine and Dalaran stole his treasured figure of Morarith, the shadow walker, and returned it sans one articulated bone leg.

“Thought you might be too far gone,” Dalaran continued, with tight relief, and suddenly Dorr was struggling to get out of bed. His body was cold and stiff and sluggish, despite the crackling fire and the warm civilian clothes.

They would have dressed up my corpse before they sent it home, of course...

Dorr knew all the protocol of the battlefield necromancers. They didn’t revive; no time for that. But they would preserve as many bodies as they could: washed, dressed, and magically suspended.

Dorr knew the men who had likely saved him, and he had worked with them, helping them because his own specialty as a battlefield apothecary overlapped theirs.

He didn’t realize how it would feel.

“I don’t feel right...” He coughed, choking on his own voice. “My body isn’t working right.”

“That’s exactly how it goes,” Dalaran said. “Especially in your case, cousin. Your comrades must have really liked you. They went to a lot of damn trouble to put you back together. Or something resembling you, anyway. You need some tonic. You know how it goes. Then, lots of rest, food, piss and shit.

Gotta get all the rusty clockwork going again. Then lots more rest. You won't feel as dead as you do right now forever."

"I need to get home," Dorr said. He wanted his own bed and his family, and he didn't care if it was embarrassing for a grown man. Everyone wanted their mothers on the battlefield. He would never forget the sound of that man who died beside him, crying for his mother, first Meirin, but soon just a childish plea.

"You need two weeks of rest at least."

"Not here. Not with you."

"The dead are so ungrateful," Dalaran murmured. "Well, if you can make it home, I won't stop you, but I'd strongly advise rest first."

Dorr forced himself out of bed. Every muscle in his body felt stiff, cold, and unfamiliar. Through sheer willpower, he slumped to the door. He was shivering, but his brow tickled like it was trying to remember how to sweat.

"By the spirits, man, give yourself a break!" Dalaran groaned. "You'll feel a thousand times better in a couple of weeks. You're like any other man who's been injured in battle. Take your tonic and rest up and your body will start working again."

"I just want to go home," Dorr said, but he realized he couldn't go anywhere yet, and reluctantly got back into bed.

NOW A FEW DAYS had passed and his body was remembering how to work. Magic and non-magical life seemed to be at war inside him, his heart slowing to almost nothing and then kicking into a normal rhythm and back again, his digestion struggling with more than broth, his breath ragged. As the nightmares of the battle were no longer so fresh, he could reason with himself. Dalaran was right. Soon his body would be functioning again in such a way that he would forget magic kept him alive now.

Mostly.

Then he learned just what Dorven and Saralengar had done to keep him alive. He could imagine them, walking the battlefield together after, seeing the bodies of friends, trying to decide who was revivable. Dorr could tell he had been too damaged to save under any normal circumstance. They took a chance because they liked him; there was no other explanation.

As soon as he could walk, he announced his departure. He procured a horse and carriage, and then Dalaran asked if he might be willing to take a girl with him.

“Why?” Dorr asked, as he had never been less in the mood for female company.

“She needs a ride, and we help each other out in this town.”

“I would hope people help each other out in every town.”

“She’s a resourceful type. I doubt she’ll need anything from you except that extra seat in your carriage. She’s just a doll girl. Doesn’t even need to eat or pee every hour like some women I’ve traveled with.”

A Fanarlem? Dorr didn’t expect to find Fanarlem this far into Miralem country. At least a Fanarlem girl couldn’t rightly judge him for being dragged from the dead and pieced together. That basically described their entire race. She was probably an escaped slave, and most of them were kind of funny looking, but that was preferable right about now. At least he wouldn’t be too ashamed to be in the company of a fellow wretched soul.

“Fine...if she doesn’t mind that I’m not feeling conversational.”

“She’ll stop by tomorrow morning,” Dalaran said.

Dorr tried his best to get ready for the journey, forcing down some broth, procuring a horse (thanks to his honest friends, he showed up with his money in an inner pocket of his clothes), sweeping the cobwebs from Dalaran’s squalid bachelor apartment, and generally forcing his sluggish body to move so Dalaran could see he was good to go.

In the morning, just as promised, the Fanarlem girl appeared downstairs: neatly dressed, bright-eyed, with glossy black curls pinned back with ribbons, completely and undeniably adorable, and looking like she was trying very hard not to be unnerved by him.

Great.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SORLA THOUGHT she could say goodbye bravely, without crying.

She was very wrong. She could hardly stop crying. It hit her just how much having a family had meant to her, as if she had never let herself fully acknowledge what Grau and Velsa meant to her until she was setting off on her own.

“It’s okay.” Velsa smoothed her hair like a real mother. “We’ll write, and we’ll visit, and you’ll visit, and this isn’t goodbye at all.”

Then she started sobbing too, because if Sorla really found a home in Laionesse, it really was goodbye. Sorla was never going to make such a journey back. Once in a while Grau and Velsa might visit Mr. Trinavel, the Fanarlem maker in Laionesse, but most physical repairs could be done at home.

Grau got that lopsided, pained smile that meant he was trying not to show his emotions, and brought out a dagger in a sheath that he often carried himself. “Take this, in case you do need protection.”

“I’m sure I won’t...”

“But I’ll feel better if you do. It has a little burning magic in it, so if you really concentrate, it’ll heat up like a poker, but it won’t make fire.”

“Thank you,” she choked out. “I’ll be honored to carry it.”

“I mean, it’s nothing fancy. I bought it off a blanket at a bazaar for three ilan. But I can’t send you off unarmed.”

Somehow, Sorla managed to pry herself away, eternally grateful that Fanarlem didn't have tears, and pulled herself back together. Dalaran was lurking outside of his own house like a bandit, motioning her close.

"I need one favor out of—"

"Oh, no." Sorla jerked back. "I knew it! I should have known better than to—"

"Not a favor for me, doll. Take care of *him*. He's no danger to you, but he's also not well. When you come back from the spirit world like that, well...it's hard. He has to take his tonic and eat a real meal every day. Just make sure he does that. That's all I'm asking. I don't want his parents to blame me for sending him home too far gone."

"What? What happens if he doesn't take his tonic and eat!?"

"If his body doesn't get back to real living, bad things happen."

"Like what? That hardly sounds safe!"

"His soul will start to go, and if his soul dies... Well, let me just say, if he tries to drink any raw blood, head straight for the nearest sorcerer and tell them what's happening."

Sorla fumed. "I'm the one who was looking for protection going to Laionesse, not to babysit someone who might turn into a monster! I'm going back home. After I said goodbye and everything."

"No—no—I promise. It's not likely to happen. He ate a little. And most men tend to listen more when a pretty young woman bosses them than when I do it. I just don't want anything bad to happen after his friends went to that much trouble to save him."

Sorla probably would have gone home if it wasn't for that phrasing—"his friends went to so much trouble". In any other circumstance, Dalaran surely would have mentioned his own efforts to save the man. He was always the first (and usually only) one to sing his own praises. There must be something about Dorr's circumstances he found genuinely touching.

“Okay,” she sighed. “I’ll make sure he eats. Making sure people eat is probably one of my greatest talents.”

“Exactly. You’re the perfect person for the job.”

“No cheap flattery out of you. You just had to call me ‘doll’, after knowing me all this time?”

“What’s wrong with it? You’re a cute doll.”

“I guess it’s better to be a cute doll than a loser who can’t bother dressing properly for company!” Sorla growled at him.

“I’m home, and clothes are itchy.” Dalaran swung the door open. “After you.”

Sorla had Blueberry perched on her shoulder, and she had just fed him so his lazy head was snuggled against her neck. Dorr was nesting some glass bottles in paper within a crate, and she worried he might tell her he didn’t want Blueberry along, but he hardly seemed to notice her beloved pet.

Dorr finally looked up at her, grimacing. Clearly he was in pain.

“Are we ready?” Sorla asked, trying to stay cheerful.

“Yes. Come on.”

She followed him through the narrow room to the back alley, where a two-seater carriage and a handsome horse of the shaggy northern type awaited them.

“What a nice little carriage!” Sorla said, pleasantly surprised.

“I told you, he’s the rich cousin,” Dalaran said. “Well, you two stay safe out there.”

Dorr was loading the bottles into the small stowage area of the carriage, and she climbed up onto the seat before he felt the need to offer her help. She sat there, wriggling her toes, feeling generally self-conscious.

Then the seat creaked as he sat beside her. *Fates, why does he have to be so damn tall!*

She hardly had any curves to speak of either, and it was hard not to wish she was a Miralem woman with the strong and feminine frame of a warrior.

“Ho!” He twitched the reins.

Sorla sat frozen, watching all of the extremely familiar places of home slowly pass by: the shops with living quarters above and thatched roofs, Maren Peladir’s chickens skittering out of their way, the horse clopping over one of the stone bridges crossing the shallow creeks that wove around the town.

I just wish he’d say something. Some little pleasantries. I get the feeling he’ll be annoyed if I say something first...

His mind was so heavy and troubled. She couldn’t ignore it. She wanted to fix him right up. Of course, only telepathic healers could really help men who came back from the war in a bad way. That is, outside of time, but time was very slow and Sorla was not very patient.

Now they were passing the small herb farm run by Lorasel, an older woman who had once been the town midwife and had trained all the current town midwives. This meant they would soon be past the streets Sorla walked every day.

It was odd he hadn’t even mentioned she was a Fanarlem. It seemed like whenever Sorla met a stranger, they had to tell her about some other Fanarlem they knew once, or give her some kind of general condolences for being what she was, which was particularly aggravating.

It was like he hadn’t even noticed.

Well, how often have I wished someone would just treat me like a normal person? I guess this is it.

“Are you reading my mind?” he said suddenly.

“No!”

“You look deep in concentration.”

“I can’t read minds. I’m not that good. I’m just wondering what you’re about.”

“So you would read my mind if you were that good.”

“No!”

“I think you already know there’s nothing good to read,” he said. “War is...insanity. I don’t know how I could have ever thought otherwise.”

“Feirin was a soldier,” she said, nodding as if she understood. Sorla had seen a little of war, but probably not enough to really understand. She wasn’t sure about Grau. Troubles had a way of bouncing off of him, or maybe he was good at burying them. “How long were you in the military?”

“Four years. But only some months on the front lines.” He looked far into the distance. “I’m a coward, maybe.”

“I’m sure you’re not,” Sorla said, vaguely troubled by this conversation. The war had been going on for a long time now—years. Almost as long as she could remember, depending on how you named the start of it, as it had brewed slowly, with increasing border skirmishes. By the time the Kalanites formally declared war, it was like hearing a woman was having a baby just weeks before the due date.

A number of young men and women had gone to fight, and some had died, but not as many as in larger cities. Farmers weren’t drafted. Food was a necessity.

The Miralem hadn’t lost yet, but it also didn’t feel like they were winning. It was starting to feel like there would always be a war, and people would keep dying, and nothing would come of it—which had plenty of people wondering what the point was, anyway.

Sorla didn’t like thinking about it. She opened her bag. Blueberry came to life at the rustle.

“Would you like a chocolate tart? I made them this morning.” She pushed her pet’s long nose back from the bag.

“No.” He added, “No, thank you,” with a belated nod to manners.

“Of all the things I make, everyone says these are the very best,” she said. “If you just try one little bite, I’ll leave you

alone.” She felt she could not allow him to refuse food. Dalaran hinted that horrible things would happen if he didn’t eat, and she wanted to see him eat something right now.

“Not now.”

“In exactly one hour, then,” she said. “Promise me.”

“Exactly, eh? Do you have a clock on your person?” he asked, faintly bemused.

Then he turned to her as if she’d exhausted him, and she was startled by the sudden full eye contact. It forced her to give him a fresh assessment and realize that he was just a normal man after all, and not that old either. He was probably no more than thirty, just the age of men who would court her, if anyone was interested—not that they were.

He had a somewhat craggy look, and something about his face seemed uneven although she couldn’t pinpoint what it was. But he had a very good nose, and Sorla could appreciate a good nose. He also had enviable hair, very black and thick, with a loose curl, unruly and directionless. Sorla loved hair like that but she didn’t know very many people who possessed it. She had to roll her hair with wet rags and then lightly work in perfumed oil to set a curl.

If she had a type, and Seldon was that type, Dorr was uncomfortably close to making the cut as well.

He held out a hand. “Just give me a piece now and we’ll be done with this. Otherwise I’ll eat when we get where we’re going.”

She broke up a piece, as best she could, since it was creamy. It stuck to her fingers and she had to sort of wipe it into his palm. He smacked the palm to his mouth while she licked her fingers.

At first bite, something crossed his face. His pale skin and tired eyes briefly seemed to shake off the specter of death.

He licked his lips, although they were clean. He looked surprised, then thoughtful, then he turned to her again.

“I’ll have the rest,” he said.

CHAPTER NINE

SINCE HE HAD COME BACK, Dorr tasted nothing. Food was dull. Broth was like salted water with some faintly bitter mineral quality. Potatoes were just mush. Toast was rough and lifeless. The only thing he tasted at all was the one thing he didn't want to taste—the harshly medicinal cocktail of herbs and spell work that he'd have to drink every day now if he wanted to remain alive and well.

This chocolate tart was like a miracle. It felt like the first thing he'd ever tasted, like he'd been completely reborn and forgotten everything but this. Its sweet silkiness was balanced by a pleasant bitterness, a roasty molten combination of cocoa bean and cream that lingered on the tongue like a deep kiss.

Spirits beyond, I shouldn't think of it like that.

He just wanted more. It was the first thing that reminded him how good it was to live.

“Here, please! Take it all!” She handed it over, a bit messily, then added dangerously, “I brought two.”

“Just one,” he said. “I'm supposed to eat only simple food for now.”

“Oh. Yes, yes. Don't get sick. Sometimes I forget that for flesh people, food has to go all the way through and out.” She wiggled her finger in the air as if to suggest an anatomy lesson.

“You do eat, don't you?” he asked. “But where does that go?”

“It’s a spell,” she said. “Once I swallow food it vanishes. There’s a portal somewhere. *My* guess is that the makers of the spell have the portal lead back to their own land and they sell a bunch of chewed up Fanarlem food as fertilizer or pig feed or something, but it’s just a theory. Just so you know, I think real bodies are quite interesting. I don’t find it gross like some Fanarlem do. I guess you don’t feel that way right now if you’re on the mend, but isn’t digestion satisfying? I’ve always thought it would be.”

“Digestion is a great inconvenience,” he said. This sudden deluge of words bouncing from chewed up food, to pig slops, to digestion, was like no conversation he had ever had with a woman.

The ideal Ven-Diri women—and men, for that matter—were delicate with words, choosing them like they were selecting the most unblemished produce at a market. Certainly no woman of his own kind would imply that they had ever digested anything, nor envied those who did.

She looked away, fidgeting with the paper that had wrapped the pastry. “I’m sorry. You don’t want to hear about any of that right now. I just wasn’t sure if you knew that I know how flesh bodies work, but I do and I’m not squeamish about anything.”

“Ven-Diri women are very ethereal,” he said.

“Of course,” she said, and she didn’t say much after that.

Well, Dorr had never claimed to be good at idle conversation. He had grown up in his parents’ apothecary, working with herbs and concoctions, managing the shop alone frequently from the age of fourteen, and joined the military as soon as he was able, with some idea that it would be honorable and romantic. He never had any carefree youth, parties or courtships since he was always working and studying and then the war had swept him away, along with many of his peers, just at the age when former generations would have started making their own fun. Ven-Diri marriages were usually arranged in any case, and he trusted his parents to choose a girl

better than he could himself. His mother had already written him with some potential prospects.

He shot a few quick glances at her, still vaguely alarmed by how she looked so very alive and had a quite agreeable appearance.

He had never really *known* a Fanarlem, but it wasn't strange to see them. He knew a few people who had hired Fanarlem as servants, since they usually showed up in Laionesse already possessing domestic skills and eager to work for actual wages, and the Ven-Diri were happy to hire them, perhaps even with a little extra sympathy because their existence was the fault of other Daramons.

Outside of the usual quirks of a doll—a petite body with big brown eyes and a generic prettiness—she had a face like morning sunshine, with an irrepressible eagerness even when she was obviously nervous. In complement to the neatly tied ribbons in her hair, she wore a typical Miralem white blouse, and a pinafore in a humble walnut brown embellished with pink trimmings, clean and pressed, against the light tawny-gold color of her skin. She was underdressed, but she wouldn't get cold anyway. She was missing a fingernail on her left hand. He found this endearing, for no good reason.

As soon as he thought anything about her was endearing, he had the awareness that a lot of things about her might be endearing.

He pushed aside such a thought immediately. Fanarlem might be charming, but he didn't want to be one of *those* guys, and they couldn't have families.

But now I can't have a family either, he realized. No matter how well an undead body might recover a reasonable level of function, no one had ever managed to get reproduction to work after death.

It had been the last thing on his mind, but he realized now that his parents' carefully curated list of marriage prospects would now be tossed in a fire.

Well, I wasn't thinking of marriage yet anyway. I've never been that romantic, so maybe it won't be hard to give up that idea. Much easier not to have any expectations. I can just manage the shop.

He tried to convince himself that he didn't care if he never taught a smaller version of himself to mix a healing potion, or felt a woman's warm skin in the night, or shared the Ancestor's Day Feast with a table of his grandchildren. He also tried not to take another look at the girl beside him. She was gazing out at the forest that came right up to the roadside. Her expression was somewhat anguished and he could tell she was thinking she'd embarrassed herself. She nibbled a fingernail and then caught herself.

She is very...cute.

The thought attacked him.

How could I be thinking that right now, of all times?

He felt broken beyond repair and completely unappealing, and it seemed a downright insult to this girl's lively personality that a wrecked, disgusting, dead thing like him would be thinking of her at all. She certainly deserved better than that, and didn't he only start thinking of her because he realized he couldn't have children? That wasn't fair either.

I just need to get home. It will all feel a little more normal, when I'm in a familiar place.

CHAPTER TEN

AHH! Stupid! Stupid! I can't believe I just prattled on like that about something I'm probably not even supposed to mention!

After Sorla's enthusiastic word avalanche about digestion, Dorr didn't say much. She wanted to curl up like a pillbug and roll right out of the carriage.

The one thing she could console herself with was that Dorr didn't seem that chatty anyway, and maybe he was hardly thinking about anything she said. They would both forget each other quickly once they reached Laionesse.

And they would reach the capital in good time. Dorr only stopped to feed and water the horse, slipping a little endurance potion into the mare's drink. They rode past dark, taking advantage of a nearly full moon.

"Well, this will do," he said, coming up to a small meadow just off the road.

"Is it safe enough from bandits?" Sorla asked. They would definitely be in sight of the road. She was aware that her adult body was more expensive than when she was a mere servant; that she would be a prize for someone.

"Bandits," he repeated dismissively.

"Is that a yes?" Sorla said nervously.

"There won't be any bandits, and on the rare chance that there is, I'll take care of them."

He took out a bedroll and unfurled it in the grass. He didn't make a fire or have any dinner. He took off his outer layer of

clothing but kept the coat close. "You might want to sleep in the carriage," he said. "It'll be a little more of a proper bed."

Sorla had brought a blanket and pillow from home, and arranged them on the bench. It wasn't wide enough for her to stretch out so she curled up, leaving her boots on in case she had to run. He limped a few feet away and got right to sleep. She could soon hear him breathe in a slow, heavy way, with occasional hitches and coughs.

He doesn't sound too good. I doubt he'd protect me from a clever bandit.

Sorla couldn't sleep. She missed home more than she expected. She used to be on her own; she thought she was accustomed to that. But, no, she'd gone soft. She missed the solid walls of home and the heavy blanket. She missed the flowers Velsa cut from the garden and put in the tall pink vase Grau gave her as an anniversary gift several years ago. Most of all, she missed knowing that Grau and Velsa were upstairs, with all their magical and telepathic powers and their love of her. She missed hearing them murmur and laugh together through the floorboards, even though she sometimes felt despair that she would ever have someone like that.

What if the prince and the bakery aren't enough to replace them?

She was as wide awake as she'd ever been, clutching Blueberry as he settled against her. She looked up at the moon, and the darkness around it seemed to go on forever. Her ears were pricked for danger. If any bandits showed up, she needed time to hide, and to calm herself down enough to put up telepathic shields. Dorr would have to take care of himself; at least no one would sell him into slavery.

She snapped awake, having fallen asleep without realizing it, waking with a start from a dream that big, sweaty hill folk had come out of the woods, declaring that Fanarlem were an affront to the goddess and they were going to burn her alive.

She heard a rustle.

Or was that a remnant of the dream?

No.

Blueberry was perked up now, watching something. She put a hand on the wyvern, hoping he would stay put. She would never forgive herself if the intruder shot him down.

Something was moving slowly through the patch of trees and brush near the road. Sorla went completely still, blank with terror as she stared toward the sound. Blueberry opened his mouth and made that tiny *kik-kik-kik* noise in the back of his throat.

The moon wasn't bright enough to see anything that mattered. She needed to use telepathy, but she couldn't snap out of her fear.

It was coming closer.

The horse let out a nervous whinny, moving its feet, wanting to escape its bonds, and now she knew she wasn't just dreaming. Someone was crawling through the grasses. She couldn't run. He probably had already spotted her.

You just need to tap into your telepathic powers. Come on, mind! You can do better than this!

But Sorla's power was always weak, hardly better than no power at all. She never needed it because she had Velsa. She fumbled for the dagger beside her, cringing at the rustling noise of her skirts and the blankets, closing her hand around the handle. How did she activate the heat magic? She never asked Grau for this oh-so-important detail. With her other arm, she held Blueberry against her. He didn't like that and started wriggling around, making louder honks of protest.

It was coming closer and closer; it was almost within striking distance of the sleeping Dorr; any minute a weapon would flash in the night, or maybe a telepathic attack Dorr wouldn't even see coming—

Suddenly Dorr's arm flung out of the covers, poison dart gun in hand, and Sorla heard the click of its trigger. A pained little dog bark followed. Dorr was on his feet now, gun still at the ready, but his shoulders relaxed.

“Damn,” he said softly. He glanced back at Sorla. “Did that wake you up? It was just a dog. I thought it might be a wolf.”

Sorla started shaking with relief. “I—I wasn’t sleeping,” she said. “I thought it was a bandit or the hill folk!”

“The ‘hill folk’?”

“You know!”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“The Fur and Hide clans! The tribesmen of the hills who think Fanarlem are an abomination against the goddess. Once in a while they come into town and if they see me, they will start making wards with their hands and speaking creepy prayers. They think we should be burned to release our souls.”

“I had no idea,” he repeated with a hint of sympathy in his rough voice. “But I told you I’d protect you.”

“What if it had been a bandit or a tribesman? I think they would have stabbed you before you even knew it!”

“That dog never got close to me,” he said. “I shot it with the potion. I would have done the same no matter what it was.”

The dog was whimpering and sniffing up Dorr’s leg.

“As it stands, I temporarily blinded this dog,” he said, allowing the dog to sniff his hand before he scratched its ears, as if in apology. “But the spell will fade in a day or two. It seems friendly, if confused. Anyway, if you’re this worried about bandits and so on, why are you going to a big city like Laionesse?”

“Because I’ll be safe there! I’ll be under royal protection.”

“Royal ‘protection’.” He snorted. “Why would the prince want a doll girl?”

As Sorla’s terror faded, a fuming anger replaced it. “Excuse me? I see you are Dalaran’s cousin after all. He wants me to work in the royal bakery, and maybe—just maybe—it’s because people come to town *just* to eat my baked goods. I’m

getting very tired of people suggesting he has some nefarious purpose, and that I should just stay in my safe little town and do the same safe little things I always do.”

“I apologize,” he said gruffly. “I didn’t mean to say it in the way I did. I would think the same if the prince made an offer to my sister. I wouldn’t trust the motives of Prince Seldon with any young woman.”

“I’ve never heard any rumors about him,” Sorla said, now wondering if there was something she didn’t know. “Is he a playboy?”

“Not exactly—”

“Or is this just based on a general feeling that young women need big!—tall!—strong!—men to protect them, even when they’re half-dead and probably could use some help themselves?”

Dorr immediately withdrew, giving her a cool look, but that was rich of him when he’d started it. “I’ll be out of your way soon,” he said, with a note of finality.

The dog was still sniffing him, with great interest and perhaps concern. The dog stopped and whined, and licked Dorr’s hand. Blueberry was approaching the dog from around Dorr’s side, sniffing in return, and the noses of the two beasts met. Sorla tensed when the dog barked and Blueberry briefly fanned his wings, but the tension faded almost as soon as it began.

“Well...I don’t know what we’ll do with this dog, but it needs a better home than wherever it came from,” Dorr said. The dog’s fur was thick and matted, concealing the dog’s skinny form at first glance, but upon closer inspection she could see that it was unkempt skin and bones. It looked like a farm dog that should have lots of children to play with; all big sweet eyes, long snout, floppy little ears and wagging tail.

“It does look hungry.” The dog kept trying to sniff and lick Dorr while Blueberry tried to sniff and groom the dog in return. Dorr ran a hand across the dog’s ribs. Now he went to the back of the carriage and got out the stew. The dog trotted

after him, making tiny groans like it was trying to hold back its starvation. Blueberry had flown onto the dog's back and was now riding it, picking fleas out of its fur and nibbling them up.

“Oh, Blue!” If Sorla hadn't been so annoyed at Dorr, she would have laughed over this.

“Have you considered keeping a dog in the capital?” he asked.

“What, to protect me from Prince Seldon?” she said with a little sarcasm. “I can't bring a dog to the bakery. And I think it likes you better than me.”

While the dog ate up all of the rations Dalaran had insisted Dorr needed to eat himself, Dorr took out a lantern and matches. As he lit the lantern, she noticed with sudden shock that his hands didn't match. One was pale and the other was tanned, and they also seemed to have slightly different shape and length of fingers.

He caught her staring and his face darkened. The dog was sniffing him all over and whined.

“This dog doesn't like me; it smells death,” he said.

“You're not dead anymore than I am,” Sorla said. She could guess at what happened. She'd heard the tales. Daramons could be pieced back together, even from other bodies. Once when Grau still had a flesh body and was badly hurt, Velsa had to go and ask the great necromancer Dormongara for the organs of a preserved corpse.

“I can see you haven't tasted death. I have more than tasted it; it's poisoned me,” he said. “Go get some sleep. I'll keep watch.”

“You need rest too,” she said. “And food. You just gave your dinner to the dog. And—the tonic. Dalaran said you need —”

“I don't need anyone to mother me,” he said. “I'll take care of myself. We're making good time and we'll be there quite soon.”

“Oh, I’m not mothering you. I’m making sure you don’t turn into a monster for purely selfish motives.” By now, Sorla had abandoned the idea of showing him gentle consideration.

“I don’t want that any more than you do.” He sat down on his blanket and pulled his boots back on, the dog and wyvern following. The dog kept sniffing at his clothes, his feet, his face, and everything else until he was fending off the dog as much as he was getting dressed, but he had shut her out.

She’d seen and heard enough of war that she could paint a terrible picture in her mind of what it would be like to die there.

He didn’t want to talk about, or think about it, even though it was bearing down on him, weighing on the life he had left. She never wanted to talk about the time when she was enslaved either.

But that was what aggravated her about him. He probably thought he had seen things she would never understand.

I’m sure I’ve seen things he’ll never understand either.

He thought she’d never tasted death? Well, she’d never tasted flesh and blood life, but it didn’t stop her from living.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

DORR REALIZED—QUICKLY but still a little too late—that he had grown too relaxed with his passenger. He'd let her see his bare hands.

He wasn't himself anymore; getting better wasn't the same as going back to the way things were, when he felt young and vigorous and ready to defend his home and family. Now he was slow and clumsy and she was right. A bandit probably would have put a few arrows in his sleeping body and run off with her.

At least, as expected, no bandits came for them this night.

Instead he'd just temporarily blinded a hungry mutt.

When I get home, I'm tossing the blinding potion. I never want to use this shit again. I'll only keep it long enough to see this girl to safety.

It was harder to hide the truth in the moonlight. Fears crept closer. The spirit world whispered in the trees, reminding all mortals that death would always win. When he shut his eyes, he could see the faces of men on the other side, paralyzed with terror as the Miralem telepaths used their powers to shut down their minds and bodies so Dorr and the other potions specialists could shoot them with the darts. When the Miralem released their minds, their vision was gone; any who escaped that fate and tried to fight back were met by the swordsmen, and Dorr remembered feeling exhilaration at all of this, at first, a rush of triumph that they were winning, but it was always

later, always in the *after*, in the darkness, that he truly heard their screaming...

Both of them eventually nodded off, for a short time, and then he woke with the sunrise and readied the horse.

Sorla rummaged in her pack and offered him another pastry. "It's a good thing I brought food since you gave yours away. Not that I blame you. Poor fellow." She patted the dog's eager head. It was still sniffing everywhere, trying to figure out why it couldn't see. The spell should start to wear off by evening, but even just seeing the dog's confusion reminded him of men groping across the bodies of their fellow soldiers, blood on their hands.

"It's a girl, actually. I poked under the tail earlier."

"Oh, you're a girl dog! Aw. You are pretty, aren't you? You're a pretty girl!" Sorla lavished attention on the dog and then said, "If you don't like *that* pastry, I have another one. That one is my odd specialty, a savory red cabbage pastry. Not everyone gets excited about cabbage."

"Are you talking to me, or the dog?"

"You, of course!"

"I told you I don't need your assistance to feed myself."

"I know you do need to eat, so I am simply making sure you have food available."

"Fine. I'll eat as we go."

"Excellent." She grabbed the dog and heaved it up into the seat with her—she was stronger than he expected—her wyvern settling onto her lap, still picking at the dog's fleas.

Dorr had every intention for the dog to walk alongside the carriage, but he couldn't bring himself to say that now.

He took the cue, tossing his bedroll in the back and climbing up beside her.

She tried not to talk to him, for a few minutes, but she was watching him, making sure he took a bite. He could tell she wasn't going to let him get away with skipping breakfast,

so although a cabbage pastry hardly sounded exciting, he nibbled a corner.

He paused as the savory, slightly tart filling hit his tongue behind the flaky crust.

Damned if this isn't almost as good as the chocolate tart...

Her eyes gleamed with triumph. "Good, isn't it?"

"You know you're good, don't you?"

"Yes. I do," she said.

He had to admire her moxie, at least. Fanarlem servants were known for their meek manners. Sorla's cheerfulness seemed almost rebellious. She definitely was not meek.

"Is your family waiting for you in Laionesse?" she asked, after watching him eat every bite of the pastry, which had a hint of sweetness and the forest taste of juniper.

"I don't know," he said. "I didn't write. I'm not sure if they got any word of me. And my parents might not be home; they travel a lot. But...if I'm there to play lord of the manor, so be it. I'll work in the shop until I figure out where to go from here."

"Your family owns a shop too?"

"Yes, an apothecary," he said.

"So in the military, you supported the healers?" she asked.

"At first," he said.

"Something happened?" Her gaze was wide-eyed and intense. She seemed wiser than her years when she made that face.

"Something is always happening," he said, trying to stretch out his right leg, as it was getting painfully stiff during the long days of riding. "At first I was in the healing wards, making healing tonics and giving them to the wounded soldiers. Then they moved me out of the healer's tents and had all of us with potion-making capabilities switch over to making aggressive potions. For some months I was in an old

warehouse, just mixing blinding potions all day, which...is not what apothecaries normally do.”

“Yes, I know,” Sorla said. “My father is a potion maker. I know that’s really a separate discipline, but close enough, I suppose.”

“Yes, well...”

“You liked healing much better, didn’t you?”

Dorr didn’t like admitting that he preferred healing to fighting. It felt a little unmanly, and he was already feeling so broken. He might never see her again after they arrived in the city, but he couldn’t help wanting to impress upon her that he was a strong man who would fight to protect others.

“I’m sure you heard that General Froskar was badly injured and is healing up,” Dorr said. “Morale took a blow, and the new General who replaced him had some different ideas. He feels that we should wage an emotional war, above all else. He sees the cultural beliefs of the southern Daramons as the greatest weakness we can exploit. They see a battlefield death as glorious, but if they go home maimed, that is shameful.”

“Yes, and then they’re expected to get their affairs in order and commit suicide. I can see how that would weaken their morale,” she said. “But what about our men? Are they getting enough care if the apothecaries are making attack potions?”

“No,” he said. “I’m sure they are not. It was already overwhelming. We don’t hear it from the top, but...well, in the past several months they moved me from potion making to the battlefield itself, to shoot men with poison myself. I fought on the western front, at the Port of Duiran.” Duiran was the southernmost holding of Fernanna, the nation which Seldon’s family ruled. It was so far south that it seemed like another country, an outpost that had born the brunt of fighting, as far as Fernanna was concerned. “I was there when Prince Seldon himself decided to join the fray,” he said. He promised himself he wouldn’t get into it when she fawned over Seldon, but now he could feel his tongue loosening, unable to help itself anymore.

“Oh,” Sorla said. “Well, I know he had gone down there.”

“All the whispers in the camp were that we are losing, but the generals thought our best chance was to go on a strong offensive and terrify the Daramons with the sheer number of men we send home on their end blinded or missing arms and legs. That’s what all the potion-making was for. We were absolutely loaded with them. And that was when Seldon insisted he get himself down there to fight.”

“Do you think it’s *Prince Seldon’s* fault that the battle of Duiran didn’t go well?” Sorla sounded downright annoyed.

“I know the last thing we needed was the heir to the throne showing up with no experience.”

“But Seldon has been wanting to fight the entire time!” Sorla exclaimed. “When Prince Somon was killed, his family made him stay home, but he finally insisted that his place was with his people and went to fight—and is he wrong? What kind of leader just sits at home safe while sending ordinary people to die?”

“He didn’t do us ordinary people any favors,” Dorr huffed. “He had no battle experience. The generals deferred to him. And I died covering his retreat!”

“So that’s his fault?” Sorla snapped.

“Who else’s fault is it? He shouldn’t have been out there. He’s the crown prince. Maybe if he’d been with us from the beginning, but it’s way too late to jump in now. Not only did I die, but my friends died, and *they* didn’t get to come back.” He rubbed his right hand, feeling an itch in the unfamiliar fingers that was surely just his imagination.

“Well, he’s not here to tell his side of the story, but I doubt the entire battle hinged on Seldon,” Sorla said. “And I know he’s trying to do the right thing. So.”

“All I’m saying is that the royals are only mortals, but they’re raised to think they can have and do whatever they want. That goes for any of ‘em, anywhere,” Dorr said. “And I don’t know how much he wanted to get his opinion in on tactics, but...”

“It sounds like things weren’t going that well anyway,” Sorla said, fear softening her anger, so that she now sounded more vulnerable. “Like the battle of Duiran was sort of a last ditch effort...”

Dorr had felt that, at the time, and he still did.

When they moved him to the front lines with blinding potion in hand, all he saw were scared young men who looked just like him on the enemy side, and scared young men he knew personally on his own side, all of them destroying each other’s lives far beyond the battlefield, and never getting anywhere.

This wasn’t just a skirmish over the best farmland or mines or control of the Atlantis river. Each side was trying to strike pain in the very heart of their opposition’s way of life, and each side’s way of life seemed perfectly developed to oppose the other, for centuries in the past and the future.

How could that end? There was no way to wrap it up neatly. The Kalanites wanted control of the world. There were dark ancestral memories of Miralem subjugating them, of telepathic torture, assaults by dragon riders, holy wars waged in the name of the mother-goddess.

The Miralem had blood on their hands, but they also had a point. In the Kalanite lands, women were not treated as equals, and slavery had always been legal. When he saw the fear in Sorla’s eyes, the reason for all that death became more stark.

She had a lot to lose if Kalanites ruled the world.

“We’re still sending new recruits and we haven’t surrendered yet,” he said, trying to reassure her now. “It’s not over.”

Sorla looked even more grave. “Is it harder to maim people than to kill them? I would think it might be... To have to hear them. Death is very quiet...but suffering isn’t.”

“You have to shut it out,” he said. “Keep your eyes on the goal and bring up all your inner ruthlessness.”

And you were good at it, weren’t you? he thought. *Shutting yourself off and doing what you had to do. In the moment, at*

least. Just not after.

“You’ll probably start to feel entirely like yourself again when you’re back to helping people,” Sorla said. “In the family shop. That sounds quite nice.”

Now she was trying to reassure him again. She was still trying to fix him, and he couldn’t be fixed. *‘Back to helping people...in the family shop...’* What a precious little life, he thought with disdain.

“I don’t know anymore,” he said.

Having said far too much, he tried to keep quiet during the trip. Now Sorla stayed quiet too. Thank the gods. Quiet, that was all he wanted.

She wasn’t at all like his sister, who could hardly even read a book without simultaneously talking about the book. She was the only person he knew who interrupted people while *she* was reading.

But as soon as she went quiet, he found it just as bothersome. He had upset her. Here she was, traveling to Laionesse all alone, without any ally...

What if she wants to be Prince Seldon’s courtesan?

That thought occurred to him, as unpleasant as the tonic he drank this morning.

The thought of some rich royal man who rushed foolishly into battle also having control over Sorla’s fate was painful. She looked so slight and sweet.

Curses—why do I keep worrying about how she’ll fare in the capital? Her fate isn’t mine to worry over and I damn sure don’t want her worrying over me.

A lot of people seemed to become uncontrollably carnal when on the front lines. It seemed to do the opposite to Dorr; he didn’t even want to think about flesh and blood.

But it is making me feel protective. Can’t imagine having sex anymore, not all messed up like I am. But I don’t like the thought of such men targeting her.

I mean, it's hard not to get suspicious of a powerful man extending a special invitation to a Fanarlem girl.

Dorr thought he would check on her now and then, from a distance, just to be sure.

By late afternoon they reached the outskirts of the capital, passing the sprawling farms that fed its masses. It was the beginning of spring, and the farmers were out readying the fields for spring plantings, the air pungent with fertilizer. Before long, a skyline grew visible when the road sloped up on a hilltop, a glimpse into another world from the humble farm houses. Dorr had always enjoyed the approach to Laionesse, the way the sharp spires of the palace and the many landmark towers that showed off clocks, balconies, and bells rose up in the distance on a clear day. When the hill sloped down, it vanished again, until the next rise, growing a little closer and clearer with each hill.

Sorla was getting antsy, chewing on her nails. Now he knew how she'd lost one.

The next time the road met a view of the capital, Sorla was sitting on her hands, trying to spare them any more of her own abuse.

“Nervous?” Dorr asked.

“No! No, I'm excited.”

She was clearly lying, probably as much to herself as to him.

He imagined himself looming over the prince—few people were as tall as Dorr—and grabbing his collar, issuing a threat before he left. *If you hurt this sweet girl, I'll tell everyone you're a Fanarlem-abusing pervert.*

Of course, in reality he wasn't going to do anything of the sort and would probably be thrown in prison if he did.

“Should I bring you right to the palace?” he asked.

“Yes, probably. That way I can let him know I'm here.” She looked even more intimidated.

“All right,” Dorr said.

I won't leave her until I see how Prince Seldon greets her,
he decided.

They reached the city after dark, and it took another hour just to get to the palace. Traffic on the main streets was always slow-moving chaos, and Dorr steered them around it by force of habit, taking smaller side lanes. But the war was visible in the darkness; magical lights were rationed now, with the sorcerers no longer putting their power toward such small comforts. The main roads, when glimpsed, didn't seem very busy, and on the side lanes, there was almost no traffic at all.

Sorla seemed impressed anyway, leaning forward to get the best view she could. The homes were wedged tight together, but each was large with three floors. Shops and offices occupied ground floors, and the second floors had large balconies, painted brightly. Dorr often came to this part of town to shop; the colors were so bright and welcoming compared to the Ven-Diri-Ashi, his district. The smell of budding spring barely tinged the night air from courtyard gardens.

"This is Tarten Road," he said. "It runs west to east. Plank Street starts from the south of the fountain, and that's where my home is, about a mile down. There's the fountain."

Sorla bounced from her chair and nearly lost her balance when he took a sharp turn into the roundabout that circled the Dragon Fountain. This landmark had stood for centuries and was, true to its name, a massive coiling dragon made of stone, captured as if about to take flight, with water pouring from its mouth. It was sculpted to size, as tall as the fine shops around the square. And it, too, was dark.

"Whoa." Sorla gaped at it. It was one of those monuments that informed you that you were in the territory of royal families—old families—and wherever you had come from was far behind you.

"Usually it's illuminated," Dorr said, with some shock. "With hundreds of magical lights."

"I guess that would be wasteful now. It's still quite a sight!"

“The city has changed,” he murmured. “The atmosphere is so dark and quiet.”

“It has plenty of hustle and bustle compared to Dor-Temerna,” Sorla said.

“The palace is to the north,” Dorr said, steering around a carriage of gawking tourists—or more likely, he considered, war refugees—that had stopped cold in the intersection. “And your bakery is there, on the Palace Road.”

The towers of the palace were too dark to be seen just now. It was softly lit like the other houses, with just enough romantic lighting to keep the inhabitants from stumbling in the dark or fumbling for their feasts.

Sorla might have been to the capital once before, but she couldn’t stop staring out every direction.

“I barely saw the city when I was here,” Sorla finally murmured. “It’s very grand.” He could tell she was trying to place herself in these surroundings. The shops and homes surrounding the palace had stood for hundreds of years, and they had always been for the noble Miralem families. After dark, the pedestrians were shadowed, moving between evening cafes and theaters in cloaks and capes, but he didn’t have to see them to know there were no Fanarlem here. The soft glow and shimmer of the night life was still comforting, even if it was not really for him or Sorla.

He wasn’t sure how she would be treated. It was hard to say. The Miralem religion valued equality in theory, but not everyone followed the ideals of their faith, and that was certainly true everywhere. She went quiet, squirming a little, clutching her wyvern as he kept trying to wriggle away.

Now they passed the royal bakery, its tall glass displays dark. He pointed it out to her anyway, and neighboring shops that sold the royal family their tea, their healing potions, their perfumes, their medicinal bitters and liqueurs, their candies, and their cheese—just to name a few in the row.

By the time they reached the palace, Dorr thought of his own troubles just long enough to realize he hadn’t been

thinking of them at all. For a moment he had been spared the battlefield horrors and the awareness of his own broken self. He was only hoping Sorla would be in good hands here.

But then he snapped out of it. They were enjoying an uneasy peace, but they hadn't exactly gotten along, and would only keep arguing if the journey went on any longer.

He hated delivering her into the hands of Prince Seldon, and then to return home to all his haunted thoughts.

The palace gates were open. A guard stopped them and asked their business.

"Sorla Thanneau, sir, here at the request of Prince Seldon." She sounded calm, but was squeezing Blueberry tightly enough that he let out a strangled squawk and started twisting ever more vigorously within her clenched arms. The dog barked as if to tell Sorla to be gentle to her new grooming buddy.

"I don't think Prince Seldon was expecting a menagerie," the guard chuckled, "but I've been told to expect you. Is this gentleman your escort?"

Sorla glanced fleetingly at Dorr. "Only to this point," she said. "And the dog belongs to him."

"The dog—" Dorr started to protest, but decided not to bother.

She looked nervous now. "Prince Seldon is expecting Blueberry."

"Very well. I'll show you inside."

"Thank you for the ride," Sorla said, hesitating before she started to clamber down.

"Let me see you to the door."

"I'm *quite* fine," Sorla insisted. The guard offered a hand. "Sorry, girl," she whispered, patting the dog.

"You are entirely sure Prince Seldon is expecting you?" Dorr asked.

“Yes! Absolutely sure!” She looked annoyed. “Good evening, and goodbye.” She sounded determined again, lightly accepting the guard’s hand to hop down and then taking her bag from the back of the carriage.

Dorr wanted to go after her, as he had vowed to do. She looked very small standing in the broad courtyard with the short yet burly guard.

But he would be meddling if he attempted to limp after her, dog in tow. She was on her own path now.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SORLA SHOT one last glance at Dorr as he circled his carriage around the wide courtyard and headed back out into the city.

Now this trip can properly begin.

Dorr didn't know Prince Seldon like she did.

I am absolutely ready for this position. I've worked so hard, and I'll make the royal bakery proud.

The guard took her to a side door of the palace, and Sorla wondered if it was a servant's entrance, but there was no way of figuring the hierarchy of doors. She just couldn't help remembering that when she was last here with her parents and Lord Dormongara, they came in the main door.

The guard led her inside a softly lit hall, the magic light drawing out the warm tones of the wooden floor and the rich, red-hued tapestry on the wall. A small mirror hung beside the tapestry, where Sorla saw herself disheveled from travel, with no trace of her carefully maintained curls, clad in her humble dress and apron. She quickly smoothed her hair and fixed the ribbons and pins that kept her locks tucked neatly behind her ears, just as Seldon turned a corner ahead.

She couldn't help the feeling inside her, like a jar of bugs had been released inside her stuffing to race around. Her hands were tingling. She was practically a kid the last time she saw him in the flesh. He was as handsome as she remembered; she could tell that even down the hall. His clothes were simple but fine, dyed in rich tones of deep forest green, royal blue and ochre, with gold buttons that caught the lights.

He had a toddling little girl by the hand, and a young and curvaceous woman in an evening gown walked beside him. The little girl might be Nisina, the daughter of Princess Ingnara, but the woman was certainly not his sister.

“Sorla! I’m so glad you made it.” Seldon went right up to her and offered a hand for Blueberry to land on. “Here’s the feisty little guy, huh? How was your trip?”

About half of her relaxed right away at his friendly greeting. “Good! Luckily I was able to find someone going this way.”

“Oh—curses, if you’d said something I would have sent a carriage. Well, I’m glad to hear it. You must be exhausted, I’m sure.” Nisina was clutching his trousers, and he crouched, with Blueberry gripping his arm. “Look at this, huh? A wyvern! This is Blueberry, and this is my friend Sorla.”

Nisina was staring at Sorla in terror before bursting into tears.

“Nissy, that is no way to treat a friend. Remember what I told you about crying when you see people?” he said, growing firm.

Nisina immediately tried to wipe her tears and buck up. “Why does she look funny?” she said in a small voice.

“I’m sorry for Nissy’s behavior,” he said, looking a little exasperated at the toddler. “We’re trying to teach her that people look all sorts of different ways, but she hasn’t seen a Fanarlem before. It’s a lesson we’ve been learning. Our warriors have come home in such an alarming state and I try to visit the veteran’s wards every week. I bring her along. The sooner she learns not to cry because a man’s lost his nose, the better.”

“What a grim greeting!” the woman said. “It’s so nice to meet you. Seldon has told the court a lot about you.”

“Thank you!” Sorla said, feeling disoriented. Did he have to compare her to a man without a nose? She’d just looked at herself in the mirror but now she was reminded that even when her clothes were clean and her hair was nice and she had an

expensive body designed to look attractive, plenty of Miralem would still find her uncanny.

And who was this woman anyway? She was having flashbacks to Ruven and Elusha as she watched the woman kneel to comfort Nisina, her dress clinging to substantial curves, and her blonde hair falling past her waist.

“I’m Kanalem, Seldon’s very distant cousin from Avalon,” she said. “I’ve come to court to help all the men without noses.”

“A healer?” Sorla said, and now she realized that the evening gown was the light blue of a novice priestess, and maybe simpler than the usual court gown. “A priestess of Vallamir?”

“Newly minted,” Kanalem said, shy and pleased.

“She’s modest, but she’s an excellent skin shaper,” Seldon said. “And we can’t get enough of them. Hopefully it’ll all be over...someday. But, for now, I’m hoping to gather the broadest network of support for returning soldiers so they can heal up quickly. I’m so glad you’re here. Rath has been running the magic bake shop all by himself after Salvie died, and well—he’s no Salvie. You’re amazing. I’m confident you’re going to get it all back to shape.”

“The—magic bake shop? That’s the one...by the perfume shop?” Sorla stammered, having heard nothing about a ‘magic’ bake shop. Bakers and magic bakers were not the same profession at all. One made delicious baked goods. The other made *spells*—spells that just happened to be infused in pastry and bread.

“Oh, no, don’t worry. Not that big one!” Seldon said.

“No, he means the little magic bake shop right by the Dragon Fountain,” Kanalem said. “It’s very cozy and it has a back alley entrance so you won’t get all the rabble. You’ll have lots of quiet time to work on magic. “

Magic? Sorla wondered if this was the point where a flesh and blood girl might faint. She was getting a funny out-of-body feeling herself. *He thinks I’m good at magic.*

I never said—I never, ever would have said—

“Rath is a great guy,” Seldon said. “But incredibly absent-minded. I know you run a tight operation.”

All Sorla could think was that she frequently bragged about her talented ‘parents’ in her letters. She was extremely proud of them and she was always eager to help Grau make potions, but she didn’t help him with the actual magical part. She was patient with precise measurements and keeping pots from burning. Grau was the one with the actual sorcery.

I must have worded something poorly and given the wrong idea.

But now she’d come this far, and he was so happy to see her, all for a job she would certainly fail at.

“You seem tired and frazzled,” Kanalem said, probably picking up on Sorla’s emotions. “Let’s just get you to a bed for now and Seldon will take you to the shop in the morning.”

“Of course, of course. We can talk more in the morning,” Seldon said. “We’ve prepared the room where you stayed last time. I thought some familiar surroundings would be comforting. It really is good to see you again! You haven’t changed a bit!”

“Well, I promise I actually have,” Sorla said, realizing with horror that she had just gotten an adult body when she last saw him and of course he might have expected her to look older somehow.

“Oh, I do know that. I keep all your letters and re-read them now and then. We were kids when we started that, weren’t we?” he said, bringing back all the phantom insects fluttering around her innards. “How are things back home?” he asked. “Your parents are well?”

“Yes, very well. I hope they’ll manage the cafe without me, but it’s all very...well.” Sorla swallowed, missing home terribly. She yearned to have either one of her parents here to talk to about this mistake.

As much as I loved them, I’m not sure I realized just how much they really did become my parents...

Seldon was just as friendly and easygoing as she remembered, without any intimidating royal airs, and his ugly-handsomeness was as intriguing as ever, but she did remember him being more romantic. Now she wasn't sure if she'd just imagined all that, when Kanalem kept drawing her attention. She was a beautiful woman, that curtain of hair swinging with every step, her lush mouth, and a knife at her waist that was definitely too fine to have been purchased off a blanket in the bazaar. While Fanarlem women were made to satisfy a Kalanite man's ideal of beauty, delicate and petite, Sorla sometimes wondered if worshipping a goddess for centuries made Miralem women look more like goddesses themselves.

Sorla's parents endlessly discouraged her from comparing herself to Miralem girls, but as a result she just felt like she couldn't vent those feelings to anyone and they simmered inside.

"Will you take Nissy back to the dinner?" Seldon asked this fertile deity. "I'll be right along."

"Of course. I'll see you soon, Sorla. It was lovely to meet you," Kanalem said, smiling.

Seldon pulled a magical light from its niche in the wall and led her down a hall to a wide spiral staircase that was vaguely familiar from her one and only previous visit to the palace. She remembered the warrior woman carved into the newel post; her stiff pose with a spear in hand and stylized curves in close-fitting battle armor.

"It's been a busy week," Seldon said, sounding more tired now, almost confiding. "Do you want any dinner sent to your room? I would invite you but there is still some class protocol I might be breaching. As if I really care, but..." He shrugged.

"No, I am not really in any kind of mood to eat. I'm just relieved to have made it," Sorla said. "Not that it was a hard trip, as it turned out, but...traveling makes me nervous."

"I am so sorry I didn't send an escort. I feel like an idiot. Glad it went well; I'd never have forgiven myself." He stopped at a door and faced her. "I have a lot on my mind, but it is good to see you." His weathered face usually looked older

than his years, but when he smiled he seemed a younger man—*just like Dorr.*

“You too.” Sorla felt dizzy. *What does he mean by this?*

He opened the door to a room that was much too big for her. “I’m glad your family is well. Grau has handled becoming a Fanarlem all right?”

They had discussed this in letters already; she was starting to think he was a little nervous around her too. “Yes, I think it was harder on Meirin. I think he *prefers* not having to eat unless he wants to, and being able to handle poisons with his bare hands.”

Seldon chuckled. “I can see how a workaholic potion-maker might see advantages to that position...”

“How is your family?” Sorla asked, wondering what was weighing on his mind so much. Maybe it was just the war, as usual, but it felt like more.

“There’s so much going on.” He heaved a sigh that seemed weighted down with boulders. “This war is not going well, Sorla. Not at all.”

“In what way?” she said, trying not to feel panic at the tone of his voice. She knew the war was dragging on, but she also assumed that her home would be safe, and that she would never be dragged back into slavery by invading Kalanites.

Now she wondered if that was naive.

“Promise you won’t whisper of this to anyone,” he said, speaking in the barest whisper himself. “But...the dragons are almost gone.”

“Gone?”

“Dead.” His throat sounded knotted. “They’ve breached the defenses in Kota, and a coded message came from the royal family there requesting help. They are proud—isolated— If they want my help, it’s really gone wrong, and...we’re in a bad position. General Froskar is still not able to return to the battlefield.” He took her hand and squeezed it. “We need you, Sorla.”

“Me?” she sputtered. “I don’t think I can do much—if it’s that bad. What happens if...we lose?”

He had the most haunted look in his eyes. She could feel his misery and reluctance. It scared her into silence. “We won’t,” he said. “We will prevail. We must. These are the lands where people are free, and where everyone who shares that belief is welcome—and Vallamir has granted us our telepathic gifts. We’ve never lost, and we won’t.”

She didn’t feel convinced by this now, but she forced all her fears out of her head so he wouldn’t sense them.

He tried to smile and lighten the mood. “I’m just glad to see you. There is a lot of pressure on me to marry. I mean, of course, you’ve read my complaints. It’s been that way for years. Ever since my brother died, particularly, and now that Inga’s gone ahead, what’s my excuse? Everyone thought she’d have to be cajoled into it, but no. Her and Jhoran are almost unbearable together. Baby talk, mating like rabbits...and Kana, well...I get along with her just fine. She seems very amenable to me. We’re related, but very distantly—just what you want in the royal line, eh?”

Why is he telling me he’s glad to see me—and then this? She was still reeling from this horrifying news about the dragon kingdom, and now she was back to wondering over his feelings for her. “You’re supposed to marry Kana?”

“We try to avoid ‘supposed to’ here,” he said. “But yes. Without a doubt, yes, because no one can see any reason not to, and what really matters is if she’s happy, eh?” He shook his head. “I shouldn’t be telling you all this, either.”

“I can keep secrets, luckily for you, since you’ve already told me.”

“It isn’t really a secret. Kana is very pragmatic herself. She’s even told me I’m ugly.” He laughed. “And I like her when she does. At least she’s honest.”

“You’re not ugly!” Sorla said, briefly swept up in anger that poor Seldon would be coerced into marrying a pragmatic woman who thought he was ugly.

He met her eyes. Although he didn't move, he suddenly seemed to be standing closer than she had realized. "You must have odd taste in men," he said, laughing again, but without much humor.

Now an overwhelming wave of embarrassment swept over her. "I—I don't know. Maybe I just don't trust the handsome ones as much."

"Get a good rest," he said. "You'll hear more soon. Thank you for coming, Sorla." His gaze briefly lingered, and then he went out the door.

As soon as the heavy wood wedged shut in its old, slightly warped frame, and the lock clicked definitively, she dropped her bag and sagged onto the floor beside it.

Fates! That wasn't nothing, was it?

What does all this mean?

Is he happy to see me because I'm a distraction from the woman he doesn't love?

Is it just because he needs me to work at the magical bakery?

Will any of it matter if we're about to lose this war?

Seldon's interest in her had always been unusual. Ruven was her neighbor; of course he might like her, the way circles of young people of the same age might shift their affections around. When she was moping all over the house about Ruven, Grau told her he'd had several girls in his hometown briefly pine over him, only to move on quickly enough, and that she would move on to someone better too.

But Seldon was a *prince*. He had no reason to maintain a correspondence with her for years, or offer her a position. He'd never even tasted her baked goods.

She had an itchy feeling all over her body, like something was in her that needed out, and Seldon somehow held the key to relief. She'd felt this with Ruven before, and there was no relief at all except a slow fade, but now it was worse. So much

worse. There was all sorts of fear mixed in, and that made her yearn for someone to love her, hold her, protect her...

She shoved herself back to her feet, sat on the bed, and pulled off her shoes, letting them tumble onto the plush rug. The sound was almost entirely absorbed.

Stop it. Seldon looks like he needs you as much as you could ever need him. You just told Dorr you've never needed anyone to protect you, and that's absolutely true. You're a survivor, whatever happens, and you'll figure all of this out on your own.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE REST of the city was turning in, even the bar crawlers, by the time Dorr reached the Ven-Diri-Ashi. Here, the shops remained open until midnight, the restaurants until two, and most people slept through the sunrise and opened back up at noon.

I'll have to readjust to this, Dorr thought, yawning. He brought the horse and carriage to the back, handing them off to the family's male servant, Rowel.

"Are my parents at home, Rowel?"

"No, sir. They are in Drennalyl."

"I figured as much."

"Miss Unalise is running the shop."

"Yes, I'll see her now."

"You had better, sir. Everyone thinks you are dead," Rowel said, showing his usual level of restraint.

"Can you return the horse and carriage to the hiring station in the morning?"

"Of course. And the dog?"

"I don't know if I'm going to keep it, but..."

"Shall I feed it and keep it in the stable, sir? Until we see how it behaves with cats?"

Dorr reluctantly gave up the dog to Rowel. His enthusiasm over seeing his sister was severely dampened as he realized he

was coming back dead, and she would know.

Una would think this was romantic, and convincing her otherwise would be more of a chore than it was worth. At least he was feeling better every day, his body knitting and getting back to normal function. He was aching badly all over, but his heart was beating steadily now.

He mustered all his strength and, perhaps more importantly, his sense of normalcy, as he looked at the family home he had not seen in years. It was three stories, with the shop and kitchen on the bottom, living space above, and then the four bedrooms. Although it was mostly dark, like the rest of the city, it looked cozy with its plain colors, twin chimneys, and surrounding herb gardens. He used to envy the more colorful Miralem houses and now he was just glad to see his own.

The back door to the shop was open. Una's voice came from inside.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Vorlan—it was just a little slip—"

"Slip! Well, I'm glad your slip wasn't poisoning me! This is the second time—"

"I'm mixing up the new stuff right now and if you keep yelling at me, I'll mess it up again!" Una cried back.

What a welcome, too.

Dorr joined her at the counter, slipping in the unlit back hall and throwing an apron over his head as a matter of habit. "What's the trouble?"

"Dorr!" Una shrieked. She dropped everything and sagged against the counter. "We thought you were dead!"

"Well, I'm glad you're not, because *you* never made mistakes on my medicine," Mr. Vorlan said coolly, giving the counter a little rap. He was a fussily aged man, dressed all in black with lace collar and cuffs, and a heart condition he managed with a weekly concoction he had been buying from their shop for a decade.

Una was gazing up at Dorr with radiant joy, so happy to see him that she didn't care what happened to customers. The counters were covered in splayed, half-read novels, with the potion recipe books buried underneath them. Her eyes shone with tears.

"She could have killed me," Mr. Vorlan said.

"It was an accident, both times, and I didn't poison you. I forgot one little ingredient," Una said curtly over her shoulder.

"Last time she had the wrong amounts!"

Mixing concoctions was a serious business. Dorr had learned all too well how thin the line between harm and healing was. But he also saw his sister working here by herself while his parents traveled. Although she would have the help of the family's two domestic workers, Rowel and Irlana, she would also be considered the lady of the house—all alone.

"I'll fix it for you, Mr. Vorlan," Dorr said. "No harm done. Everyone makes a mistake now and then, but no one works harder than my sister." This was a lie, but Dorr couldn't help bristling when anyone attacked Una. The job of a big brother was surely to protect her at all costs to outsiders, and harass her freely once they were alone.

He hardly needed to look at the recipe, although he checked it just to be sure, and carefully fixed the tonic while Una looked at him, her face pale and tight, desperately trying not to cry. Then she whirled back to the counter.

"There, he's got it all taken care of. Of course, I would have been happy to do the same."

"I'd rather you didn't, young woman!"

"No charge, of course." Dorr looked at Mr. Vorlan, his eyes a firm command that he should leave now, without fuss.

"I thought you were lost in the battle at Duiran," Mr. Vorlan said.

"I was."

Mr. Vorlan got the point. "*Nar calla n'omshan,*" he whispered in customary blessing. *Mercies of the spirit world.*

Dorr stared at him in silence until he left, and it certainly didn't take long for Dorr's glower to drive him away. Coming back from the dead might be customary, but it wasn't common, and the few people in their district who had returned were known mainly for this dubious distinction.

Unpleasant, to think he was one of them now, like Elufia the witch who lived alone in a small green house, and withered old Jor who bought one book at the bookshop every week but was rarely seen otherwise. Both were quite old and didn't seem to have any family. He had never thought to wonder why. Of course, there was also Sathon, a guard at the Ven-Diri temple, a friendly and unremarkable fellow who lived with his parents and had never married. Well, of course he hadn't.

“Dorr...”

Dorr lifted her mourning veil. “Maybe you wouldn't make mistakes if you could see.”

She threw her arms around him and finally let out the sobs of happiness and relief she'd been holding in, and he remembered why anyone would cheat death. Her fingers dug into his ribs. She held him like she thought he might slip away from her.

“It's okay,” he said. “I'm here. They brought me back. I'm guessing there was a miscommunication.”

“We had a message that you were dead beyond revival. And it's been weeks! And hardly anyone is getting revived these days! I didn't think we were important enough for that!”

“They sent me to our cousin, Dalaran.”

“The one who isn't very good?”

“I guess he's good enough. He said it was close, but I'm here. I do feel like absolute shit.”

“I see you have a soldier's mouth,” she said prudishly, but she couldn't maintain any airs. She pulled away from him reluctantly. “You feel all right. You're warm.”

“I'm lukewarm at best,” he said. “I'm not all right, really. And I don't want to talk about it either.”

She studied him, and seemed unnerved. He was different, and he already knew he didn't look well, in body or spirit. "After you've meditated at the temple—" she began.

"I'm not meditating. I'm here to help you with the shop so it doesn't turn into a disaster—and so you can do something you like better, even."

"You'll feel much better with a meditation, I'm sure!" she said.

"Una—I stopped with all the meditations and blessings and offerings to the gods as soon as I joined up," he said bluntly. "I just want to get back to work. I'll help you close up." He lifted a battered leather-bound copy of a novel, *The Perfume of Skulls*, off the ledger book. "Spirits above, don't leave books from the subscription library splayed open; they're not yours."

She looked somewhat heartbroken that he was rejecting their gods, but she seemed to be getting the point quickly that he had been through things. "I'm still getting the hang of it all, of course, but I am *trying*. I told Meirin and Feirin I had everything under control...and they could go make the offerings for you in Drennalyl... I knew that was important to them, even if it isn't to you."

"But you don't have everything under control."

"I don't know how I make so many mistakes," she said. "I know I *must* learn to be focused. It's just so hard! My mind is all over the place and no matter how I try I find myself thinking about the fate of Lord Birador facing the trials of the dark curses while Brindia searches for the sword of life—"

"You must try to give the trials of Mr. Vorlan at least as much attention as the trials of Lord So-and-So."

"Birador!" she cried passionately, as if this was important at all. "Thank you for helping me with Mr. Vorlan, by the way. I feel so stupid. I just don't know how I..."

"It's not really your nature, I realize," he said.

"Yes, but since I said I could handle it, I have no excuses for this," she said ruefully.

He was realizing just how long he had been gone. His sister looked older and taller. She was wearing the simple black dress he remembered, with fitted sleeves and tight black gloves, but over it was a short cape of the darkest possible shade of purple, and matching top that laced across her breasts. Her overskirt had a deep V notched in the front, also laced, that looked a bit suggestive, even though not a single inch of skin was showing on her entire body—not even her face, once she pulled the veil back over it. She looked very grown-up, and he expected his friends would think her pretty.

She caught his look. “Oh, Dorr. I’m not wearing those old-fashioned droopy dresses anymore, because I’m no longer a kid.”

“I understand that, but—it worried me a little that you’ve been working the shop front alone.”

“The men are gone! We ladies just look alluring for the benefit of one another at this point.”

Right. The men were gone. He should certainly realize that much.

He sighed. “You can at least take off the veil now. I’m not dead enough for that.”

“All the most fashionable girls are in mourning,” she sighed, before throwing it back.

“Would you rather I was dead so you can stay fashionable?”

“No, no, definitely not, but maybe a more annoying member of the family could die instead so I could keep it for a while.” She flounced to the door. “I’ll let you look over the ledger and build up a good list of criticisms to level at me over a bowl of oatmeal.”

“A fair bargain,” he said, although once she rushed out of the room, he struggled to reorient himself in the old familiar shop. *It’s so strange that everything here is the same...*

Well, except the mess. He carefully stacked Una’s books, placing bookmarks in the ones she had left open, and cleared

everything else off the counter. It could use a little polish in the morning.

In the silence, he heard the dying moans of the man he had just shot with poison, and screams in the near distance... Where was Lorvaran? His fellow apothecary was beside him one moment, and then there was a blast... Dorr didn't know what had become of the men and women who fought at his side.

He slowly drew off his glove, seeing the hand that was not his own. He rubbed the hand's cold fingers. He had feeling in the foreign fingers. It belonged to him now, but it was as much a stranger as someone riding into town from another land.

No, that isn't true, he thought. It probably belonged to a friend...

He had been trying not to think of any of this, but now he was home. He had wanted to come home more than anything, but now he realized that home was too quiet, too safe. It was a place for thoughts, and he didn't want thoughts.

Lorvaran was almost as tall as I am. He was the only...

Dorr swallowed.

The only match.

"It's almost ready!" Una chirped. "Shall we go upstairs? I can pour you a glass of wine."

He turned, quickly yanking the glove back on, as time seemed to have passed without him, and somehow Una was already back. She took his arm, giving him a little tug. She sensed his limp when he started to walk, and her brows knit. "Are you hurt?"

"You know perfectly well it takes time to recover."

"You seem different..."

He shrugged.

"Did you see anything? Did you see the spirit world?"

"No. I don't remember anything. It was a dreamless sleep as far as I'm concerned."

“Oh.” She sighed. “Well, you’ve never been very attuned to these things.”

He tried to take the stairs quickly, but he couldn’t. Una glanced back with silent concern. He immediately felt the absence of his parents when he saw the family altar around the hearth. There were all the usual bones: his paternal great-grandfather and great-grandmother’s right hands, his maternal grandmother’s skull, his maternal great-grandparents’ clavicles, and all the others that were passed down according to traditions of birth order and gender. Now, they were joined by the full skeletons of Una’s first three cats, moved out of her bedroom and to a position of honor, including Gray, the one who liked Dorr better than Una. His parents never let her keep them up there on the family altar, but as soon as she was the lady of the house, the cat bones got a good dusting and came out to the main shelves. He gave Gray a little pat on the skull while Una swept ahead.

Una had never been a great cook, but she still took pride in her small efforts, and brought up several bowls. She’d made a porridge of coarse-cut oats, warmed apple butter, and fried up pork sausages—the sort of thing his mother would make when Irlana had a day off. The simplicity and familiarity was all he wanted—all he could even think of eating.

He still had no appetite at all. The oats smelled dull and the sausage too strong. He took the least amount he could get away with.

Una took off her gloves and murmured a prayer. She looked at him oddly when he did neither, but she didn’t press. Thank the spirits, although it was unusual for her to keep her mouth shut.

He sliced the sausage and took a small bite—but it was too rich, too fatty. It made him think of dying flesh. They said the dead would crave raw meat and especially blood, but that certainly didn’t hold true for the cooked stuff. He choked it down and attempted the oatmeal instead, but it had no taste at all, the gluiness of it off-putting.

“Is it bad? I didn’t think it was too bad! Or—do you just feel very sick?” Una looked worried; she wasn’t used to Dorr being vulnerable, and neither was he. “You feel a little sick at first, right? You have to heal? But you’re supposed to eat; I know that much.”

“It’s nothing to do with your cooking. My sense of taste is messed up. A lot of things feel messed up right now; you’ll just have to be patient with me. Anyway, you must have been having a hard time of it too. I’m impressed with you, running the shop by yourself. Even with a mistake now and then, you’ve stepped up to support the family.”

Usually flattery worked with Una, but her attention was locked on him. “You *have* to eat, Dorr; I know that much, or you’ll lose your soul...” Her voice turned to a whisper.

“I’ll eat! Curses, Una, it’s just not easy when every bite is completely off.”

“But you’re trying to make me talk about myself instead! And usually you’re so responsible; I’m the one who always forgets to do what I need to do.”

“This has nothing to do with being responsible. I was nearly blown to pieces and now I’m supposed to just sit down and have wine and oatmeal—a very strange pairing, by the way—by candlelight, like nothing happened? I’m completely fucked up and I shouldn’t be alive. The dead should just stay dead!”

“Dorr...” She covered her face. “But I—I’m so happy you’re here. It felt like a piece of me was ripped out when I thought you weren’t coming back; you always seemed so strong. I never thought you would die. I couldn’t even believe it, except that the house was so lonely and day after day, no word, nothing... It was incomprehensible. I thought we’d have families, and our kids would play together like we did, and...”

“Well, there won’t be a family for me now!” he snapped.

Tears welled in her eyes as her mouth set, attempting to preserve dignity. She had learned more composure in his years away as well.

“I’m sorry,” he choked out. “I shouldn’t yell at you, but all these people died around me, and they didn’t come back. I don’t know why I should. I hate that you were grieving, but...I chose to fight, and if my body was broken, I wanted to die. Death is ugly. I don’t want to spend my life flirting with it.”

“Someone worked hard to bring you back, so you could keep living,” she said. “And they did it because that’s what we *do*—we’re not afraid to dance with the spirit world, and we don’t toss people aside just because they’re broken. We love them anyway. You have to eat. I’ll write Meirin and Feirin and tell them to come right home.”

“I don’t need them fussing over me. I’ll write and tell them I’m alive and they can stay where they are, praying for me, because I probably still need it.” He forced another bite. He knew she was right. He was alive because someone else had sacrificed for him. But why did he deserve it? They’d all been fighting together, as a group, equally brave and committed, all with families back home...

He needed a good cry, but Ven-Diri men didn’t cry; he just had to let the cold into his veins and learn that finely cultivated detachment he was supposed to have mastered already.

He was struggling just to detach himself from the tasteless meal, and he couldn’t help but think of chocolate tart and surprisingly delicious cabbage tart.

“Una—in the morning, I’ll eat,” he said. “I promise you.”

“I don’t care what you eat as long as it’s something. And I don’t care what you do as long as you’re here. I missed you so much, Dorr. Words can’t say. I know my prayers and wishes didn’t bring you back, and I also know they’re not enough to balance out the things you’ve endured on the battlefield...”

He lifted a hand, giving her an expression he hoped was gentler. “Who’s to say they’re not? I am fortunate to have a warm welcome. It’s all right,” he said. “I met a baker who produces pastries that actually taste like something. She must have a little magic in her that comes out in the food. I’ll pay her a visit tomorrow and buy whatever I can to eat.”

“A baker? Which bakery does she work at?”

“She’s working at the royal bakery, but I think I can persuade her to sell me a burnt roll or something—if she ever burns anything. There has to be something that isn’t quite to the royal standard I can buy from her.”

“Where did you meet her?”

“I gave her a ride. She was going this way, but she needed some protection. She’s a Fanarlem.”

“A Fanarlem girl rode with you all the way from whatever that town is, that Dalaran’s from...?”

“Dor-Temerna, yes. It isn’t anything to speak of. Except a lucky coincidence for my mouth.” He immediately wished he had not equated Sorla in any way to his mouth.

“Mm...” She looked intrigued. Una had the unfortunate gift of all talkative girls for sniffing out things to talk about. “Is she cute? Wait, that was a stupid question. She must be the cute kind if she’s working at the royal bakery.”

“The ‘cute kind’?” he growled.

“You know exactly what I mean and I’m sure you thought it yourself!” she said, which was also basically true. “How did she get to be a royal baker? She must have connections! Is she Fanarlem-born? Was she adopted? It’s very intriguing.”

“We really didn’t talk much. She is also of no interest to me beyond her ability to make food I can taste.” He stared at the spread Una had made—with love, he knew. He hated to push it away, but...

“It’s okay. I’ll save it for my breakfast tomorrow,” Una said gently. “Speaking of the royal family...we’ve had some mysterious orders. They’re always written out and hand delivered by a courier, and retrieved by different people in plain—but very fine—carriages. And they’re for undead tonic.”

“Undead tonic? They’re ordering that from *us*?”

“I’m afraid so...”

Normally that was the purview of necromancers, although a Ven-Diri apothecary would do in a pinch. That just showed how the necromancers were all off at the battlefields.

“I don’t really mind. It’s one of my favorite concoctions to make,” Una said. “I always imagine I am the main character from *My Secret, Beloved Corpse*. But it makes me think the royal family—or someone nearly as powerful—must have brought back someone extremely important. They made me sign a contract that I wouldn’t speak of it to anyone outside this family or mention it in writing to anyone, or I’d face imprisonment, and of course they’re going to make you sign one too once they hear you’ve returned.”

“What on earth? You mean, they brought back a Miralem from the dead?” That just wasn’t done. The Miralem never tried to stop the Ven-Diri from practicing their customs, but they were firm on the idea that death was both sacred and final.

“Apparently,” Una said. “I’m not sure who it could be.”

“I have a few suspicions,” Dorr said.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SORLA, I'm sorry to tell you this, but we don't need you any longer.

Please pack your clothes; you can take them with you.

No, no, you didn't do anything wrong, but Kora and Illora are big girls now and they don't need a companion at home. They've been busy with their friends, anyway. And you'll grow up too. It's a normal part of life...

But we will have to put a golden band on you, to suppress your telepathic powers.

Oh, I know you don't really use them...

Well, I wouldn't say you don't know how.

You did use them.

That's how we know you have them at all.

SORLA WOKE UP WITH A START, in a cavernous room. As soon as she saw the high ceilings and the curtains on the bed she remembered where she was.

The nightmare lingered like the taste of poison. Sometimes the memories still chased her... Her original family sent her away just a few days after the one time she used telepathic powers, which was pure accident. She didn't know she had them, so she was as shocked as anyone, and all she did was push back a visiting male cousin of the family who yanked on her arm to see if he could sever it from her body. He'd been

harassing her all week, escalating his efforts when no one stopped him. Sorla was scared, and she defended herself—

I had every right to.

That was what she thought then, and now, but those Kalanites didn't think so. They felt that because she could only feel very fleeting pain, she couldn't be hurt. And they thought if she couldn't be hurt, she couldn't really suffer. So if that boy wanted to pull her arm off, well, they could just patch her up when he left. It wasn't that expensive.

She still reflexively rubbed her arm whenever she thought about it.

That was so, so long ago. It's all behind me now.

I'm just nervous...

She tried to fall back asleep and failed spectacularly, tossing the covers every which way. A maid came in the morning, and told her a carriage was waiting to take her to the magical bake shop. Seldon wasn't escorting her, apparently, or even saying hello this morning. He must be busy with prince stuff.

Sorla had to face this bit alone. Oh well, she was used to that.

The carriage ride was over much too soon, and a man was waiting for her outside when the carriage pulled up. He was a fairly average looking Miralem, a little past middle aged and of middling height, with disheveled reddish-blond hair, a ruddy complexion, and a flour-coated apron.

“Hey, so you must be the young lady then,” he said. “I hear you're quite the talent.”

“Mmmrm...”

“I was worried you wouldn't come. I need the help, and badly. Can't run this place myself. You look tidy.”

She couldn't tell if that was a compliment or a criticism. She was thinking the opposite of him.

“I have many years of experience running a business,” Sorla said carefully. “I can follow orders and I also work well independently.”

He started waving his hand. “This ain’t a job interview, I trust you. You look fine. I just need someone now. My orders are backed up and some of them are too important to put off.”

Well, the fantasy is over. You need to tell the truth right now. Seldon will just send you home. He’ll get you safe passage this time...right? I’m sure he’ll understand. And then you’ll be back home with your family and...

She was gripping her hands tightly around her bag, every part of her being wanting to stay, despite her best efforts to argue with herself.

“Come in. I’ll show you the kitchen and the shop. I’m Rath. They told you that, right? But of course I would still introduce myself. I do have some manners, I swear it.” He laughed.

Sorla followed him, entirely tongue tied. Maybe she’d be able to do magic if she willed it hard enough. She had always been such a hard worker, capable of any task demanded of her. She didn’t complain, didn’t cause trouble—at least, not on the surface. And now this was going to defeat her? When her own family were talented sorcerers?

Rath threw open curtains to the morning light, and Blueberry chattered with curiosity when he spotted a cat sleeping on a windowsill. A proper baker’s kitchen greeted her as the sun flooded in. Loaves were cooling on a shelf, pastries baking inside the massive oven. Flowers and herbs spilled from pots on the windowsills. Two magical lights hung over the big flour-dusted table. Then there were the piles of well-worn cookbooks, and a huge selection of ingredients stored in glass jars that had broken free from wherever they belonged and were advancing throughout the room like a disorganized army of vanilla extract, pine nuts, walnuts, chocolate chunks, dried fruits, every spice in the known world, and so on. A broom sat in the corner with cobwebs draped from the handle to the wall.

“I apologize for the mess,” Rath said. “Like I said, I’ve been overrun with orders, and...well...” He shrugged.

“I heard your wife used to help you here,” Sorla said, with sympathy.

“Daughter,” he said gruffly.

“Oh. Oh—I’m so sorry!”

He waved a hand. “Proud of her,” he grunted. “She wanted to fight, and she did. Posthumous Medal of the White Tree and everything.”

“Bless her memory,” Sorla said, and he waved a hand, looking embarrassed about it now.

There was so much to work with here. Sorla had barely even looked at the kitchen gadgets strewn around, some of which she had never seen before, even with all the kitchens she’d worked in. She could make absolutely beautiful and unique things here. There was so much charm in the old books and the well-worn wooden spoons and broad table.

On the other hand, it was a mess, and she could fix that up too. Within a week he’d wonder how he ever managed without her.

Except for the magic part.

When she looked over the room, and then back at Rath, he was downing a shot glass of something in an amber bottle.

“Whatcha think?” he asked.

The truth was lodged in her throat like a ball of felt. “I definitely want to work here...if I can be of service. What sort of magic do you do? I’ve heard that magic can be very regional, so I wonder if I’ll know how to manage that part.”

“Well, baked goods are also regional, so maybe there’s a learning curve, but it ain’t hard. I’m sure we get the same requests you do—for good magic, mostly. They are served at diplomatic meetings, weddings...and to revive people’s spirits. We never do poison or truth serum or any of that potion-maker business. For example, I have an order this morning for Lady Misa for any kind of chocolate pastry with an anti-depressant.

She's just had a baby and has been feeling under the weather. But she wants the effect mild. Too much magic and she says she gets manic and can't sit still."

"Okay...so a little magic to ease depression. Not too much. And you put it in the pastry as you make it?"

"Well, yes. You wouldn't put it in after, would you?"

"Of course not!" Sorla was just trying to fumble along, hoping she could make a pastry that would trick Lady Misa into thinking she wasn't depressed because of its sheer deliciousness.

Rath put a piece of paper with the order scribbled on it in front of her, and the recipe beside it. He got out the necessary ingredients from the random places they were kept. "How about you make that, and I'll keep working on a second batch of the violet cookies for the courting party?"

"I make a very popular violet cake," Sorla told him, rolling up the sleeves of her blouse and pulling a scarf from her bag to tie around her hair. Although all evidence suggested this would go badly, she didn't want to give up without an attempt. She imagined Grau standing beside her, telling her how to tap into the inherent magic of an object. Usually a crystal was used as a conduit, but Grau didn't need a crystal.

It helps, he would say, but there are crystals in the earth under our feet, and an experienced sorcerer can draw from them anywhere.

Well, Sorla wasn't an experienced sorcerer, or even a beginning sorcerer, but she had to try something—anything—to keep her position.

She thought back to when Grau had died and Velsa brought him back as a Fanarlem. At first he was so happy to be back at her side, but then there were a few months after when he was clearly struggling, when eating felt strange to him, and his body wasn't that coordinated while he readjusted to it. The magnitude of what happened seemed to hit him. He tried to hide it from Velsa, but he really couldn't. She was too

telepathically sensitive, especially to him. And Velsa was grieving his old body just as much as he was.

Sorla couldn't stand seeing them hurting. She was younger then, and she didn't yet trust that her newfound happiness might not dissolve with one wrong move.

And when she was scared, all she could do was throw herself into a task. She pulled out all her best recipes and made them with a passion, trying to make Grau all the most delicious food she could, day after day. Before long, Grau was back to his usual self, the tight grief in Velsa's mind eased off, and Sorla's new family seemed stronger than ever.

All this made her think of Dorr, reluctantly.

He was an irritating man—way too protective, way too quiet and glum to be good company—but she could tell that he absolutely loved the food she gave him. He was trying to heal, and everything was probably miserable for him, but every time he ate her cooking he looked a little healthier.

And he was handsome. She would give him that. It was gratifying to see a little color return to his face.

Maybe I could just open my own shop: Sorla Thanneau, Baker for the Dead.

The recipe was for a simple flaky tart with a chocolate filling. So easy, and so popular at the cafe back home, that she barely needed a recipe. She took cold butter out of the crock and cut it into the flour, and rolled it into fine sheets, folding it, rolling it again, soon losing herself in the familiar rhythms of the work. All Lady Misa wanted was to shake off the low moods that sometimes came after having a baby. Sorla knew all about that because their customers discussed these things frequently. Lady Misa probably wasn't getting enough sleep either.

But how was making this pastry supposed to be different from any other pastry? Was she just supposed to think happy thoughts?

When Grau made potions, he used his crystal like an instrument, moving it around the ingredients and

concentrating, flexing his fingers, pausing to consider the recipe and sometimes changing an ingredient or the way it was prepared. He might speak a spell word or chant. He had books of spells, but half the time he didn't look at them. It was intuitive.

Good baking, Sorla felt, was precise. She wanted the same results every time—the same snap of a cookie, or crisp crust, the perfect level of sweetness or savory slightly-burnt cheese edges. She liked feeling as if everything was under control, and magic was full of troubling variables.

All she could really do here was try to fill this pastry with her usual passion for the subject of pastry, plus more—if possible.

“You're quiet while you work,” Rath said after a while.

“I'm concentrating.”

“Selvie always sang to hers,” he said.

Curses, now she ought to be singing, too? Would that help the magic? But it was too late to start now.

Plus, she didn't really want to sing.

Finally, she had a pan of tarts formed and filled with a dark chocolate center, and a sprinkling of cocoa nibs atop the cream. She felt the oven temperature with her hand and found it acceptable, sliding the pan in.

“While you're waiting, try one.” Rath offered her a sugar cookie with an orange peel curled on top. It was very buttery, and tart-sweet—as tart as a lemon, but definitely from an orange.

“What kind of orange?”

“They're imported from the Balumi Islands.”

“Oh, wow—how do you even get those these days with the trade embargo?”

He winked. “I know people.”

“The royal family doesn't mind if you buy black market ingredients?”

“You tasted it. You think they’re complaining?” He chuckled. “I only wonder if I’m betraying Selvie, passing money along to the enemy. But I imagine fruit growers and farmers are just like they are here—wishing the war would end already. Those were actually the last of my good orange peels, and I’m out of all the good Kaalsonian nuts. But I can handle all *that*. Now I’m having to cut my coffee with dandelion root powder. Feh!”

They chatted over the subject of wartime shortages for a bit, and soon the pastry was done. Sorla pulled on thick oven mitts and took it out, steam rising from the expanded buttery layers. She knew they’d be delicious, but she felt just as certain they were no different than her usual.

Rath waved an open hand over one of the pastries and then drew his fingers together. The steam seemed to draw out of the pastry all at once in a visible cloud, then dissipate, as he cooled it with a bit of elemental magic.

“I’ll teach you that trick,” he added, picking it up to take a bite.

Sorla tried not to sag against the counter as she realized that all she had worked for was about to be pointless. She should have been learning magic alongside baking. It didn’t especially interest her, but she should have realized she would need it someday. After all, it was why Meirin and Feirin managed all right despite being Fanarlem. Magic bought you power and respect, no matter who you were. She was a fool to think just making good pastry would get her anywhere.

“Well, shit!” he exclaimed. “If that ain’t the best plain chocolate tart I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Oh, don’t sir me, I ain’t a lord; I’m barely fit for decent company.” He took another bite. He must have baked goods all the time but he seemed genuinely impressed with hers. She was frozen with anticipation. Maybe—

“But...” He took a slow breath. “It seems we had a miscommunication. This was supposed to have the magic for

Lady Misa.”

“Yes...” Sorla knew she couldn’t lie. “I know. The truth is...I’m just an ordinary baker. I don’t have magic. The miscommunication was between me and Prince Seldon. I’m sorry. I tried.”

“You can’t replace my Selvie,” he said heavily. “I need that magic....”

“But—surely, I have the ability—maybe I just need to go work at the regular royal bakery.”

“I don’t think they need anyone,” he said, with a hint of caution that implied something worse—that maybe she wouldn’t be welcome there. “Do you have a place to go back to?”

“Yes,” Sorla said, but it was a whisper of despair.

“I’m sorry, girl, I truly am—but I think you might just have to go home.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

DORR WAS SO TIRED that he slept heavily in his own bed without nightmares, a welcome feeling indeed, like spending time with an old friend. Una was still awake for a while after him, keeping an ordinary Ven-Diri schedule while he was on military time, waking with the sunrise. In the morning, the house was quiet and he laid unmoving, wishing that he never had to wake up again. Even under the covers he felt cold, his limbs leaden.

But then he thought of Una's shining joy at seeing him again, and the dark circles under her eyes, and he knew he was still too needed in this world to give up on it.

And, he had to admit that while he felt awful, when he sat up, his head didn't ache. His breath came easily. He picked up the bottle of tonic on the nightstand and poured a dose into the shot glass he kept with it, wincing as the taste flooded his mouth.

That's the taste of life now, but gods, it's ghastly.

He felt a little sick as the medicine went down, and he knew he needed real food, but he could barely choke down the oatmeal Una made last night.

There's only one food I've enjoyed since...

He'd be damned if he'd go to Sorla asking for favors. He would compensate her well. He opened his wardrobe, releasing the scent of a lavender sachet, cedar and wool. White linen shirts were still folded neatly in the drawers, ignored for years while he had been off wearing uniforms. He dressed

quickly, away from the mirror, unwilling to take a look at himself until he was neatly attired in fashions Una would probably find dated now: a black vest and knee-length coat, black trousers and boots, all clean and polished.

He tried to sneak down the stairs, but his aching joints and the general disaster of his—or someone’s—right leg made it impossible. When he made the turn at the stair landing, Rowel was standing at the foot looking up at him, holding a rope that he’d fashioned into a makeshift harness for a very excited dog who clearly had her vision back. Rowel was trying his best to stand still while the dog jumped around and barked at the sight of Dorr.

“Would it help if I draw you a hot bath?” Rowel asked, in his detached and dutiful way.

“No, I’m actually stepping out. Would you like me to—”

“*Please*,” Rowel said, holding out the leash.

I might just stay a morning person, Dorr thought as he staggered down the street, tugged along by the excited sniffing of this fluffy, ridiculous beast. No one in Ven-Diri-Ashi had a goofy dog, and his return would excite enough attention even without that. Returning from the dead certainly qualified as one of those events people liked to talk about, like getting married or having a baby, except less common and generally much worse. He had grabbed some money from the shop’s till, enough to buy pastries for a whole damn dinner party, and made his way to the bakery.

“A Fanarlem? Working here?” The young man at the counter of the royal bake shop smoothed his blonde locks as if vaguely offended by the idea. “I *do* not *think* so.” His accent had a condescending sing-song.

“Prince Seldon himself asked for her,” Dorr said, glaring down at him as a clutching protectiveness squeezed his empty stomach despite his best efforts not to care. “Do any adults work here?”

“*I* have worked here for six years, *oaf!*” the young man retorted, but when Dorr kept looming, he looked like he

immediately regretted this. “Ah—well—sir, there is a small bakery that supplies the bespelled pastry. I can’t *imagine* they would hire a Fanarlem *either*, but maybe try that one?”

Dorr followed the directions to an alley. A small printed sign was the only indication that he had the right place; there was no shopfront or pictorial sign, so this shop was definitely not for the common folk. He knocked but no one answered. He heard faint voices inside.

It was Sorla, and she sounded anxious.

He let himself in, hearing her ask if she could work at the royal bakery that he had just departed, and an older man turning her down gently.

“Do you have a place to go back to?” the man asked.

“Yes,” he heard Sorla reply, her voice subdued.

Dorr quickly tied up the dog and followed their voices past the small seating area just inside, to the kitchen beyond.

“What’s going on?” he asked. “They aren’t sending you home after you came all this way, are they?”

“Dorr, what are you doing here? It doesn’t matter to you. But there was a mistake,” Sorla said, unable to hide a flash of dark frustration. “The prince thought I had magical baking skills, but I just have ordinary ones. But I’m *not* going home. There must be a number of finer bakeries in Laionesse, where I could learn things I can’t make at home, and make city wages...so I won’t be needing a ride anytime soon.”

“If you have a good place back home...I’m not sure you really want to try your luck here,” the older man said. “It’s a damn shame, but I’ve never seen Fanarlem working in those better places.”

“Have they tried?” Sorla snapped, clearly determined. “Maybe I’m better at what I do than any Fanarlem has ever been.”

Her eyes looked much more anxious and desperate than her tone implied, but she was certainly trying to keep her chin

up. “Am I to understand,” Dorr began, “that you don’t put any magic in your baking?”

“No,” Sorla said. “I don’t have much talent for magic, I’m afraid...”

“I don’t believe it. I came here because the baked goods you gave me had to be in some way enchanted.”

“No, they were just really delicious,” Sorla sighed.

“It was more than that. I haven’t been able to taste *anything* since I was revived. I don’t have an appetite. But your pastries—I want them, and they don’t make me sick, and most importantly, they taste just the way good food always did—or perhaps better. I came down here with a bag of coins to persuade you to part with anything, even a burnt roll.”

“Revived?” the old man said. “Are you saying that she makes food that even the dead want to eat?”

“Well, the recently dead,” Sorla said. “I suppose that’s my only talent, but what good will that do if I can’t make antidepressant pastry and love pastry and all these other things?” She handed him a pastry. “I just made this. Rath says it’s not magic, but see how you feel.”

The older man was staring at Dorr with piercing pale blue eyes, stroking his chin. “Go on.”

“Don’t make him nervous!” Sorla said. “He’s having trouble with his digestion.”

“I’m not having any trouble with my digestion; stop discussing it.” Dorr ate up half the pastry in two bites. Unlike the pastries she brought on the trip, this one was fresh from the oven—and yet more delicious.

“Well, if you *are* having trouble with your digestion, you ought not to be living on pastries,” Rath said, ignoring Dorr’s request. “I make a nice carrot mash for that.” But he was watching carefully as Dorr finished it off.

And it really was astoundingly delicious. It wasn’t just the perfect crispness of the flaky outer layer and the buttery

softness of the inner. The simple pastry somehow felt deeply nourishing, more like a stew than a treat.

“It’s good,” Dorr said. “I don’t believe there isn’t some magic here. Pastry isn’t normally like this.”

The older man lit up like a torch. He grabbed Sorla’s arm. “My dear, what were you doing when you made this? Were you thinking of this man?”

“No! I was thinking of my father, actually.”

“Answer honestly.”

“Why wouldn’t I answer honestly?”

“Come now,” he said, just being a typical telepath at this point. They could really be miserable company.

“I was thinking of my father *and* Dorr, I suppose. We had just spent a couple days together and he did like my pastry, and anyone would think of that.”

“You were concerned for his recovery? You wanted to make something that would help him?”

“I guess.” She was carefully watching her wyvern poking around on a side table of spices. “When my father died and came back, I was thinking the same thing.”

Dorr filed that fact away to ask her about later. “Last night, my own sister, whom I adore, made me dinner and I couldn’t stomach more than one bite. It tasted like nothing. Everything else is revolting, but whatever Sorla does, her baked goods are not just delicious, but I feel much better after eating them. There is something to it.”

“Seldon didn’t know this about you?” Rath asked her.

“I didn’t know this about me! I’ve never even had the chance to find out that apparently my only magic is helping the undead? None of my customers fit the bill back home, besides my father, and he wasn’t brought back the same way. If this means I have magic, then...I’m sure I could learn more. I do learn quickly if given the chance, I—”

“No need.” Rath shook his head. “I wasn’t going to tell you right away, because this is of a very secret nature, but right now we have one ‘customer’ more important than any other.” He glanced at Dorr. “You can come back tomorrow, lad.”

No one called Dorr ‘lad’. His brow furrowed. “Is your customer General Froskar?”

Rath smacked the big work table. “How did you know that?”

“Because my apothecary shop has been getting orders from a mysterious customer too,” Dorr said. “For undead tonic. And I just came back from the Battle of Duiran. At that time, a rumor went around that he was dead. Men claimed to have seen him go down, but the official report was that he was just injured. I didn’t really question it because I know Miralem don’t come back, but...it all makes sense. But no one’s seen him since. That was a month ago. So I’m guessing something’s not going very well. I’m undead myself, and I can tell you, you’re not the same afterward.”

Sorla was looking at him with wide eyes and he couldn’t tell if she was impressed with him for knowing royal secrets, or full of trepidation about where this was going.

“You are undead...,” Rath murmured. “We Miralem don’t believe in coming back; we’re not supposed to deal with this. You make it look easy...but it isn’t, now, is it?”

I make it look easy!?! Limping in here with the pallor of Dormon Uthra himself? “No, it’s not,” he replied.

“This ain’t to leave this room...but I don’t know how long he’ll last anyway,” Rath said.

Shit.

Dorr wasn’t surprised it was Froskar, but it was certainly bad fortune for their side. Everyone knew and admired the hero of Laionesse. A distant cousin of the royal family, he had been the best friend of the late Prince Somon, and when the kingdom lost their heir, the pledge of loyalty given to Prince Seldon by the shining and brave general had helped calm the

nerves of the people. He had led the soldiers to nearly all their recent victories.

General Froskar was the sort of man who would make the difference between victory and defeat. He was beloved and trusted by the people and the royal family alike, with a good head for strategy and the heart to lead.

He was also as pure a son of Vallamir as one could imagine—golden hair fine and smooth as silk, pale green eyes, a fine telepath with a specialty in reading moods, a staunch follower of the goddess Vallamir, educated in Avalon by the Scholars of the Crescent, with their vows of celibacy and devotion to ideals.

Which meant he was the sort of man who would be even more opposed to returning from the dead than the average sort of Miralem.

Desperate times, Dorr thought grimly. He could imagine the hushed conversation between some necromancer and other highly ranked officers, the frantic telepathic messages that would fly to the royal palace and back, and the scandalous decision that he was too important *not* to revive.

“How bad is it?” Dorr asked.

“I ain’t seen him. I don’t think they want to share details.”

“I see...so probably really damn bad.”

“You do need me.” Sorla was practically hovering off the ground with relief. Her wyvern picked up a jar of cinnamon, flew into her arms with a small squawk, and offered it to her.

“Thank you, Blue,” she murmured, and snuggled him against her neck.

“If you can keep doing what you’re doing, then yes, I need you quite a lot,” Rath said. “And what is your name again?” he asked Dorr, although they actually hadn’t exchanged introductions the first time.

“Dorr Tondana.”

“That’s a boring name for an interesting looking man, isn’t it?” Rath commented, which was true—Dor was such a

common Ven-Diri name that sometimes strangers called out “Dor!” as a generic, as in, “Hey, Dor, you dropped a coin!” He might spell his a little differently, but that was a minimally distinguishing feature.

“Well, I’m glad Sorla knows you; she might need your advice to save the general. I’m sending a message to the royals suggesting the apothecary come along. Come back tonight, would you?”

“But—we’re—we don’t—well.” Sorla hesitated, clearly afraid to put her position in jeopardy, and glanced at Dorr.

The agonized mixture of gratitude and ire on her face was...well, it was even more endearing than her missing fingernail.

That look gave him something to live for, at least for today.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“GLAD THAT ALL WORKED OUT,” Rath said, as Dorr left. Sorla heard the dog bark. Blueberry’s head shot up to alertness.

“You’ll have to groom later,” she said. “*Did* it work out? He’s not going to be much help. He’s not that enthusiastic about living either.”

“Well, he’s walking around looking hungry for pie and the cute girls who make ‘em, which is better than Froskar’s doing.”

“Do you mean me? Don’t suggest anything like that. I rode with him here, and we didn’t even get along.”

“I may not be a level ten telepath, but I pick up enough not to believe you,” he said. “No time to waste now. I’ll show you your bedroom and give you a brief tour of the grounds and then you can finish the pies. You can make one for your fellow and one for the General.”

“I’m serious, Rath. He’s not my ‘fellow’. Not at all.”

“You’re right, young lady. It’s not my business and I shouldn’t have said it. Not professional. Nevertheless, he is doing quite well for a man who just died, and General Froskar isn’t, so I think he should come along. Here is your room...”

This long-dreamed-of job was not quite working out as she expected. She imagined a wave of calm settling through her as she tried to keep all these pesky emotions from getting in the way of a day’s work.

Rath was heading up the stairs. Near the top were a few towering piles of cookbooks, and before Sorla even reached the top herself, Blueberry landed on a pile and the entire thing swayed.

“Blue, get down!” she cried.

The wyvern launched with an annoyed squawk at being told where to go, and the movement sent all the books sideways into the next pile of books, and then the third, and then every last book went tumbling, some of them falling down the stairs, so that Sorla rushed to the top grabbing wayward books along the way.

“I’m so sorry!” she cried. “Books are so expensive; oh fates, I’ll keep him locked up from now on!”

Rath shrugged. “Nonsense. I’ll clean it up later.”

“I’ll clean it up now!”

“Don’t be silly. No harm done,” he said, even though pages had fallen out of a few of the tomes. “Here’s your room. You don’t need much space, I imagine? Not to imply you shouldn’t have space, just that there isn’t any.”

Sorla looked in the room and saw a tidy little bed by the window with a thick woven blanket and a freshly plumped pillow. That was very nice. But from there, it appeared she would be sharing her room with some lumber, a cabinet with shattered glass doors, several crates of chipped crockery, tarnished candlesticks, and other stuff that made her wonder if Rath had been previously employed as a traveling junk peddler.

“This is fine, although I could probably use a drawer for my clothes.”

“I thought of that!” he said proudly, lifting the edge of the blanket with a foot to show off a single drawer, separated from its original furniture and sitting under her bed.

Well, I asked for a drawer and I got a drawer, she told herself, with a wry expression.

“I could help you tidy up!” she said.

“Maybe,” he said mildly, but in such a way that she knew meant no. He had carried her bag up, and put it on the bed for her, and then said, “Let me show you the garden.”

“A garden?”

“Of course a garden. Good to have our own fresh ingredients, and best of all, a place to sit in the sun.”

Down the stairs again, and out a narrow, crooked, creaking back door—straight into a small courtyard garden overflowing with plants that were just beginning to stir with shoots and buds. Potted citrus trees were soaking up the sun.

She took a lingering look at the garden, studying the tiny green beginnings of spring, knowing that soon the season would come on so fast that this garden would be different every day. Two wooden chairs, built haphazardly but with fat sturdy legs, must be the spot where Rath and his daughter would enjoy summer days.

“It’s nice, eh?” he said, beaming over it. “Come May, I’ll hate to work when I could be reading a book out here. I’m glad you know how to read.”

Sorla never took time to read; she was always working, but she didn’t say that. “Well, I’ll get right to those desserts now, but I’m looking forward to May.”

Right now, all she wanted was to last that long.

Why would I only have magic for this one circumstance? I can only imagine I unlocked it because I cared so much about Feirin; I didn’t want anything to wreck my family.

She had no idea if she would have the same effect on General Froskar.

Even out in Dor-Temerna, everyone knew of General Froskar’s heroic deeds. Early on in the war, he fended off an attack, and then he led troops south to aid Otaré during the battle at the Pass. Both were resounding victories. General Froskar adopted new battle strategies when the Kalanites brought surprises into the fray, whether it was the huge long-range guns called artillery, or the buzzing flying machines that rivaled dragons for the sky.

Sorla knew he'd been injured, but she certainly never guessed he had died.

I have to save him. If my pastries could pull him back from death and help turn the tides of war...

She imagined Seldon's solemn gratitude...a large sum of money handed her by the weeping queen that she would send home so her parents could live out all their dreams...a ball in her honor...and a silk gown with embroidered sleeves...

Dreams were all well and good, but first she had to make the best confections of her life.

Sorla took a good look at the ingredients on hand and found that they had an abundance of light, sweet cheese with a delicate paper label detailing how this priestesses had blessed the cow's milk. Sorla tasted it and blessed or not, it was delicious, feather-light and subtly sweet. She knew desserts made with this light cheese were popular in Laionesse, but she hadn't worked with it much, so she pored over some cookbooks and found a light cake with a cheese filling, subtly flavored with cinnamon, pine nuts, cocoa powder, and sweet wine, and glazed with apricot jam. She would have to leave out the cocoa powder; that was all right. *I'm not sure it needs it anyway.*

It's a little odd, but how much can one do in the early spring with limited ingredients?

Alongside this more experimental dessert, they had a limited amount of strawberry and rhubarb, and she whipped that into a good, ordinary pie, losing herself for hours in the soothing rituals of mixing and rolling dough, chopping nuts and rhubarb stalks, mixing and stirring. Rath worked beside her, making almond cake and a spiced egg custard, occasionally humming to his food as it took shape.

Blueberry made himself at home inside a pot of herbs, curling around them, snuggling under the leaves like a blanket and behaving himself for the most part, except when a bird hopped onto the windowsill and he kicked up dirt and made his aggressive little *kik-kik-kik*.

Sorla expected it might take time to feel comfortable in a new bakery, but she felt very welcome and comfortable here already, except that she didn't know where some of the ingredients and supplies were kept.

Before long, the pie and cakes were cooling on the sill, and Rath looked pleased.

"I'm sending a message to the prince now," he said. "I'm sure they will want you and Dorr to bring them to General Froskar tonight. No time to waste."

"I'm going to meet General Froskar?"

"Well, your magic will probably work better if you can touch his mind."

"Have you seen him?"

"I saw him the day he was brought back. But it will be different now. It's been three months...so I don't know what he's become. It's ghastly magic, if you ask me, this raising the dead."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

DORR

“YOU LOOK BETTER THAN LAST NIGHT!” Una put a hand to Dorr’s cheek as soon as he walked into the shop, which she had just opened for the day by the time he walked home from the bakery. He had limped two miles while the upper-class Miralem gave him wary glances, probably noticing not just his hulking body but his mental state of pain and general grumpiness.

“That’s all anyone says to me anymore,” he said. “I look better than yesterday. But no one says I look good.”

“You do look good! You look better than good, how’s that? Did you get your pastry?”

“Yes. I’ll go back tonight.”

“Ohhh! Good! So you spoke to this girl?” She waggled her fingers together, leaning over the counter.

He decided to wait to tell her about General Froskar. “Una, if you make a thing of this, I won’t keep you company. Other men come back from the war needing healers, and I just need a particular diet until I fully recover.”

“Your defensiveness really isn’t helping your case. You’ll be proud of me though, I have already mixed three orders this morning and I was very careful with them. And I cleared off the counter.”

On the table behind her was the pile of books she was reading, but at least the customer-facing counter was clean, with just a ledger book, pen and ink, and a few sample bottles for immediate purchase.

“Would you like me to mix the rest?” Dorr asked.

“If you would...” She sighed. “It’s so wonderful to have you back.”

“You say that after I offer to take on all the day’s work.” He half-grinned.

“I’d be just as happy if you came back without hands—well, not at all happy for *you*, but you know what I mean.” As Dorr tried not to conjure up memories of watching the sword units slashing off hands, she continued, “I missed you. But yes. I could use the help, that’s for sure.”

“Is the ledger balanced and the taxes paid?” he asked.

“Well, they aren’t due until—”

“Work on that, if you would,” he said, opening the orders book and settling immediately back into the familiar routine. It took him a minute to remember where things were kept, but mixing the tonics and elixirs was so easy that it was almost mindless. He had to be careful not to add the wrong dose and repeat Una’s mistakes, of course, but he had mixed almost every spell in the book a hundred times.

“We only have six orders today?”

“Well...” She winced. “Yes.”

“Have you lost clients?”

“Gods,” she whispered, looking so guilty and miserable that he knew she was beating herself up more than he ever could. She should have written their parents and told them she was in over her head, but would he have done the same? No, of course not.

“It’s okay, Un,” he said. “I’ll get us rolling again.”

He wanted to feel the bottles and spoons, to crush leaves with his fingertips, but he left his gloves on. He didn’t want to

look at that strange hand.

A few customers came in to buy things off the shelves, mostly the older people who were trying to chase away their ailments the same way they hid their years under shape-shifting and pale powdered cosmetics.

Una worked diligently on the books, although she kept looking to her pile of lurid novels longingly.

“Done!” she finally declared, slamming the book shut. “You’re still making concoctions. Shall I read to you? I think you’ll like this one. It’s a travel narrative.”

“You did all of February and March up until this point?”

She deflated slightly. “I did all of February. March isn’t over.”

“It’s over in three days and you could catch up on it.”

“I missed your birthday!” she said, ignoring that completely. “When were you brought back? It must have been almost on your birthday!”

“I guess you’re right. It probably was my birthday week,” he murmured. “Well, at least I don’t have to celebrate anything twice.”

“No, it means you have to celebrate twice as hard. I could throw you a—”

“No. No,” he said. “I’m not sure if you’ve noticed, but I’m in pain, and I’m tired, and I hate food, and the best thing for me right now is to work. That keeps my mind off of it.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I’m sorry. I keep feeling like I could do something to make it easier.”

“You have. Just being here does make it easier, believe it or not.” He looked at her gently. “But that’s enough for now.”

The shop door opened, and Una turned to greet the customer before immediately recoiling.

“Good afternoon,” the man said, grinning at her somewhat cluelessly before jumping half out of his boots when he saw Dorr. “You’re alive, Dorrithan. Gods, how long have you been

back? We're some real slouches at gossip in this neighborhood, aren't we?"

"One of our finer points," Dorr said. "Yes, I'm alive. More than a little worse for wear, though, I'm afraid." He stood up to greet his old school mate, trying not to limp, but of course he didn't really manage it.

"I'm sorry... It'll heal up once the healers get back, I'm sure." Varrie looked concerned. He had always been optimistic to the point of seeming a little stupid, which Una blamed on his family being rich as lords.

Una saw Varrie as a nemesis. He was not a proper Ven-Diri, in her opinion, because his family had originally gotten rich selling magic crystal deposits on their land to Miralem, and the family elders seemed to spend more time at Miralem parties and theaters than in their own community. Besides that, they wore lots of color and were generally too loud.

But worst of all, Varrie worked at the Ven-Diri bookstore, and so Una could not go there without having to make small talk with him and "all his smiling", as she put it.

Dorr understood that the family could be irritatingly entitled, but he found it hard to *hate* Varrie. He was too oblivious to it all, and too good-natured.

Varrie was wearing a neatly tied purple scarf at his throat, and had blue lining on his coat. Dorr could already see Una glaring at this display, which might as well have been the spangled costume of a traveling dance troupe as far as her aesthetics were offended.

"It's not something a healer can fix, but...it could be worse," Dorr said, trying to sound blasé about it.

Varrie looked a tad pale. "Well, at least you were brave. I'm going off this week—"

"To fight?" Dorr interrupted. "You?"

"Yes."

"I thought your father set it up for you so you didn't have to fight," Una said, making no attempt to soften her words.

“He did, but...I enlisted anyway. I know things aren't going well, and...I have friends who have been badly injured...doesn't feel right to stay home. I regret not going sooner, considering. So, wish me luck and all!” He swung an arm in a jaunty way, oblivious to Una's disdain, but he definitely looked like the type who would get chewed up on the battlefield.

“What brings you here?” Dorr asked.

“Oh, well...I wondered if you had any potions that would increase my bravery. Something I could just take a swig of, when...”

“I can sell you a flask of whiskey,” Dorr said.

“Alcohol doesn't agree with me,” Varrie said, wincing. “It gives me night panics.”

“Do you smoke? Tiralem nef is good for the nerves.”

“Smoke? Me? It makes you age faster.”

“You sound about as useful on the battlefield as a carcass,” Una said.

“Lay off him,” Dorr told his sister. “The truth is, most of us aren't ready for it, even those of us who think we are. Tiralem nef is also calming in a liquid form without the negative effects, just less potent, but I'll mix it with firestar flower, which is good for vigor and focus. Too much firestar flower and you'll be a berserker out there, but I'll only give you a tiny bit. I can have it ready tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it deeply. If I make it back, I'll owe you one.”

“Oh, no, now I do believe the war is going badly!” Una groaned as he left. “That boy is in no way equipped to kill anybody else!”

Dorr was sure the war must be going very poorly if they felt they had to break the taboo against bringing a Miralem back from the dead, and Varrie would be walking right in on the end of it.

“You’re right, on both counts, but if he wants to go, I’ll do my best to help him,” Dorr said. He would try and mix the most powerful courage tonic he could for Varrie, taking up the rest of the afternoon, while he realized he was counting down the hours until he could see Sorla again.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“GIVE me your hand and swear to me that you will speak of nothing you will see in these chambers.” The female guard, dressed in light armor and wearing the full moon emblems of a highly ranked telepath, held out one hand to Sorla and the other to Dorr.

The trip to see General Froskar was already nerve-racking. They were told to approach the palace at a small side entrance, through a gate that silently unlocked and swung open at their approach. Several guards met them, all of them wearing the moon insignias. Sorla felt the very air around them sparking, and their minds brushing hers. She had never been anywhere secretive before. It was impossible to ignore that this was a Very Serious Pie Delivery.

She glanced up at Dorr, and in this moment, she was glad to have someone with her—but she would never admit that.

“Surrender your blade, sir, and it will be returned to you when you leave,” the guard said, and Dorr produced a sheathed dagger from under his coat.

“What you see today may be alarming at first,” the woman said solemnly, as she started to unlock a door with a overstuffed key ring.

“What will I see?” Sorla asked.

“Maybe I should bring him the dessert and you can stay back,” Dorr said. He was carrying the cake, while Sorla gripped the pie, and she wouldn’t let him take it from her.

“No! I can handle it,” Sorla said. “I’m the one who made them. Just because I ask a question doesn’t mean I’m nervous.”

Dorr looked at Sorla. “Let me do this alone,” he said. “This is my people’s fault. One of our necromancers brought him back when they shouldn’t. You don’t have to see this.”

“This is my job. You’re the tag-along. Seldon asked me to be here. He doesn’t even know you! If anyone should leave, it’s you. *Prince Seldon, that is,*” she added, embarrassed. The guard was looking at her with unreadable calm, but Sorla knew she shouldn’t speak of the prince like some farmer down the street.

Dorr didn’t look convinced, but he said, “This is true. Then, I defer to you, my lady.”

Was that sarcastic? He didn’t sound it, but she couldn’t help taking it that way. I can’t seem to help snapping at him whenever he’s around, but he always wants to take charge of the situation!

“He’s in here,” the guard said, lifting the key again, and Sorla realized she didn’t look very professional after that outburst, but it was his fault for being overprotective again where he had no business.

Sorla straightened up, trying to look as tall and brave as possible. At times like this she almost missed when she was just a cheap servant Fanarlem with a straight rod for a back instead of having a spine at all. The door swung open, revealing a blank blue eye.

Sorla jumped.

A man was standing right on the other side, his eyes glassy. He looked ready to block their way in, and now his eyes focused and ticked over to meet hers. Although he maintained some semblance of the handsome Miralem general, his skin was dry and grayish, his eyes sunken, his entire body wasted. He touched the doorframe with a withered hand.

He didn’t speak.

As he met her eyes, she almost felt he looked angry, but then there wasn't enough fire or strength in him for that. He needed help, but he didn't want it. Sorla extended her feeble telepathy toward him. She couldn't help herself, although she was afraid of what she might feel.

Nothing.

He felt like a shell, a man with no soul. This was the man who inspired new recruits from hundreds of miles away, whose noble countenance was reproduced on cards that mothers kept tucked in their pockets for good luck, who had held the river pass those years ago and won many battles since.

And he had once been beautiful, the way some Miralem looked like they were born from sunshine. She could tell he had been like that once, fair and pretty but also very strong, like Ruven.

Too far gone, Sorla thought, unwillingly, and a shudder went through her. *I can't help this man. I thought maybe this was my ticket to stay, but it isn't...*

She looked at Dorr, and now the contrast between them was stark. *Dorr seems so alive.*

He might not be flush with perfect health; he might be dour company, but it was clear that Dorr was getting along and improving, day by day. Her food couldn't take all the credit. He had some purpose that drove him onward; things to do, people he loved. Every time she saw him she noticed an improvement, but even from the beginning, he had enough ambition to drive back to Laionesse, which was more than she could imagine Froskar doing in this state.

And Dorr looked calm, like he knew what to do.

I won't admit it, but I truly am glad he's here.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

“TRY TO GET HIM TO EAT,” the guard told Sorla. “Sir, this young woman has brought you a gift.”

It was everything Dorr had feared; he shuddered at this glimpse into his own potential fate.

This was the hero of the Laionesse Army. He seemed in pain, his eyes vaguely searching for help, but he had little reaction to their appearance on his doorstep. Months of undeath without anyone to support him through the worst of it had drained his soul away, leaving him a revenant. Soon, there would be nothing left of him, and he would begin to hunger for blood—but such a fate was known mostly only in Una’s novels. No Ven-Diri would be left to suffer that way.

Dorr saw the horror on Sorla’s face and he knew he had to find some way to manage the situation.

“I know the necromancers have been sent to the front,” Dorr said. “But have *any* Ven-Diri been to see him?”

“He is not a Ven-Diri, good sir. We do force him to take the tonic, and that’s no easy task. The mind-healers have tried to help. He was very resistant from the start.”

“I don’t want to see Ven-Diri,” Froskar said. “Or anyone else.”

“I understand you are a Miralem,” Dorr said. “I’m not here to convince you of anything. Your people have always respected our culture, and I respect yours.”

“Then you’ll go away and just...let me die.”

“I *would* let you die,” Dorr said, after a heavy pause. “I’m not a necromancer. I am like you, General...I was brought back against my desire. I’m struggling with it, as you are. But since we were both brought back...it’s too late to regret it. It would be just as difficult to die a second time as it was the first.”

“It feels easy,” Froskar said. “It has felt so close ever since...” He shut his eyes, leaning against the wall.

Dorr found it much too easy to imagine what went through his mind. Just his short time fighting had left him with too many troubled memories to count. What would a general have seen?

“I know it means very little to you now, but it’s an honor to meet you formally,” Dorr said.

Froskar just waved a hand, wanting him gone.

Behind him, he could feel Sorla nearly buzzing with her need to prove herself and salvage an unsalvageable situation. “We brought you pie and cake,” she said, holding it up to him. “I’d be honored if you tried a little.”

Dorr avoided looking at Sorla. Of course anyone could tell he wasn’t thrilled to be undead. He’d tried his best to accept the way of things, but for General Froskar, it wasn’t the way of things.

“I’m not hungry. Thank you for the kind offer,” General Froskar said, his hollow eyes ignoring her creations.

She was grasping, but there was the ghost of a man with more charm in the way he thanked her. So there had to be a little personality left as well. “Could we...have a minute with him?” Sorla asked the guard. She nodded solemnly and shut the door on them.

The sound echoed. Froskar’s room was sparsely furnished, as if he were still living in a barracks. Heavy curtains smothered the light from the one window. Dorr caught the medicinal scent of the tonic, which turned his own stomach.

“Is that true?” Sorla whispered to Dorr, looking up at him with such concern in her eyes that he regretted the confession.

“Do you still wish you’d been left to die, even after coming home and getting some rest?”

“It’s complicated.”

“But isn’t it the way of your people to come back?”

“Not everyone really *likes* the way of their people,” he said. “But at least I was mentally prepared, to some extent. I’m not sure General Froskar can be saved. He’ll never accept this. I know that your job is in the balance, but...you’re only going to disappoint them later instead of sooner if you try to force him to live.”

“You wish you were dead?” she said sharply. “Right now, this minute?”

“That’s a heavy question. And I’m not the one who needs help here.”

“Just tell me, if your gods of death showed up right now and offered to whisk you to the next life, would you accept?”

“What does this have to do with General Froskar?” he said, through his teeth. Her persistence was annoying.

“I don’t think you would,” she said, as if she knew him better than he knew himself.

“I will say this,” Dorr said. “I am not convinced I wanted to stay.”

In fact, it was when he was with her that he most wanted to stay, if nothing else so he could make sure nothing terrible came of her during this mess. Arguing with her seemed to get his reluctant blood pumping.

But he also wasn’t going to hand her a victory over him too easily.

Froskar met Dorr’s eyes for the first time. His nostrils flared. He studied him longer, looking aggravated at his presence. Dorr knew how he must look, dressed in black, paler and more haggard than usual—like he was a lesser death god himself.

“You’re dead too, then?” he said.

“Undead,” Dorr said, thinking it was important to make the distinction, at the moment.

“‘Un’ dead, yes,” Froskar murmured.

This is why I’m better off keeping my mouth shut. I suppose. Now I seem like a nit-picking death god.

Sorla turned to the General and set the pie on the table. “General Froskar, sir...my name is Sorla. I’m a baker at the royal magical bakery and they say my baked goods are so delicious that even dead men can taste them.” She spoke with such confidence that no one would guess she had almost lost her job earlier. “It would truly be my honor if you take one bite. That’s all. Just one bite.”

She took the fork from Dorr and scooped out a big mouthful of rhubarb, strawberry, and buttery lattice, jabbing it at Froskar like she was prepared to do battle over it.

“One bite if you will leave me alone,” General Froskar said with a sigh that turned into a slight cough. He sat down in the chair, clearly in pain, and took the fork. He looked weak. Just watching him sharpened every ache and weakness in Dorr’s own body.

The general took a bite.

CHAPTER TWENTY

EVERY FIBER of Sorla's being itched as she watched him slowly chew and then swallow the pie. She tried not to look too twitchy.

If this doesn't work, it's over for me.

He wiped the little bit of wayward filling from his upper lip, sucked it off his finger, and then he licked the fork.

"Lady damn you," he said, coughing again.

Sorla tried not to look triumphant. Dead men were certainly not much fun to cook for when they seemed so angry to have delicious food, but he wanted more.

"Now try the cake, at least," she said. The top was glazed in the apricot jam, and the cream and light cake beneath it were cloud-like, nearly floating off the fork.

The general couldn't resist the other bite. "What sorcery is this?" he growled, coughing, looking downright mournful over how much he clearly wanted more.

She pushed the whole thing in front of him. "I made all this for you, sir."

He ate a second bite, even though it seemed like he was remembering how to eat. "Call me Eustan," he said. "I am not General Froskar anymore."

"Eustan! It suits you well," she said. "Can I bring you some flowers from the palace grounds? Your room is exceedingly gloomy."

“I don’t need them.”

“No one thinks they *need* flowers, but sometimes it turns out that we do,” she said. “Will you humor me, at least?”

“I won’t destroy them, I suppose,” he said.

She guessed he must have trashed some previous attempts to decorate. “Wonderful. Eat as much as you like and I’ll be right back.”

Dorr lifted his brows at her as she stepped out. “What is your plan?” he asked. “Do you think flowers will actually help?”

“I’m making it up as I go,” she said. “But if I have any chance of saving him, I need to give him a reason to live, just like...well, you probably felt differently about being brought back when you came home and saw your family.”

“Maybe.” He paused. “My sister is the only one home, but she did miss me.” He frowned. “But while I might not choose death at this moment, I’d certainly choose it if I could return to that juncture and tell my friends not to bring me back.”

“Why?”

“Why would I want to die? Well, I was already dying. It feels very unnatural to come back. My whole body is protesting it.”

“Is it that much different from an injury? You’re still young, and you could have so much to do.”

“Are you talking about me, or yourself? You don’t seem like you ever stop, and probably plan on living forever, but now I’ll be living a long time without aging, marrying, or having children. In about a hundred years my body will start to break down and I’ll have to select my own day of death and go to a telepath and ask them to help me ascend, because I won’t have a natural death anymore.” He grimaced. “What is there to look forward to?”

“Gosh, I don’t know, how about my next pie?” she said, only half joking. “That makes it sound like no Fanarlem should have anything to live for. I won’t age or have children

either, and when I was a kid I thought I'd be trapped in servitude my whole life, but I still didn't want to die. There were still sunrises, and pies, and flowers, and snow, and little moments of rebellion that made me dream..."

"Moments of rebellion?" He drew a step closer as she crouched to pick some flowers.

There were only a few flowers to choose from right now, so the crocuses would do. She gathered them gently, assembling the right colors into an arrangement that hopefully didn't look too haphazard. "Yes. My original family taught me to read, and I taught myself to write, for the most part. That was already some rebellion, and then when I was a servant for hire, I ran messages for an actual rebellion that was brewing, against the High Sorcerer."

"You surprise me," he said. "Here you just seem like an innocent purveyor of pie."

"That's why I make a good rebel. I surprise everybody." She grinned.

He paused. "What you must think of me, wanting to give up as soon as I come home damaged. I get the feeling that if you were a soldier you'd go right back out as soon as you could."

"I wasn't trying to make you feel guilty," she said. "No, I can't know that. I don't know what you saw on the battlefield. I don't even know what physical pain is like. Not really, anyway, not the kind of pain that just hangs around for hours, much less weeks or months. I just feel like...it's good to live, as much as you can manage it, whether you're a doll somebody made out of stitched up bits of cloth, or a man somebody brought back because they felt he had more to do. Maybe you do. Maybe...we do. Laionesse *needs* General Froskar."

He looked at her solemnly, and then at the sky. "I know," he said. "If there's a way to bring him back, we have to try."

There was something about the way he seemed to be giving in to her, like he couldn't help himself, and the way he

looked at her, with his dark eyes, bemusement almost breaking his air of general Ven-Diri gloom, that gave her a funny feeling in her chest. “Thank you.”

“Maybe Eustan needs a dog,” he added.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

SORLA FINALLY SLEPT WELL, once she saw that the guard was satisfied with the mere fact that the General ate a piece of pie.

She woke to the sound of some stop-and-start music on a merry northern-style flute, and found Rath playing the instrument. “I made tea, if that pleases you at all,” he said. “What passes for coffee these days is too awful, so I’m trying to adapt.”

Sorla sniffed the spiced scent in the pot on the kitchen table. “I wish it pleased me more, since half the pleasure of tea seems to be feeling it warm you up all through, but it smells delicious, so if you don’t mind, I’m happy to share it.”

“Of course. No fun enjoying every damn thing alone,” he said. “Well, I’m glad it went well enough with the general. It doesn’t help me much, as I’m still buried in orders for a chocolate cake that calms people down—even while I’m running low on cocoa powder and it’s tricky getting more of that lately—but if you can bring back our national hero, that’s all anyone could ask for,” Rath said.

“You look very relaxed for a man buried in orders,” she said, grinning.

“Bah. What’s life if you never take a minute to relax. I’ll run around like a tornado the rest of the day, and probably make as many messes as well.”

“I still want to practice on the other spells today too,” she said, still worried that the general was a hopeless case and her time was limited.

“That’s good. One a day and you’ll have the hang of it before long,” Rath said. “I can see you’re determined. While I could use more help, I didn’t mean for you to take it the wrong way. I don’t want you to worry yourself too much. Even one talent is good enough, if it’s the right one, and I’m glad you can stay. I could see how heartbroken you were when I thought you might have to leave.”

Although her new boss could be rough around the edges, now she could see he was a softie on the inside. And this entire time, he hadn’t made any fuss over her being a Fanarlem, except to warn her off of the main royal bakery. “I try not to worry too much,” she promised him. “I just wanted a chance, that’s all. Now that I have one, I’m sure I can get somewhere.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Shall I answer it?” she asked.

“Go right ahead. It’s nice to have a young lady about the place again. No one wants to look at this ugly old face!”

Sorla opened the door and a young man, his reddish hair pulled back in a ponytail and thin scratches lining his arms, held up a basket of pale blue berries shaped like tears. “Is Rath around? I have wares today.”

“Ah—Bannar! Is that the first batch of snowberries? And so many too.” Rath was still hanging out behind her, unable to contain himself. “What do I owe you?”

“Five ilan.”

Rath whistled but he produced the coins, then just when Sorla thought she was going to stay ignored, he put a hand on Sorla’s shoulder. “This is my new assistant, Sorla. She might be handling the transactions some days. It’s her first proper day of work but I have a good feeling about her.”

“Welcome to the neighborhood!” Bannar said. When Rath turned to get the coins, the berry seller whispered, “It’s customary to tip the delivery boy fifty percent.”

“Don’t listen to him!” Rath barked. “These are the perfect thing today. Do you know what they say about snowberries?”

“No.”

“When Vallamir gets sick and tired of winter, she cries, and her first tears are these berries. When they show up on the mountain.”

“The goddess cries?” Sorla asked.

“Well, of course she does; we all need to now and then.”

Sorla had lived among the Miralem for years now, but she was still surprised by some of their stories. Although she didn't really believe in a goddess who said and did all these things, the stories charmed her, especially the shocking idea that everyone should cry when they needed to, which was the opposite of everything she'd been taught.

The snowberries were clean and only needed a few leaves and twigs picked out of the basket, and she immediately set to making pies out of them. A little later in the morning, there was another knock on the door—an older woman who wanted pastries that made everyone calm for a wedding between two families who didn't exactly get along.

“It's all so stupid and I'm just not having it,” she said. “I want something cheap, because they all stuff their faces at every opportunity!”

The lady was beautifully dressed, in a long tunic of pink silk trimmed with silver fur, and a gold necklace. Sorla was amused to hear her bitch on and on about her annoying relatives, especially since she was actually talking to Sorla and not over her, like a servant.

“The nobility has all the same ridiculous problems as anyone else, but they do look finer when they talk about them,” Rath said.

After that, when Sorla had just slipped the pies in the oven, Meruvel the basket maker wandered over from a few shops down. He was one of the rounder people she'd ever seen, immediately leaning on Rath's counter with a smile to Sorla, “That the new assistant, ol' boy?” he said to Rath.

“Aye, that's Sorla.”

“Are you the one making that delicious, diabolical smell of snowberry pie?”

“That’s her.”

“Temptress!” He cackled cheerfully and asked her, “How have things been around here, Miss Sorla?”

“Very good! I’m excited to have a few berries, because that means loads of berries will be here soon.”

“I don’t want summer! Blegh. Too hot.” Meruvel fanned himself just thinking about it.

“I’m the one working around ovens, ya poor melting tub of lard,” Rath said.

“You rangy old fire demon,” he sniped back. “You know, every summer he gets a sunburn by choice,” he told Sorla.

“I’m actually only twenty years old but this is my skin,” Rath joked.

They gossiped for a little while, in a very innocent sort of way that made for a pleasant backdrop while Sorla attempted to make the order of the nut buns for the contentious wedding. Rath said she could try, and he would make some as well, and if they ended up with two batches, it was all the better.

By the late afternoon, she had a failed—if delicious—order of nut buns, a beautiful snowberry pie with a top crust decorated in a floral pattern, and a general sense of failure. Sorla was not accustomed to failing and was struggling not to take it badly, her mouth refusing to form anything but a tight little scowl.

“Don’t be too hard on yourself about the nut buns,” Rath said. “That won’t do you any good. Magic takes time to master and tomorrow is a fresh day.”

“But why should I be any better at it tomorrow than today? I don’t understand how I can have magic to feed the dead, and the buns don’t have anything! I’m missing something...”

“All that really matters is getting the pie to General Froskar,” he reminded her. “You’ll have a job for life if you can manage that.”

By the time Dorr showed up to accompany her to the palace, she had baked an extra apple cake just to try again with something simple, only to have the same failures.

“Are you a perfectionist?” Dorr asked, when she briefly explained her low mood. “Because the snowberry pie looks and smells...well, let me just say that in general you seem a master of your art.”

“Art,” she fretted, as she ran her hands down the dog’s face and scratched her ears. Blueberry immediately climbed onto Silk’s back to dig in her fur for fleas. ”Magic is art. I just follow recipes. I thought baking was art once, but that’s really all it’s ever been.”

“Your baking is definitely an art! If magic isn’t your forte —”

“But it has to become my forte! Prince Seldon still hired me to be a magical baker, in the end, not just to bake pie for the dead. I’m just a Fanarlem...and if I slip up I can’t bet on getting hired elsewhere.” That really was what stung. She couldn’t stand the idea of confessing her failures to Seldon when Rath implied there was no place for her at the non-magical bakery.

Sorla was well aware that not many Fanarlem got this kind of opportunity. If she failed, it felt like a failure for her entire race.

“But the job you’re doing is still important. If the prince fires you, I’d hire you to be my cook.”

“You mean, your personal servant?” She bristled. “I mean, getting a job like *that* has never been difficult for Fanarlem, but thanks anyway.”

“I didn’t mean it like that!” he growled. “I mean, if the prince doesn’t appreciate the talents you do have, he is a shortsighted fool.”

“He’s already gone far above and beyond what any other prince would do for a Fanarlem girl who lives two or three days’ ride away! It isn’t his fault if the entire world doesn’t arrange itself for me, and at least he never suggested I be his

personal servant,” she growled back, and then she immediately regretted it. *He was trying to make me feel better...* He went silent now, his expression chastened. She hadn't really meant to attack him; she was just worried about her future. It wasn't like her to take out her moods on anyone else.

Yesterday they had achieved some peace, and now it had gone all wrong again.

And they had arrived at the palace, the guards quietly waving them in, so there was no time to muster an apology.

“What is this? Two pets now?” asked the female guard who seemed to be the leader, noticing the dog.

“This is my dog Silk. Another visitor for the general,” Dorr said. “It's hard not to feel something in the presence of a pet, particularly one as lovingly ridiculous as this.”

Dorr has really taken to the dog, despite all his grumbling, Sorla thought, and she hated how charming she found this to be.

“Hmm...well, see how he reacts. Be careful. Both for the general's sake and the dog's. Sometimes he is unpredictable.”

The guard opened the door. Sorla's heart sank when she saw the flowers she'd brought for General Froskar were dashed on the floor, and he was in bed, eyes open, otherwise as still as a corpse. Dorr took the lead, nudging just ahead of Sorla and her pie, getting annoyingly protective again. He kept the dog on a short leash.

“Eustan?” Sorla said. “I brought you another pie. What was wrong with the flowers?”

“You tricked me yesterday,” he said, in a dull voice. “You're just like the others. Trying to convince me to live the life of a dead man. I'm sorry. *Undead*. When has anyone ever wished to be un- anything?”

The dog was straining at her leash, whining, wanting to sniff at the general.

“Just go,” he said, crossing his arms and turning toward the wall.

“You told me you wouldn’t destroy the flowers,” Sorla said, gathering them back up, although the poor crocus blossoms were crushed and torn now.

He glanced over his shoulder, and Sorla couldn’t help thinking that if he really wanted them to leave, he would just stop talking. ”As soon as you left and I could have a calm moment to think, I knew you had been sent to trick me. This is unnatural. The goddess called me home to have some relief from this impossible war. I can’t win it for you. No one can.”

Silk was nearly losing her mind barking over him. Eustan suddenly got to his feet and stormed at the dog as if to strike her. Dorr tried to pull Silk back and Sorla ran to intercept.

“Sorla!” Dorr tried to stop her as she put herself between Eustan and Silk. The air crackled with Eustan’s sudden rage and he struck her with a soldier’s arm, an arm that was still quite powerful even as he withered away. She was thrown to the ground and felt something crack. A rib. Fanarlem ribs always were too fragile. Blueberry let out a shriek, and Sorla lunged for him, keeping the struggling beast from biting Eustan’s ear off.

Worse, the pie was flung to the ground, and half of it splattered across the floor.

Sorla got right to her feet, beating Dorr before he could help her up. She scooped up the pie pan, saving what of it she could, with the wyvern still flailing around under her other arm.

“Be good, Blue,” she said in a low voice.

“Please tell them to let me go!” Eustan cried, retreating back to his bed, covering his face with his hands. “I’m not your hero... I’m a failure. I’m tired...”

The raw despair in her voice left her holding the pie, paralyzed to force him into eating.

Seldon said the war wasn’t going well, and maybe Eustan had already been cracking under the pressure of it all. All she knew of him was the heroic figure, but she didn’t think about how he would also be a man, an ordinary man—past his

sunrise adulthood, but not by that much—just like how she had been so in awe of Grau when her parents first took her in and then she realized that he was far from invincible.

Maybe no one who died ever really wanted to come back, whether they were a Ven-Diri or not. And maybe it wasn't her business to insist.

But all she could think was that if her one and only gift was putting magic in desserts that made dead men want to live, it was for a reason. Sorla knew her own soul had been forced into this body, intended for a life of servitude, and for many years, that was all she got.

But she still loved life, even when it seemed against all sense. And she always felt there *would* be more, that there was something beyond serving a master and doing what she was told. Every day, the sun rose, and she wanted to see it. Every spring, the flowers bloomed, and she wanted to drink in their fresh scent. Maybe it was unrealistic and sentimental, maybe these men would never feel that way, but...

“Give me one month, Eustan. Just one month of eating my baked goods and indulging my flower arrangements and letting Silk give you pet-me eyes, and if after a month, you still want to die as much as ever, I swear I will go right to Prince Seldon and *beg* that he sends a healer to help you ascend right then and there.”

Eustan had the air of a soldier settling in for a slog of a campaign. He was sitting up now, staring at the floor.

“It's all right. I know I'm imposing on your time.”

“Sorla is right,” Dorr said. “Give it a month. Sit here at the table and eat a bite of this pie before I eat it all myself.”

“You are welcome to it,” Eustan said, looking at them like they had both betrayed him.

“She didn't make it for me.”

“I made it for both of you,” Sorla said, surprised that he was backing up her plan so firmly.

Eustan reluctantly approached the pie and took one bite, and then of course he took another. That first bite, the first step toward a will to live, always seemed to be the hardest, or—she liked to think—it was just too irresistible not to keep eating.

Dorr slowly let Silk's leash go slack, so she could sniff Eustan, and the general didn't stop her. As with Dorr, the general received a thorough investigation with a snuffling wet nose as he ate the pie, and then Silk looked up at him with a whine of concern.

As this was going on, Sorla didn't want Eustan to feel like his every move was being scrutinized, so she busied herself tidying up his room, making the bed and whisking the floor with a broom. She opened a window, letting in the warmer air of spring, and the smell of the palace gardens with it.

"You do remind me of..." Eustan murmured, when Silk kept waiting for his attention. He finally gave her ears a brief scratch, when he finished the pie.

"Of who?" Sorla asked.

"Nothing," he said softly. "I think that's enough for today. Please leave me be." He sounded so dull, and so tired, that Sorla couldn't enjoy any sense of triumph. She knew all she'd done was postpone the inevitable. The greatest war hero of Laionesse would choose death, all under her watch, proving that even the magic she did have wasn't worth a damn thing.

No, Sorla, she told herself. No worrying allowed. Just get through one day at a time.

"That went well," she found herself saying as they left, even though it really hadn't, but sometimes she was able to will a good outcome into existence.

Only she usually just said it to herself.

"Did it?" Dorr said, his voice dripping with skepticism.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“WAIT,” Dorr said, when he saw her face get all scrunched up in anticipation of releasing a retort. “First things first. Are you hurt?”

“Oh, no,” she said. “Of course not.”

“Are you sure? It sounded like something cracked.”

“Well, a rib, but what do those do anyway? I’ll get it repaired one of these days, if it starts trying to poke out of me or something.”

“That’s good,” he said. “He should have apologized for that.”

“He doesn’t have to. He’s clearly extremely traumatized and I’m coming in there to poke at him, when he’s made it entirely clear what *he* wants. I’m the one going against the will of his soul.” She seemed a little nervous, like she expected this might put him on the defensive.

She’s really something. Brave...and thoughtful.

That was all Dorr could seem to think. It started with finding her endearing, and then a selfish interest in her baking, but now it was just...her.

When he saw her spring up after getting struck down, twice as determined as ever, just storming ahead when it was clear she didn’t have much chance of success...

But she wasn’t just spirit without soul. She recognized that Eustan was in pain, and that maybe none of this was right.

Just being around her was starting to make him feel like coming back to life. He felt...desire. It was more than physical, although he was afraid some of that physical desire was starting to creep into the mix. It was the anticipation of seeing her again tomorrow, and the next day...

But what does all of this mean for me? Do I want to live for the sake of wooing this girl? And what would that mean?

It wasn't exactly taboo to fall in love with a Fanarlem, but as a Ven-Diri Daramon, he did need to be careful. The Kalanite Daramons had created Fanarlem like her to serve their needs and desires, and he was wary of courting her because he never wanted to sound like one of them.

But perhaps even more than that, he didn't want to be touched, to be seen. He didn't want to share this experience with anyone—the scars, the misshapen body, and all the memories and nightmares that went with it.

But I want to keep her in my life. That's all I know. And if she is in it, it will be a life after all. Somehow.

“I think Silk needs a walk,” he said. He wanted to draw out the time with her, to try and explain himself a little better—not his feelings, spirits no! But at least that he was on her side. He couldn't ask her out for coffee or tea, since none of that appealed to him and she would see right through it. The dog was still straining at her leash and sniffing everything. “She seems to really like your company. Have you seen Ebbin Park yet?”

“No...”

“It's a public park with beautiful gardens. It isn't too far. They have a little fenced area for lords and ladies to let their dogs run around with each other.”

“What about commoner dogs; are they allowed?”

“I guess we'll find out if anyone is policing the situation. I can act lordly if necessary.”

She smiled faintly, although she seemed uncertain about spending more time with him. “Okay.”

Well, he hadn't done much to win her over. He'd been trying to deny it from the moment he saw her. Did she feel any of that same fraught denial, or was she thinking of Prince Seldon right now?

The park was a mile away, and even though Sorla had short legs, she walked very briskly. He was practically dragging himself by sheer mental force to keep up with her. He was feeling much better, but at the same time, all the vigor he enjoyed when he joined the military felt like just a bitter memory. Walking a fast mile would have been nothing to him before; now he couldn't even make much conversation until they'd arrived.

Sorla was also painfully quiet. She looked deep in thought.

Ebbin Park had the footprint of an entire block, densely landscaped with ornamental trees and flowers that were just beginning to bloom. Among plants that were still brown and dormant were explosions of bright daffodils and crocuses, and trees with pink blossoms, visible on approach. They entered the ornamental iron gates, which were left open from sunrise until well past dark for moonlit walks. A patch of vivid purple flowers and bushes with tiny white blossoms greeted them just inside.

The horrible plodding silence of the walk was immediately forgotten when Sorla saw all the flowers. She was enraptured by them, as he suspected she would be.

"What a garden!" she exclaimed. "It really does feel royal. How wonderful that it's open to everyone! And it really is, isn't it?" One of the families walking ahead looked pretty shabby. "Someone really must *design* a garden like this, hm?"

"Yes, there has been a line of royal designers of gardens, I believe," he said.

"I love the running water," she sighed, peering over a small bridge at the stream running beneath their feet. "I think whoever designed this garden must have thought of everything. I think this place would be beautiful even if you couldn't see it."

She definitely meant it as an idle compliment on the garden, but it flashed him back to the battlefields again, and the men on the other side he had helped to maim. *Can I enjoy anything ever again without being thrown back there?*

He thought he hid his thoughts well enough, especially when Sorla didn't seem telepathically sensitive, but she glanced at him sidelong. "Are you...okay? Or...you're never okay, are you? Just like the general..." She gripped the railing of the bridge. "I can't really defy fate this way. I can't convince anyone life is worth living when they've seen whatever you've seen."

"No, that's not it," he said. "I wouldn't choose death now. I guess it just isn't a straight line. I maimed, I killed, I saw friends die, and...well." He winced. "I know no one wants to hear about it."

"I want to hear about it!" she said. "It's much better than you hardly saying a word. I'm glad that you're feeling more like sticking around. A week ago you seemed so resistant. What changed?"

You.

It was all that came to mind, although he wouldn't say it.

If he hadn't been thrown together with Sorla by pure chance, he was sure he'd just be holing up in the apothecary, working numbly on one task after another, while Una fussed over him.

"Being back home *has* probably helped," she suggested.

"You've been persuasive about the benefits of sticking around," he said. "And if we're going to see each other this often, maybe I got tired of arguing about it." That was as close as he'd come to admitting how he truly felt taken off guard by her, that she charmed him, and he didn't like the thought of her going through life pining after a prince who would never give her the time of day.

"Glad to hear that I can take a little credit." She grinned, as Silk came trotting up to her with a ratty toy in her mouth. Some other dog must have left it. Blueberry immediately

looked interested and climbed down Sorla's arm, reaching out a tiny wyvern hand to take the object, which looked like a ball someone had stepped on.

"Blue! That's not yours." The wyvern chittered with annoyance. "I was just wondering what helped you, because it seems to me we have to do something different if we're going to help Eustan. I'm never going to be able to convince him to keep going on. But they're keeping him like a prisoner! Why would he want to live, when he's isolated and doesn't have any purpose?"

"You know why, don't you?" Dorr asked, motioning ahead to the small gate that opened to the enclosed dog park. Silk's tail wagged when she saw several other dogs ahead to play with, and she tried to bark but then refused to relinquish the toy.

"Not really!" Sorla said.

"His family probably won't accept that he's been brought back," Dorr said. "His family is very religious. Not only would they be horrified at his current state, but they'd probably be furious at the royal family and stir up trouble. Although the king and queen have been very popular since we've had fewer losses thanks to Froskar's brilliance, that won't last long if the tide turns."

"But if they lose Froskar, the tide might turn anyway," Sorla said. "So they're stuck. Damned if they do, damned if they don't."

"Exactly... I'm sure the hope was that Froskar would want to continue serving his nation so much that he would accept being revived, and no one would ever have to know it even happened."

"He doesn't seem to care about serving his nation right now..."

"I understand that," Dorr said. "Dying changes your priorities."

"I guess it would. But how? I'm trying to understand. If there's any way..."

“When I was a younger man I mostly thought about carrying on the family business. When the war broke out, I wanted to serve. I had skills I felt I could offer. I had grand and noble ideas about crushing the Kalanites and restoring the honor of the Daramon race. But when I was dying, all I could think was that I was the same as the man dying next to me. He looked like me; he was scared like me, and I had to face that if I had been born in his country I would likely think like he does. It felt like nothing had really mattered; that, in fact, I had just been a cog in a big torture apparatus, following the whims of leaders. All that seemed to matter in the end was the handful of people I had loved. For the first time I really wished for a family of my own someday, but I was dying, and even when I came back...” He cut himself off. “Well, I won’t be the same.”

“You can still have a family,” Sorla said. “It seems you’ve already adopted a dog. I was adopted, of course. I thought my family was a lie when it started. Grau and Velsa told me to call them Meirin and Feirin just to fit in better. Velsa isn’t even old enough to be my mother, and Grau, barely. But when I call them my parents now...it feels so real that sometimes I swear I have memories of them from when I was little. I so want it to be true. They take care of me the way I imagine good parents do. I can feel their love all the way from here.” She added softly, “Don’t tell anyone, though. Grau and Velsa lied about their ages and everyone thinks we’re a real family.”

“Sounds like you are a real family.” He opened the gate and let Silk burst through it, getting into a an intense mutual sniffing with a dog half her size immediately. “You’re right, of course...I could still have a family outside of the traditional definition. Women aren’t beating down the door to marry undead men who can’t have children unless they don’t want them in the first place, but...” He realized he was rambling now, doing a bumbling dance around the burning thought of her, and steering the conversation into the most awkward places possible. *I really am terrible at this courtship thing.*

“I’m sure some woman who likes tall men will come along eventually,” she said, and he couldn’t remotely tell if she was teasing him or just swatting him off like a fly.

“I’ve heard tall men are very popular,” he said dryly.

“I think it’s a little inconsiderate to block out the sun.”

“I’ll try not to get between you and the sun,” he said, trying to keep up with what he hoped was flirtatious banter.

“Thank you. Blue, don’t eat that—fates, whatever that is, it’s long dead.” Sorla rushed to try and pry a rotting rodent out of Blueberry’s mouth while Silk bounded over to see what her friend had found.

“Rawk! Rawk!” Blueberry protested vociferously over the loss of his treasure. Sorla fished a little ball of dough from her apron pocket and fed it to him to shut him up while she said,

“Well, anyway, if what you’re saying is true, and it seems to be, then we can’t reunite Eustan with any of his family to convince him to stay. And clearly his status as a war hero isn’t moving him. Treats and flowers—I’m not naive enough to think that will turn him around either; they’re just buying me a little time at best. But there has to be someone he loved so much that he would live to see them again, or to make them happy...or is there? Some of us are just...alone.”

Some of us.

She knew how it felt. She had been alone.

“Sorla,” Dorr said. “Your own will to live was hard-won, I suspect. Happiness wasn’t handed to you, but was something you’ve fought for.”

She looked briefly startled, and bit her lip. “To my last stitch,” she said, in a low tone. “But I always wanted to fight. I can’t make Eustan feel that way.”

“No.”

“And if I can’t, I’ll lose my position...but I just have to face that. I have one month to figure out if there is anything Eustan really wants to live for, and if not, I’ll just have to let him go.”

“You might lose this position, but you might find a new place in the Ven-Diri-Ashi,” Dorr said. “I know at least one dead man who needs and wants your talents.”

“Who? Oh—oh, you mean you.” Now she seemed a little flustered and he hoped she didn’t think he meant he *only* wanted her talents. He hoped she understood that this entire walk was just a pretense to spend time with her, with no pies or pastries in sight, because it was her company he craved more than anything.

“Silk!” he snapped, as his dog had now decided that she didn’t like the large, lean, black dog that had just entered the gates. A proper Ven-Diri dog, of course. That *would* be the one his ridiculous animal decided she didn’t like, on the leash of a willowy Ven-Diri lady who looked at him with very thinly veiled horror.

“This is your dog, sir? Oh, dear. No, no, Romilalan, my love, leave that beast alone. You don’t want his stink on you.”

“It’s a girl!” Sorla said. “And she doesn’t stink, do you, Silky?” She gave Silk a small sniff and bit both lips. “Hm.”

“I think it’s time I took you home,” Dorr said.

“Yes, clearly the snobs have arrived.” She slipped a hand under Silk’s collar and led her back to Dorr so he could fix the leash, and they left together. He was right back to struggling to match her pace, but now she seemed to notice and slowed down a little, without a word. “Do you know that lady? She was a Ven-Diri, wasn’t she?”

“No, thankfully I don’t know her, although I’m sure she knows someone I know and I’ll hear about it from one of our more delightful clients. If she was my customer, she’d probably be nicer. I know all their dark secrets. Like who is impotent and who has hemorrhoids, and they’d much rather die than let it be known.” He chuckled, although Dorr had always taken some real pride in both helping people with their small miseries and preserving their dignity.

“I’ll have to see your shop sometime,” Sorla said. “I bet it’ll remind me of Feirin’s potion workroom.”

“Probably cleaner, based on my experience with potion makers. Unless Una’s been working. She leaves a trail of splayed books, apple cores and tea cups everywhere she goes.”

By the time he got her home, it was right around sunset and they'd been talking easily, much better than all the previous time they'd spent together. Of course, that was entirely because of him. She'd been trying to draw him out all along, but at first he wanted to lock himself up, tucking his pain and horror around him like it was as much a shield as a vulnerability.

Now he was starting to feel like himself again, like the broken bits of him that would never be the same could still be something whole in the end. Maybe he could face those scars. Maybe someday he could even stand for someone else to see them...

But not yet.

"Sorla!" Rath was sitting outside of the shop with a beer in hand, and dashed up to meet them as soon as they entered the back alley. "Thank the goddess you're back! Did you see the royal carriage out front?"

"We came the other way!"

"Prince Seldon sent for you," he said. "The carriage has been waiting half an hour already. I was about to attempt a telepathic signal."

"Oh my, and I guess I don't have time to change either. Not that I have any super-nice clothes! I'd better just go right now. You can watch Blueberry until I get back, can't you? I'm sorry. Dorr, I'll see you tomorrow!"

And that quickly, she was gone, rushing for the carriage, sounding so excited that Dorr felt a dull chill settle back in his bones.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“WELCOME,” Seldon said, greeting her carriage outside—as if he’d been waiting for her. “I apologize for the summons on short notice, and my general absence.”

“It’s fine! I’m sure you’ve been busy.” Sorla immediately noticed how exhausted he looked, so much so that she found herself wondering if he had also died and was keeping it secret. She still wished she had a nicer dress, but thank goodness she’d still been taking the time to twist her hair in damp rags at night to curl it, even as busy as she was.

“I’ve been trying like blazes to get a moment alone with you to talk,” he said. “And I’ve finally managed it. It’s not easy. You deserve a proper dinner invitation, but not all of the noble families would accept a Fanarlem at the dinner table.”

“Of course,” Sorla said, but he did have a way of making her feel awkward. He seemed painfully aware that she had a low status, and even though he was trying to help her out, it was too bad they couldn’t talk without that between them. *I’m a charity case to him, more than anything, aren’t I?*

She followed him into the palace, through dimly lit halls with parquet patterned floors and doors tall enough for giants, to a sort of sitting room with a crackling fireplace, sea-blue curtains drawn over the windows, and a table in the corner set with plates of chocolate and cheese, and a silver tea set.

“For some reason, it would be scandalous to have you for dinner, but I can have you over for snacks,” he said, with humor.

“If this is what you call ‘snacks’!” She knew all too well that chocolate was in short supply now, and these were dark truffles adorned in orange peels, lavender blossoms and in one case, what looked like curls of dried mushroom. Then there were the half-dozen varieties of cheese and thin slices of bread.

“I know it’s probably your dinner time, so I hope this will do,” he said, holding out a chair for her.

This unexpected chivalry, and being alone with him, was more than she expected. He lit the tapers of beeswax that sat between them before he sat down.

“I—I don’t usually eat dinner at all,” she said, wondering how to eat anything when he was sitting there looking at her like he hoped to please her.

I’m probably reading the situation wrong, but...I’ve never been alone with him, except when he showed me my room. Never like this.

“I know...um...” He cleared his throat. “Well, I’m glad you don’t usually eat dinner or this would be a very rude spread; no meat, no vegetables, no soup...”

She made herself take a bite of everything, while he seemed so anxious and after a moment, just took a flask from his jacket and had a quick drink. “Ah, Sorla... I told you it’s not going well, didn’t I, and worse all the time.”

“You told me. But it’s worse now? I haven’t heard anything on the street.”

“There are no town criers in the royal districts because we all read the paper,” he explained, and she had been wondering. Back home, all important news was announced in the town squares and spread rapidly by telepathic messages and conversation; there was no newspaper in Dor-Temerna. “Daramons control all the trade on the Atlantis river now, east to west,” he said. “And they have successfully blockaded all of our eastern ports. In the west, they have basically stomped all over Kota. We’re boxed in. We can’t trade with the neutral

territories, and we can barely even trade with ourselves without the river.”

“But you can trade by land, right? And what else would you need? The Miralem lands are self sufficient, aren’t they?” Sorla had often heard her neighbors say so. Back home, everyone certainly felt they didn’t need Kalanite trade.

“If they would just leave us alone, I suppose we’d manage, but they want telepaths to be subdued into submission. They’re terrified of us. They have greater numbers, and an absolute fervor to leave us utterly humbled. I don’t see as much passion in our warriors. They will fight like hell to defend themselves, of course, but...the Daramons have such terrifying weapons. Our telepathy wasn’t meant to fend off huge explosive weapons that are fired from miles away...or dropped from the skies. And then there are the things they imported to us before the war really got started. These cheap books, laundry soap in boxes, those photograph things...and the noble families want them back. They want to make business arrangements. Imports, manufacturing...”

Sorla jolted, jabbing at a truffle with a fork. “So this is about money,” she said. “Rich families who want to get richer and make sure they don’t miss out. Is that why our criers back home haven’t even said how bad it is? Do you think it’s really because the people don’t *want* to fight? What happens if we lose? Could it possibly be good for us?”

“I don’t know,” he said, taking another drink. “My brother would never have given in, but he’s dead, and my parents feel that the Kalanites have taken enough losses that they would accept a peace treaty.”

“Under what terms? Do you know?” Sorla asked, a little frantically. “And what does this mean for me and my people? Kalanites think we are born to be slaves! If you kowtow to them, where can we go for safety anymore!?”

“I understand everything you’re thinking,” Seldon said. “Sorla...I want to protect you, but I’m only the prince. My mother and father are still the rulers. But I promise you and your parents will always be safe—”

“I don’t just care about my own self,” Sorla said bitterly. “The Kalanites are wrong and I don’t want to see a world where they win. It can’t be true. It’s...it’s just too wrong...”

Seldon stood up, shoving his chair back, and to her astonishment and some embarrassment, he knelt in front of her.

“I have no excuses, Sorla,” he said. “You’re right and I agree with you. We need to protect the Fanarlem and the integrity of our own people. We don’t need nor want what the Kalanites are offering. That is my opinion to anyone who asks, but...”

“But you don’t rule Laionesse,” Sorla said gently. “Get up, though. I can’t handle it. You don’t have to kneel to me.”

He looked up, but didn’t stand. He met her eyes, with all his exhaustion.

A streak of terror jolted through her. She thought he meant to...

Touch her? Kiss her? Say something he shouldn’t?

He stood up now, abruptly breaking the spell, and she thought she must be losing her mind to her runaway imagination. Now he paced, swigging from the flask again. “You know who did agree with me?”

“Besides your brother?”

“General Froskar.”

“Oh! Ohh. Yes.” For one moment, Sorla had entirely forgotten the man existed, which was amazing when she’d been worrying over him every waking moment.

“How is he?”

“I’m never going to actually be able to eat a bite of this, you know,” she said, as she felt her expression crumpling.

“I know he isn’t doing well at all,” Seldon murmured. “I’ve visited him many times. He’s numb. The man I admired so much really does seem to be dead. I didn’t summon you here thinking you’d be able to do anything about it, but I heard

that you have a knack for pastries for the revived, that you've been seeing him..."

"I just talked to Dorr about this today—"

"Who is Dorr?" he asked, with an unmistakable hint of jealousy.

"The Ven-Diri man who brought me here. He's also just been brought back."

"Well, the Ven-Diri are different."

"They're really not. He didn't want to come back. When I first met him he was very gloomy and standoffish. He told me plainly that he wished he'd been left to die. But he went home and saw his sister, and she missed him a lot. I expect he probably has some friends around too. He needed connections to people he loved to come back. I know General Froskar's family won't be happy about reviving him, but is there anyone who would? Anyone he would want to live for?"

"If he doesn't want to live for all the men who fought under him...his country..."

"Dorr said it needs to be more than that. It sounds like dying is very...personal. Like the love of a parent, or child, or —"

"You're asking if he had a lover," Seldon said.

"It doesn't have to be a lover. For Dorr it was just his sister."

"Was it?" Seldon's brow furrowed.

"Well, I—I don't know all his business, obviously. I think you're getting a little drunk."

"Maybe. But I don't know his business either and you should probably be careful."

"Stop. Please."

"I'm sorry, Sorla. You're just the kind of girl who brings out a man's protective instincts." With Dorr she would have snapped back at that immediately, but with the prince she felt speechless. He put his hand on her head—just long enough for

her to register the weight and warmth of it, before he slumped back into his chair. She only wished she could blame it on the drink, but he seemed more at the end of his rope than truly drunk. Her body was so full of confusing emotions that she couldn't think of a reply.

This isn't a daydream or a fantasy. Seldon does feel something for me.

But he wasn't quite the gallant prince of the letters right now. He looked unraveled and angry.

Not that she couldn't understand why. This seemed like a perilous situation, and he was on the brink of failure.

"Has Eustan Froskar ever loved anyone?" she asked, composing herself. "In a very personal way? Not for country, not for duty, not for family honor, but just for himself?"

"I always wondered if Eustan had a sex drive," Seldon muttered. "Does he like men or women? Seemed like neither. Like he was just stamped out by the goddess herself to be a great hero and nothing else."

"Hmm. That would be a lot of pressure, though... Are you his closest friend?"

"Probably not."

"Who would be? And do they know he's been revived? Have they been to see him?"

"You're thinking of some detective work, aren't you?" Seldon sighed. "Probably Captain Elmara, but he's on the front lines trying to hold the river port at Otaré. The only thing I can say is that he may have talked to his wife."

"Then I'll pay her a visit."

"You can't just..."

"Oh, right. She's very important and I'm no one. I really should know these things."

"No—I will set up a meeting and assure her that you are important," Seldon said. "But be prepared for somewhat of a chilly reception. I've never met Captain Elmara's wife. She

keeps to herself and she comes from a very scholarly family. I'm not sure how much she'll know, or want to tell you."

"That's all I can ask for. Thank you."

"You're welcome, Sorla." He looked at the table, head in hand. "You don't have to keep pretending to eat. I'm sorry if I behaved inappropriately this evening."

"You're carrying quite a weight on your shoulders," she said, relaxing a little. "I don't know if I can do anything for General Froskar, but I'm going to try everything."

"I will also try everything," he said, lifting a hand, reaching out until he caught hers beneath his. "You're a good soul, Sorla. I burdened you with all of this because I know you see my point of view. I hate to think that my own kingdom doesn't always welcome Fanarlem. I hope to see a day when that is no longer true."

"If we don't capitulate to the Kalanites, I think that will be true someday."

Beneath this relatively formal exchange, she felt the crackle of his touch. She saw the look in his eyes. She was aware that she was forbidden to him. He had to marry someone else and he could never marry her. She wondered if he ever thought of marrying her, or was she just an escape? Someone to unload his troubles on, someone he knew was too powerless to bother sharing his secrets?

She never expected it to go even this far, and for it to feel so complicated.

"I'll have a carriage brought around for you," he said, finally letting go of her hand and getting to his feet.

"Thank you."

She walked beside him to the side door. He spoke to a footman and the steady clop of horse hooves followed shortly. He helped her up onto the seat, lifting her easily. If Dorr had lifted her into a carriage she would have yelled at him, but once again, with Seldon she found herself letting him take the lead. She wasn't sure if she really wanted it, or if his rank just intimidated her beyond words.

“I’ll send word about the meeting with Lady Vinnavora soon,” he said, holding the carriage door half shut. “And you’ll be paid tomorrow. Thank you, Sorla.”

She sat in the darkness of the carriage, glad the way home was short. She needed the quiet solitude of her own little bedroom to settle her nerves.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“YOU WERE GONE A LONG TIME!” Una beamed when she caught Dorr coming up the stairs. “Were you with Sorla this whole time?”

“I took Silk to the park for a walk and she’s exhausted,” he said, side-stepping that question. “I’m going to let her sleep in my room tonight. I think she’s lonely out there.”

“As long as she stays in your room. The cats were here first.”

“I know. I won’t upset Grissa.”

“She’s an old girl,” Una agreed. “Well, I was just going to have dinner alone with a book.” She was holding a book bound in black leather from the circulation library simply titled, “My Death”, which sounded like the last story in the world Dorr wanted for a read aloud.

“We could bet on some bones,” he said.

“Ooh, yes! If you don’t mind me stuffing my face at the same time.”

So they had a decent evening gambling spare coins. Before the war, they would have invited their friends, but all of Dorr’s friends were away fighting, or else they had died, and Una knew better than to invite a pack of girls over without the young men to balance them out. It still wasn’t a bad night, with the cats meandering down to ball up beside them, enjoying the fire Dorr built, as the spring nights were still cool.

In the morning he felt mentally prepared to face a dreaded task: he needed to bathe. It was claimed to be a perk of being undead to have cool skin and not sweat much, and that did seem true enough that he had gotten away with merely washing his hands and face at the basin for many days. Besides, he now seemed to smell not of living sweat but of herbs, like the tonic. Either way, he wanted to scrub it off.

He had been trying his best to pretend his old body was still there, or perhaps that he didn't have a body at all and was just a spirit embodying a set of old clothes.

He heated the water and drew the bath himself, before the house stirred. He ran his fingers through the hot water, and it was the perfect temperature, beckoning his aching body.

He pulled off his gloves, showing his mismatched hands, and took a ragged breath before unbuttoning his shirt.

The stitches were still in his skin. He'd have to get them out soon. He was fairly well healed, but spirits!—his shoulder... It was even more of a mess than he'd thought. His arm had been swapped all the way to the shoulder socket, with flaps of skin sewn across his collarbone and the back of his shoulder. At first he could hardly tell where his body ended and Lorvaran's arm began, because there was so much scar tissue.

He couldn't exactly remember what had happened at the end, just that there was an explosion that threw him onto the ground. Clearly, it had gotten his right arm and leg. As he stripped off his trousers he saw the same mess of scarring around his hip and stitches at the top of his leg. Well, not that it was his leg. It was quite obvious that half his limbs didn't match. The skin didn't match. The friend whose arm and leg he now wore was a little shorter and a little broader. When they stood beside each other, Dorr was perhaps two inches taller.

But now that Lorvaran was a part of him, it was all too obvious that he had stolen his friend's body. Taken the hand that had touched people Dorr would never know, possessed skills different from his own...

But with every day that passed, they belonged more and more to him. He was adjusting to them, possessing them. Lorvaran was gone and he was here.

Dorr sank into the hot bath and as the hot water soothed him, he felt tears in his eyes.

Spirits, I'm sorry... I'm sorry it was me and not you...

He knew he hadn't really stolen anything; he knew the battlefield mages had just tried to save everyone they could. A man too far gone might save another. All Ven-Diri understood this was the pact.

I just never thought this would happen to me. Especially not this...pieced together life.

Dalaran told him his friends went to some trouble to save him, and he knew that was true. He could imagine how hard they must have worked, probably late in the night, to carefully cut him and Lorvaran up, and figure out how to stitch him together, trying not to lose too much blood, and then the even harder work of knitting bones together with incredibly taxing sorcery. Dorr had never imagined anyone would think he was worth the trouble.

But I would have done the same for any of them...

He couldn't stop crying, although he did it silently, shuddering. Hell, he probably could have had it over with faster if he could just scream, but he had to keep up a proper front and not worry Una.

Finally, it passed, and he soaped up his skin and hair, wincing over the scars.

He couldn't imagine showing this to anyone. He looked hideous, and even in the dark, the scars were rough webs all over his shoulder especially, right in the spot of embraces.

He shut his eyes and imagined how perfect Sorla might look. He didn't want to think about her that way, but once considered it was hard to stop. He had never seen a Fanarlem naked, but he could imagine her hair falling across her slender shoulders, how neat and well-proportioned she would look, her golden-brown skin beautiful in the fire light.

At which point he had to shove out all thoughts of her, lest he think of her as being more than just endearing. That was bad enough. He had no real evidence she cared for him in return.

There was definitely nothing endearing about this broken mess.

And last night she went to see Prince Seldon. What does he want with her?

He took a deeper breath as the hot water relaxed his muscles. Sorla had made it clear she didn't want to be protected as if he thought she couldn't take care of herself. She would only get angry at him if he tried to warn her about the prince again.

Even if she doesn't care for me, no good could come of her spending too much time with the royal family. She'll never get the respect she deserves, unless Seldon was willing to give up his position for her...but then he would be abandoning his people.

Dorr would almost start feeling bad for Seldon if he thought about it for long, so he rinsed himself off and got dressed to open the shop. It was still early, but he could start mixing orders.

He went to open the windows and flip the sign, and saw an envelope pushed under the door, addressed not to the shop in general or his parents, but specifically to him. There was no indication of the sender until he opened it.

DEAR MR. TONDAN,

WE WOULD REQUEST that you cease your visits to General Froskar as of today. This job was intended for Miss Sorla Thanneau and it is of a sensitive nature, so it is only by a misunderstanding that you ended up coming along. The general is very distressed by Ven-Diri and doesn't wish to see you again. I do thank you for your generous attempt to help

him, and we are pleased to continue your contract for the rejuvenating tonic.

BEST REGARDS,

Mirasa Bellin, Chief Guard

“WHAT IN CURSES?” Dorr growled to the empty room.

Was it a coincidence this letter came after Sorla visited Prince Seldon last night?

Did Sorla ask for me to stop accompanying her?

She wanted me to butt out of her business.

He crumpled the letter in his glove, wondering if his return to real life was just a sham. If it was all based around one girl who didn't feel the same way he did...

Una had been laughing last night. What kind of brother was he if that wasn't enough? If he had to have the love of a girl he'd just met?

Ridiculous. Hell, maybe I can even choke down some normal food today instead of paying her a visit.

The door opened and Varrie rushed in. “I'm sorry I didn't pick up the potion when it was first ready!” he said, looking flustered, like he'd run all the way from his house.

“It's all right. They don't spoil, or certainly not that fast. It's here waiting for you. I'm glad I opened early.”

“Everyone said you'd been opening early. Can't sleep?”

“Not that well. And I got on a sunrise schedule in the military.”

“Yes, that's why I'm up too. We ride out tomorrow at dawn. I'm finishing my last errands...last goodbyes.”

“I was scared shitless too, if it helps.” Dorr handed over the potion.

“I appreciate the lie to make me feel better. I’m sure you were not.” Varrie raised an eyebrow.

“All right, that’s true, I was excited, but I *should* have been scared shitless instead.”

Varrie looked faint, but he clutched the potion in one hand and said, “Well, I’m going. If everyone else can muster the courage, I don’t think I’m any less...required to defend my home.”

“How many times have you told yourself that this week alone?” Dorr smiled a little, hoping to put him at ease. “But you’re right. Laionesse isn’t perfect, but it *is* home.”

“It certainly is to me,” Varrie said. “Hopefully if something does happen I’ll be as lucky as you were.”

“Be careful what you wish for.”

“Why? You look good,” Varrie said. “If you are worse for wear, I can’t tell.”

“That’s because I’m standing behind a counter. I don’t want to give you nightmares, but...half of me aren’t the parts I was born with.”

“Oh wow!” Varrie just looked impressed. *The little twit*, Dorr thought, suddenly finding him as annoying as Una did. “I mean...that is truly awful,” Varrie said. “But magic is really something. We’re certainly lucky to have it.”

“Sure,” Dorr said, bemused now. He never could stay annoyed at Varrie because he was always like this, looking on the bright side even when it was a huge stretch. He couldn’t seem to help himself. Dorr hated to think how war was about to shatter his innocence.

“Well, I’ve heard a rumor that the Kalanites...you know how they’ve been getting all those magical machines?” Varrie said. “And they claimed it’s because they’ve found passage to the Fallen Lands? Supposedly the people of the Fallen Lands barely have any magic at all, that magic doesn’t even *work* there. It’s all just devices. Moving parts and processing minerals and...whatever.”

“If magic didn’t work in the Fallen Lands, how could our people even come back after going there?” Dorr asked. “Don’t tell me there’s a regular carriage service between realms.”

Varrie waved a hand. “Yeah, I don’t see how that could be true, but it’s what they say.”

“I’ve never trusted ‘they’ much,” Dorr said.

“Well, anyway, it makes me think how glad I am to have magic or I don’t know how anyone would heal up. Also, I have a book for your sister. Just a little thing. You know. If I don’t come back. Because she kept admiring it in the case.”

“For Una?” Dorr repeated, as it dawned on him that Varrie would only be doing this if he liked Una in some way. Spirits, at least he wasn’t the only lovesick idiot around.

“It’s one of the books from the Fallen Lands that they translated and published in Nalim Ima, that got out before the war really heated up.” He took a book from his coat and handed it over. “Maybe it’ll make you feel better that you’re not this poor fellow.”

Dorr opened it. “‘Frankenstein, or, the Sordid Tale of a Tragic Undeath in a World Without Sorcery, Harnessing the Powers of Electricity,’” he read. “Well, that does sound like the sort of book *Una* will like.”

“Just between you and me, I much prefer the Miralem dragonic sagas where everyone’s so noble. I was so in love with Lirasetha, the youngest battle priestess.” He shook his head. “But I know Una likes to suffer in her reading material.”

“She does,” Dorr agreed. “Well, I hope you can channel Lirasetha on your journey south.”

“What do I owe you for the potion?”

“Pay me when you get back,” Dorr said. “And remember that you owe me.”

Varrie understood. He nodded, slow and serious. “I’ll come back.”

“See you then.”

The bells on the door rang with finality as he left. Dorr set the book aside for Una. She'd be so happy to see it, and so annoyed it came from Varrie. He'd enjoy teasing her about that tonight, and maybe she would stop teasing him about Sorla if she got some return fire.

He took another deep breath—and his breath was coming easily now. Sorla still burned in his mind like a flame, and yet...

Whether or not she's in my life, I'm back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“OUCH!” Sorla, reaching to the top shelf for the jar of oats, recoiled when something jabbed her side. Blueberry stirred from his nap, eyes widening with concern for her, while Rath hurried over to get the oats down.

“You all right?”

“Of course. It’s just a loose bit of rib.” Sorla poked her side until she felt the end of it that kept poking her, and gave it a good punch with the palm of her heel, trying to lodge it into her stuffing so it would stay put. She had a feeling it was going to keep working loose, though.

“Maybe you should just get that repaired?” Rath suggested, sensibly.

“I’d rather avoid it. It’s not a big deal.”

“I don’t like going to the healer either,” Rath said. “Whatever you’re made of, you feel vulnerable just sitting there, half-stripped, some stranger poking at your insides, eh?”

“Exactly. I think it’ll be fine if I don’t lift my arms too high.”

“There you go. No need to see anyone when not moving is a perfectly respectable option,” Rath teased.

“I’ll get it fixed eventually. Just not today. Or this week. Too busy.” Sorla opened the jar of oats and sniffed them, enjoying the oddly soothing plainness. A customer had requested a “boring and nutritious” treat infused with mellowing magic for a boy’s party. The lady clearly didn’t

want to deal with a dozen boys unless they were somewhat drugged. Sorla insisted on trying this spell, because if it failed, the ingredients were cheap and she could give the results to Dorr.

She mixed a hearty dough with oats and pinches of a few gentle spices that would help bolster the magic. She tried very hard to project calm into the cakes as she rolled them out flat.

The only trouble was, her thoughts were far from calm. She kept replaying the evening with Seldon, considering more deeply that the royal families might soon sign a treaty with the Kalanites. Even if Seldon promised her safety, how could she really feel safe if the Miralem lost? Wouldn't that just embolden the Kalanites to keep enslaving people? No Fanarlem was truly safe as long as they could be kidnapped and sold in another nation where they had no standing.

She beat the poor oat batter hard. Fanarlem had no political clout anywhere, and maybe the Miralem didn't have that much to lose in a surrender. They could make money on Kalanite soap and so on, and with their telepathic powers, they were still safe.

No one really cares what happens to us, she thought bitterly.

But Seldon did care, the poor man. She believed that he did, but he could only do so much. He had grown up thinking his older brother would rule, and after that terrible assassination, the expectations fell to him. And yet, his parents were still the king and queen, and didn't seem to be listening to him at this crucial moment. It was easy to imagine them surrendering to the Kalanites and then stepping down, leaving him with the mess.

Either way, he was in a terrible position, slated to marry a woman he didn't love, trying to do the right thing for his people when he didn't yet have the power. She couldn't blame him for drinking too much and pouring his troubles onto her.

What would have happened if she responded to him more warmly? She was so shocked by his attentions that she didn't even remember what she said.

But then, where would that have led? He always seemed secretive when he was around her, with no servants present. If he loved her, it could never be public knowledge.

He might have to lock me away like a concubine.

She shuddered deep in her bones at the idea of that, of being *kept*.

It isn't his fault if the world is that way. But I could never accept it. Not for any man.

Fates, I can't believe I'm even considering all of this!

“Hm...well...” When the oat cakes were done, Rath broke off a bite and chewed thoughtfully. “I hate to say it at all, but there’s something real off about this one. There isn’t a tingle of calming magic in it, and it’s quite tough. Are you sure something ain’t troubling you? You don’t want to get that rib back in place? Your wages should be coming today.”

“Ohhh no! No, I don’t think that’ll help. I just can’t seem to get ahold of this magic. It feels like it doesn’t exist for me.”

“Well, don’t be too hard on yourself,” Rath said, as usual. “You have talent enough already.”

But when the courier came with her wages, she felt even more that she had to live up to expectations and keep this job at all costs. It was more money than the cafe in Dor-Temerna made in a month. She couldn’t believe this was all for her.

“Oh, it is,” Rath said. “Don’t let my general squalor fool you; it’s a good living here. Go buy yourself something nice to celebrate.”

Sorla didn’t spend a single coin. If she ended up working only until Eustan died, she wanted to take it all home to her family.

In the afternoon, she made a spiced cheesecake with a rhubarb compote for Eustan, and waited for Dorr to show up... but there was no sign of him. When the royal carriage arrived, the driver said, “The gentleman will no longer be attending, at the request of General Froskar. He does not wish for the company of Ven-Diri.”

“Oh?”

Until that moment, Sorla hadn't realized she looked forward to Dorr's company so much. The carriage felt quite empty without him, and when she visited Eustan, she realized how much it had bolstered her spirits knowing she had someone beside her. She did trust Dorr, at least, to be there for her if she needed him.

And why do I trust him? Because he always protected me, even when I was mad about it, but I must admit he never disrespected me... How frustrating...

Eustan was as drained of life as ever. He ate the cheesecake like he was resigned to it, perking up slightly at the flavors, but it wasn't enough. She watched him eat, growing increasingly frustrated, petting Blueberry's head until the wyvern grew annoyed with her repetitive touch.

“The other day you said I reminded you of someone,” she attempted.

“My little cousin,” he said.

“Oh.”

“She likes to mother people,” he said.

It didn't sound like a compliment, and Sorla certainly didn't take it as one, although she also wasn't sure she believed him. That was not the tone he used before when he said she reminded him of someone.

“I hear the war is going badly,” she said—almost pleading.

“I don't think we could have expected another result.”

“But you didn't used to feel that way, did you? Everyone was so inspired by your victory speech after the battle of the pass...”

“That was another life.”

“You don't care at all? You don't care about anyone who served under you?”

He sighed heavily. “Death comes for us all. It comes so quickly that nothing we do here matters. They thought me a

great man, but I was never anything special. Death came for me first, and soon they will all join me. It's all over so fast, and we're all so small, that I don't know why we ever bothered."

"Of course it matters!" Sorla snapped. "It's all relative! Life goes very slowly when you're suffering. And your suffering becomes bigger than the entire universe."

"That's ridiculous," he said calmly.

"Not any more ridiculous than what you said. We're small, but we're the entire world to ourselves, and each other. What does size matter? The moon is big, but it's just a rock."

"The moon is the home of Vallamir," he said, apparently getting his religious sensibilities offended. "It's extremely important, much more so than you or me."

She shouldn't have used the moon as an example, but she shifted tactics. "Well, if you still believe that the goddess is sleeping inside the moon, you also have to believe that—"

"That death is as sacred as life, and shouldn't be messed with."

"Doesn't your religion also say that all of our souls have value and that we should share our gifts with each other? Maybe you shouldn't have been brought back, but your existence isn't pointless. Your bravery meant so much to all the Miralem. They love you. They brought you back because they felt the consequences of letting you go would be so much more devastating. Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

He looked at the cheesecake, and at his hand holding the fork, and his eyes were searching.

She sensed the feeling inside him...like he was trying to find a lantern in a window, within a terrible blizzard. He remembered that it was *possible* to feel warm.

But he was still alone out there. He couldn't find it. Maybe if they'd gotten to him sooner, before his soul started withering. Or maybe it was never possible, because Seldon seemed like he'd tried.

“Have you ever loved anyone, Eustan? Fiercely?”

His fingers clenched. “Go away.”

“But—”

“*Go away!*”

Blueberry puffed up into a striking pose again, and Sorla quickly grabbed him and made for the door.

When she slipped out, her mind was still burning, her temples pounding.

He actually psychic blasted me a little...!

Fates, I got him really upset that time. But...could he really get this angry if his soul was dead?

People with damaged souls didn't get angry any more than they bubbled over with joy. Some of Sorla's fellow Fanarlem when she was at the Fanarlem hire-by-the-day shop were like that, their emotions dulled so that they had no spark in either direction. They usually were the ones hired first because they would do anything asked of them. That was what seemed strange about Eustan; he was very vehement for a man with a dying soul, but she had chalked that up to leading an army being very different from scrubbing a house clean.

Now, she just couldn't deny it. He was furious.

His soul isn't damaged beyond repair. He's just shutting out the telepaths.

Something happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

ON THE FIRST day of the new week, Sorla asked Rath for the morning off, wore Grau's knife at her waist under a cloak, and took a very purposeful walk to Dorr's apothecary with a basket of pastry, many of them now stale, in her arm.

She hadn't had much of a chance to see the city, since she was working all the time, and spent her days off writing long letters home, tidying up her room, and reading cookbooks. Laionesse wasn't exactly bustling anymore, but the broad and sparsely populated royal shopping districts made her just as nervous as crowds.

She glanced at the shop windows, showing off spring dresses, hair ornaments, half-length spring capes embroidered with violets and robins, glittering perfume bottles and boxes of candy. None of it tempted her purse—which she had, in any case, left home due to fears of getting mugged. All Sorla wanted was to know what had happened to Dorr and she was starting to get quite worried.

Before long, she knew she was in the Ven-Diri-Ashi because all the houses were mostly colorless. Although most of them weren't actually painted black, because she supposed that would make them very hot in summer, she could feel them straining to become true shadows as soon as night fell. They were all white, gray, and black with some accents of purple and silver. Since they didn't seem to care for colors, fashionable houses expressed themselves with an excess of trim-work, patterned roofs of slate, elaborate iron gates, door knockers, offering boxes for the ancestors, and so on.

This must be it.

The sign stated “Tondan & Family Apothecary”. The ground floor was light gray stucco with black shutters punched with cut-outs in the shape of bottles of healing tonic, and a black door with a peaked top. The upper story was dark wood with a very sharp roofline and dark purple trim-work, spiked, almost like icicles...or dripping blood.

Bells jingled above her at the door, announcing her presence. Dorr looked up from the counter. He was dressed in all black, as usual, except for an apron of cream linen and his sleeves were rolled up above his gloves, exposing his strong forearms. He was carefully measuring something, but he stopped as soon as he saw her, and put down the bottle and the tiny spoon. He rolled his sleeves down, and she could tell he was trying not to look embarrassed that she’d seen them.

“Where have you *been!*?” Sorla dumped the heaping basket of pastry on the counter. “Are you eating?”

“Did you want me to come?” A hint of irritation in his voice was mirrored by his heavily furrowed brow. “I thought you requested to have me out of your business, and I got the message. I’m certainly not one to push myself on others.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You didn’t want me to accompany you to see the general anymore.”

“No, it was the general who didn’t want to see you. And he barely wants to see me either.”

“I thought Eustan and I had come to some understanding, but this message came right after your visit to Prince Seldon. You already told me you didn’t want me there. You can’t blame me for thinking you asked Seldon to come up with a polite excuse to get me to leave you alone.”

“No! No...it isn’t like that. I made you all of this food!”

“You’re too kind. Thank you.” He still seemed distant. “But...I’ve been forcing myself to eat normal food, and...” He paused, and it was clear how miserable this normal food was tasting. “Well, it’s about time I got back independence,

anyway. I'm a working man, not a prince. I can't rely on you to feed me."

"I don't mind!"

"Don't you? You didn't want to be my chef. You made that clear," he said. "Even if I just take a little of what you make for General Froskar, I mean...how uncouth is that?" He added, "It's all right, Sorla. Really. I understand that I have to eat, and it might be unpleasant, but it's only five minutes of the day... at least, if you choke it down fast." He got back to the measuring as he spoke.

She wasn't sure what to say. She felt silly demanding he come to eat her food.

He's probably right. It wasn't a very practical arrangement for him either, I'm sure. And if I have to leave, if General Froskar dies, that's the end of that, unless I found work at a Ven-Diri bakery. I could, but...if the war turns, I might as well go back to Meirin and Feirin anyway...

She wasn't sure why the idea of it gave her such an unfinished feeling.

She took in the apothecary, a clean and appealing shop with broad wooden counters, dark wooden floors, and shelves painted white with forest green trimming. At least the Ven-Diri seemed to allow more color in their interiors. They were lined with bottles, similar to a potions shop, but the scent was distinctly herbal. The apothecary's trade was a little more stodgy, certainly, just using herbal recipes passed down along generations rather than all the experimentation potion makers got into. But she could tell this was Dorr's place, the way flour-dusted tables and baking ovens was her place. She was used to him looking more like a lost, broken soldier, wandering alone through the world. Now she had to readjust her idea of him. He looked very comfortable here.

"Well, these are still for you, anyway," she said. "And your shop is very nice. You look like you're doing well."

"Yes," he said. He took the basket, set it aside, and then took out an oat cake.

“Those are actually the oldest,” Sorla said. “And not very good. I was uncharacteristically distracted when I made them.”

He took a bite over her warnings. He had this look on his face like he wanted to say something, but he wasn't saying a word.

“You know, I do have extras, and there's no shame in stopping by once in a while for them,” Sorla said. “I'd rather they not go to waste.”

That didn't seem to soothe him. “How is Eustan doing?”

“Not...that well. I'm meeting his best friend's wife next week to see if she knows of anyone close to him.”

“Lady Vinnavora?”

“Yes.”

“She's cripplingly shy, I've heard. I'm surprised.”

“Have you met her?”

“No. I've met her husband, Captain Elmara.”

“Have you!? What was he like?”

“He was the one who gathered us up and said he wanted our initiative to be maiming, not killing. He had spoken to Lord Tellen in Otaré and they both noticed the Kalanites were more distressed by the maimed than the dead. A calculating man...but affable.”

“Prince Seldon told me we're losing,” she whispered. “As in, the king and queen might agree to terms of surrender, and the Kalanites would have plenty of say in those terms, I assume. I don't know what will become of Fanarlem then. I don't know if anyone here would make it a priority to protect us. I'm...” She trailed off. She was scared. Of course. What was the point of telling the man she'd yelled at for trying to protect her?

“I would make it a priority,” he said. Plainly, his dark eyes earnest but not asking for anything in return.

A shiver went through her. “I'm sorry,” she said hastily. “I wasn't fishing for that sort of response.”

“I know,” he said.

As was so often the case with Dorr, she wished he would say more. What did he mean by that, exactly? She was tempted to try and read his emotions, but that didn't seem right.

Or necessary, really.

Because you can feel it, can't you?

Dorr is not like Seldon, or Ruven. It isn't about what he says, but what he doesn't say. He doesn't cover up what he really feels with jokes, or gloss over me, or constantly remind me that I'm a poor Fanarlem.

She trusted him, in a way she hadn't felt with any other man.

“Maybe you'd like to go with me,” Sorla said impulsively. She hated that he had ever thought she was the one who didn't want him to come around anymore.

“I don't know if I should,” he said, after a heavy pause. “If she's shy, I don't think my presence will help. And...I don't think it would put me in a great mood to see their grand house and Lady Vinnavora tucked away from the world.”

“Do you...blame Captain Elmara for his strategy?”

“I just thought I was enlisting to tend to our wounded, with my herbs and tonics. I didn't want to leave men maimed and crying for help.”

“The Daramons you maimed...were also...my enslavers.”

“Sorla, I apologize. The Kalanites are my enemy too, and what they've done is shameful. But I died beside one of them. And I kept hearing him cry for his mother. I didn't kill him; the same blast got us both, but I blinded him so he died in darkness. All I know of him is the sound of his fear...and the feeling of my own fear...mixed up together. I think their culture is wrong. But I don't think their *souls* are worse than ours.”

“But their souls made that culture,” she murmured. “They had such splendid things—like fancy soap, and...photographs!

Oh, I wanted a photograph. But all those splendid things and nothing but cruelty.” She didn’t want to back down, even though she understood how awful that moment must have been. “I carried a knife with me here, and I walked fast,” she continued. “Because I know there are people who could sell me to the Kalanites for good money, and once I was across their borders, I would never be free again. You know it too, because you told me not to walk around the way I could in my neighborhood back home. I don’t really care if every last Kalanite loses his eyes and his hands both.”

“But some of them are just kids.”

“The kids,” she snarled, “are just as bad. I could tell you a thing or two about their kids.” She shook her head. “Never mind. I understand. I didn’t mean to argue about this. I have it handled. The visit to Lady Vinnavora, I mean.” She flung herself back out the door, feeling as if she had a whole thunderstorm inside her chest, with crackling and booming and heavy gray rain.

She still felt entirely in the right; she always carried the fear of being a Fanarlem and somehow ending up back in the lands where she was trapped and alone. It was a part of her the way breathing was for flesh and blood people, she imagined.

And being a servant-for-hire there, she felt she had seen every sort of Daramon there was. Some cruel, some ‘nice’, all of them unified in seeing her as an inferior being. Feirin was one of the few who didn’t, and he’d lost every bit of his old life over it.

If the Kalanites won this war, she knew it would be bad for Fanarlem. At best, the Miralem would insist that all of the Fanarlem who were in safe territory now would continue to have freedom, but slave traders would prowl the river and grow increasingly emboldened. Who would stop them? If the Miralem lost the war already, would they stir it up again over that? They had mixed feelings about Fanarlem themselves.

Still, she realized that thinking an entire race of people had wicked souls was not much different than their justifications for mistreating her.

And she had never killed or maimed anyone. She certainly felt she could kill someone, but no one seemed to come back from the battlefields the same.

We always seem to get into an argument one way or another...

Well.

I am usually the one to start it, aren't I? But I keep coming back.

She thought of him at the counter, working away with bottles and measuring spoons, scale and ledgers around him, the clean apron and those forearms...

And then she thought of him bleeding out on a battlefield, unable to get up anymore, listening to the cries of this other dying man...looking at the sky until his last breath strangled out of his lungs and his eyes went blank.

It felt impossible, but it had actually happened, and she might never have met him at all if his friends hadn't saved his life.

She had rushed away so quickly that the shop was already out of sight, but she looked back anyway. She kept walking away, even as she realized that even though he kept irritating her, even though he wasn't a prince, and even though she was too proud to go back to the apothecary and start the conversation over again...

I don't think it's Prince Seldon I have feelings for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“I MISSED HER?” Una was horrified when she caught Dorr eating a tart at the shop counter, just after he locked the doors for the day. “I wanted to see her!”

“You were so engrossed by that book Varrie gave you, eh?”

“Stop saying it like that! It’s such an excellent book—ugh. I can’t believe that ridiculous boy thought to give it to me. If he comes back alive I don’t know what I’ll do. I don’t want to owe him anything.”

“He might be different when he returns, and I have to credit him for courage, when you know his family didn’t even want him to go.”

“Courage, yes, so courageous that he had to buy a potion to calm his nerves, and I suppose he also brought a fainting couch to the battle. But enough about him—what was Sorla here for? Just to visit you?”

“No, no. She just had extras.” He tried not to talk with his mouth full, but he had been choking down the bare minimum for days, and now he had a bounty of delicious food.

“That’s really all? I’m not sure I believe it.”

“Stop trying to create dramas where none exist,” he said, hypocritically. Una had missed quite the show, as he had run the gamut of emotions when Sorla was here, and for the grand finale, sent her running out all upset.

He felt bad for getting into it, when he knew that Fanarlem could never truly relax, and no matter how talented and deserving Sorla was, she had to work much harder than a flesh and blood person to prove herself. *Of course she's going to be sensitive about it, you stupid oaf.*

"I don't believe you," Una said. "You talk about her a lot. Every night this week she's come up in dinner conversation. And not always very naturally. Yesterday I said something about my mattress sagging and you started talking about how you and Sorla found Silk."

"Well, you were talking about having trouble sleeping, and we weren't able to sleep because of Silk."

"*Oh,*" she said, her voice withering enough to wilt the spring flowers.

"Who else am I going to talk about besides Sorla? Everyone else is still gone."

"You could call on some of my friends. You could enjoy being one of the few bachelors in the neighborhood."

"Everyone will just ignore me the minute the other guys come back."

"Not Brindy! She's always thought you were cute. And she hates kids."

"Brindy?" He made a face.

"What's wrong with her?"

"I don't know; she's always saying things are 'delicious'. Non-food things. I don't want to be referred to as delicious."

"Oh, she doesn't say that anymore. I mean, she's nineteen now. She's gotten really good at the flute too. And she has beautiful hair."

"And I like kids," he said. "Maybe I can't have any now, but I don't want to be with someone who is delighted about it."

"Brindy isn't a mannerless child; she isn't going to gloat over it, I was just pointing out that she won't be disappointed

either. But I know none of that matters because you are thinking of Sorla, wondering how you can bring Sorla up in conversation, eating Sorla's pastry in a state of transcendence..."

"Okay, stop, stop. Yes. She is more appealing to me than Brindy could ever be."

"So why didn't you invite her in? For dinner? You know we have too much. And she must have come near the end of the work day."

"We got into a fight again."

"Again?"

"She always seems to be irritated at me. This time, I just stepped in it. It's been hard to reckon with the things I saw on the battlefield. And the things I did. It haunts me, but Sorla... well, I didn't think about how she'd been enslaved by the Kalanites. She didn't think I should be sorry for fighting with all we have. We were both thinking back on painful memories, and they didn't mix well."

"Could you apologize? Or does it feel like something you can't apologize for?"

"I'm not sure it's that sort of situation... We have a lot of those. Other times, she'll get mad at me for trying to warn her about Prince Seldon, or protect her from some physical danger. I know I have no place to tell her what to do, but she really should be careful with Seldon. So I wouldn't apologize for that either."

"So you expect you'll be squabbling all the time. Sounds about right!"

Their parents were definitely deeply compatible in some ways, but just as prone to snapping at each other.

"You just need to patch it up enough to see her again, right?" Una suggested.

"A simple way to state a complicated problem... She invited me to see Lady Vinnavora with her, and I said no. That

was where it went downhill. I have some opinions about Captain Elmara. His tactics were absolutely ruthless.”

“Their weapons are just as horrific,” Una said thoughtfully. “You know what I think truly bothers you is that they wanted you to take your personal skills, that you had worked hard on, and use them to hurt people instead. As soon as our parents let you work in the shop, you liked ‘mixing and fixing’, as Feirin would say. You’d look so proud when you prepared a concoction to heal a terrible wound, or restore sight, or lift a curse. To ask you to take everything you know and hurt people instead... How can you put that aside, and cause that sort of pain instead? It’s a part of you.”

“You’re a wise little sister sometimes.”

“Sometimes.” She smiled in the serene way that made her look like their mother. “Well, I know, because I used to be so envious that you loved the family business. I know everyone wants me to love it too—including me. Instead, you went away and I was here filling in your shoes—badly.”

“You love books,” he said. “Speaking of which, if Varrie is gone, his job must be open, and you don’t even have to work with him anymore. Have you inquired?”

“Sort of, but not really. You need me, don’t you?”

“Do I look like I do? If you could run this place without me, I can damn sure run it without you.”

“Oh, very true, don’t rub it in. Okay. I’ll see if it’s still open tomorrow. And you should do something about Sorla. Don’t just let that slip you by.”

“Maybe,” he groaned. “But courtship is not my forte.”

“Tell her the dog missed her.”

“Yeah, right.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

“THE DOG REALLY MISSED YOU.” Dorr stood in the entryway of the bakery, and both he and the dog were soaked at the edges.

“The dog missed me so much, today, that you had to walk a mile in this weather?” Sorla had been interrupted in the middle of getting ready for her meeting with Lady Vinnavora, coming downstairs in half-buttoned boots when Rath told her she had a visitor.

Silk was going nuts at the sight of her, barking excitedly and straining against her leash. Sorla came close enough to get her hands slathered in excited dog tongue. “I have to get going,” she said. “But I have saved a pile of pastry for you. Rath can pack it up.” She glanced behind her and backed up into one of the chairs in the entry, tugging on the tedious buttons with the button hook. She would never wear these if it wasn’t raining.

Dorr tightened Silk’s leash so she couldn’t stick her nose into Sorla’s business. “I found out today is the day you’re seeing Lady Vinnavora. I realize I uninvited myself already, and not gracefully, but...”

“She is expecting me by myself,” Sorla said. She was already nervous, and Fanarlem had to be careful in the rain, and a whole week had passed before she could even get this meeting. Meanwhile, Eustan was more dull and depressed every day. Her month to save him was already half over.

She spotted the carriage drawing up at the end of the alley, and quickly put on her hooded raincoat, buttoning it to her

neck and pulling the hood far forward. “That must be for me.”

He sloughed off his own jacket of black wool, and underneath he just had on a black shirt, the sort that pulled over the head, and a plain collar that fit around the neck, and could be fastened with one button. He hadn’t bothered with the button. She froze, surprised at this sudden undressing, and smelled the sharp herbal scent of him that was quite pleasing.

“Silk didn’t miss you,” he said. “I did. And when you asked me to come with you, I should have just said yes.”

“You missed me?”

“Yes. I know it might not be reciprocated. But if you’ll tolerate me, I do know how to speak the language of the upper classes here. I won’t take the lead but I’ll be there if you want me to step in. If she’s cold to you, I might be able to extract some information by playing on her thank-you-for-your-service sympathies.”

“I was thinking along those lines the other day...” An extra buzz joined in her general nervousness. “You can come. Why did you take your coat off?”

“To hold it over you, of course.”

“Oh. I mean...I have one.”

“Will Rath mind if I leave Silk here?” he asked. “She’s already done her business and gotten in a lot of exercise.”

“I’ll check.” Sorla dashed back to the kitchen, clutching her side to keep her chunk of rib in place, and led off with, “I promise I won’t ask again, but Dorr needs to leave his dog—just for a minute, or, well, maybe an hour—”

“You think I mind having a dog around? Don’t even worry about it. Send her in here.”

Sorla called Silk in, and she trotted right over to Rath as if she’d known him for years, while he started scratching her ears and making ridiculous lovey sounds. Sorla saw fur flying everywhere and thought about hair in the royal pastries, but she decided to just let it go.

The rain had been coming down steadily for hours, a good spring soak that the gardens were drinking up. Sorla was excited for the explosion of flowers, but the timing was terrible. Only her head, forearms, and hands were truly waterproof, and once water penetrated down to the stuffing, it was all over. First, she'd smell like wet wool, then she'd start looking lumpy, and if it really got bad, her limbs would get too heavy to move well. The alley looked very long just now.

Dorr held his coat over her before they left the shelter of the building.

"But you'll be soaked," she protested.

"It's fine. Can't catch a deathly cold, at least."

"Okay, I'm going."

"Go right ahead."

She started running, and he managed to keep up with her, although he was really forcing his bad leg. He opened the carriage and swept her in, climbing up beside her but hugging the side so he wouldn't drip on her. He pulled the wet coat over his shoulders.

"I can't catch cold either!" she said. "And you're absolutely sopping. What a mess. Lady Vinnavora isn't expecting you at all, much less as a man who crawled right out of the harbor."

He fished a handkerchief out and tried to wipe his face with it, but it was soaked too. He tried to get the water out of his eyes, at least. "No helping it."

"You didn't have to protect me. I already have a thick coat."

"You looked like you didn't trust it."

"I do hate rain! Well, I like it from inside, but I hate going out in it."

He tousled his hair, trying to dry it out, and she noticed how his shirt really clung to his shoulders and chest now, when he'd always been so covered up. "It's a warm rain, at least," he said.

She had the impression that he never wanted anyone to see his body ever again, but he had still taken off his coat for her. Now that they were sandwiched in the small carriage, she was much more aware of his flesh and blood physicality, the way his skin was so supple and his musculature so firm.

Even the most well made Fanarlem didn't have the weight and strength of flesh and blood. This was what Meirin couldn't help mourning a little when Feirin's real body died. But Dorr was taller and broader than Grau, and now she couldn't seem to notice anything else.

Although she was sure she would find many scars on his skin, this didn't bother her at all; in fact, fates help her, she was intrigued to see them.

Silk didn't miss you. I did.

Sorla felt a sense of disembodiment. She couldn't believe this was actually happening to her. She had just realized that she missed Dorr when he didn't come around. And now—this.

Yes, he irritated her sometimes. They didn't always understand the other's point of view. But she still missed him. And she trusted him. It was like Meirin said, wasn't it?

Not everyone has to agree with you, but they do need to be worthy of your trust.

Unlike when Seldon got on his knees before her, she wasn't terrified. Well, at least not in a bad way exactly.

As lashings of rain hit the windows of the carriage, panic beat inside Sorla's chest. He shoved back his wet hair. Then he looked at his very wet gloves. His face was pale, his dark lashes clumped with rain.

What do I say now? What do I do?

I don't even have a real woman's body. If something more were to come of this—

She could feel the warmth of him. She lifted her face, about to attempt some meaningful conversation.

The carriage stopped in front of a modestly sized but elegant home.

She quickly looked away and threw open the door, her hands jittery. She had no map for what to do from here. Other girls didn't talk to her about these things. What should she say?

Well, for now it would have to be nothing at all.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

DORR WATCHED Sorla nearly fling her feet onto the ground, ahead of him. She seemed nervous, but she couldn't be as nervous as he was.

I told her how I felt. And she's barely said anything in return.

But she had allowed him to shield her from the rain without protest, and coming from her, that had to mean something...didn't it?

The carriage had stopped under an overhang that protected the entrance of the house, keeping them out of the rain. Sorla led the way to the front door and knocked. He had to get his head on the task at hand. Sorla still had some hope she could save Eustan, and...well, he wasn't going to crush that hope.

Although it seemed extremely unlikely.

"Hello! You must be Miss Thanneau?" The female servant, wearing a simple gray dress, greeted them at the door. She looked nervous. If Lady Vinnavora never had visitors, this probably wasn't a normal part of her duties. She paused a moment over Sorla, and another moment over Dorr. "Is this—your manservant? The request said it would just be a lady."

"This is Dorr," Sorla said. "He's an apothecary, and a soldier, and a friend of mine."

"Well...welcome. Come and get warm by the fire."

The woman led them into a dim, cluttered entryway, hardly the grand house Dorr expected, and then into a cozy room with

a crackling fire, several cats balled up on a rug, a knitting basket with a sweater in progress spilling over it, papers cluttering the table by the fire, and more houseplants than he thought possible in one room. The woman took the chair by the knitting and gestured for them to help themselves to any of the others. then she jumped back up. “Oh—oh, wait. Maybe I should offer you drinks? Tea? Coffee? Or should it be hard stuff? Trova isn’t here to advise me. I’m so sorry. I never have guests.” A blush rose to her cheeks as she looked around the room, as if the furniture might whisper some stage directions.

This is Lady Vinnavora?

He relaxed slightly as he realized Captain Elmara had such a humble home and unpretentious wife. It shone a better light on the captain, that at least he wasn’t coming home from his captain’s quarters to unfettered luxury and a spoiled lady. Among the ranks, while General Froskar was well-loved for his kindness, Elmara was considered to be strict and restrained, although honorable.

“We don’t need anything,” Sorla said. “Well, then again, maybe tea would warm Dorr up. He got so wet. I’d be happy to help you with it.”

“I can make tea, yes! I’d be happy to! I just...everything is very humble here. I’m—I’m sure Prince Seldon told you I don’t have guests. I know I should, but it’s so much easier to not. Trova’s always gone, so he hardly cares, and when he is home, he’d rather have me to himself anyway.”

“This is a lovely, comfortable home,” Sorla said, immediately putting Lady Vinnavora at ease. “And you’re right. It is easier not to have guests, although...I’m surprised you aren’t lonely.”

“No, I just don’t really get lonely. And I really wanted to say no to having you over, but it was the crown prince himself, so I couldn’t refuse.”

“I’m sorry to impose on you then,” Sorla said.

“No, no! I actually don’t mind...not exactly...I just don’t know what to do or say! It’s not your fault; just my own

failings...”

“Shall I help you with the tea?” Sorla took her hand gently, soothing her. “And we’ll just ask you a few questions, and then leave you to a quiet evening?”

Lady Vinnavora led her to the kitchen, still prattling nervously. Dorr knew he was already falling hopelessly in love with the girl, and his opinion was biased, but she was certainly good at putting people at ease.

He stood by the fire a moment, trying to dry out, noticing that the table was covered in letters. They were certainly from Elmara to his wife, and she must keep them there as a reminder of his absent voice. Even at a glance Dorr could see that the handwriting was tidy and precise, but without flourish, just like the captain, and was sprinkled with the old pictographic characters that only the very well-educated would use.

I WILL NEVER FORGIVE what they have done, but killing them does no good at all. They will be reborn as quickly as we kill them, with no reflection whatsoever.

Nothing would bring me more pleasure than to rob each man of an entire generation of his eyes and hands. To see them unable even to grope!—utterly reliant on the wives and daughters they have stomped into submission—forced to reckon with the fact that they are petty, vulnerable, useless little men.

It is not easy nor pleasant to cut off their cocks or I’d do that too.

I know you’d rather have a love letter, but all I can think today is that the Daramon women cannot possibly know the sort of love we share.

DORR JERKED his eyes away as he heard Sorla and Lady Vinnavora returning. He wished he hadn’t snooped. The words were no surprise, but he couldn’t bring himself to wish for

such individual punishment on ‘each man of an entire generation’, no matter what they had done as a culture. But he also realized maybe it was because he *was* a Daramon.

“Now...Seldon told me in his invitation to call on you that you’ve been briefed on the condition of General Froskar,” Sorla was saying as she walked back in with three tea cups on a silver tray. She handed one with an owl painted on it to Dorr.

“Yes...poor man. I can’t believe it! It’s just so dreadful and it must be awful for him! I don’t know how I could be of any help at all. I haven’t ever spent much time with him. Of course, he and Trova are close.”

“I think the only thing that might pull him from the brink is love,” Sorla said. “It sounds like he doesn’t have any family that close. Has he...never been in love? Maybe some childhood friend he hasn’t seen in ages? A girl he loved and pushed away because of his military career? Anything”

“He loves fighting for his people. Trova always said that Eustan had the biggest heart of any man he’d ever known. I haven’t seen him since this...revival, but...I can’t believe that Eustan won’t go on for the people!”

“So everyone keeps telling me,” Sorla said. “But...he won’t.”

“Coming back from the dead is a dark place, at first,” Dorr said. “I know this from personal experience, unfortunately. You need a single hand to pull you up. And Eustan is being kept like a prisoner. I know they wanted to keep his condition secret, but it was the worst thing to do.”

“So you are also...revived. But...the necromancers who brought him back...wouldn’t they have known what to do?”

“I don’t know. Chances are they’re off on the front lines again with your husband now. Clearly if they did give advice, it wasn’t followed. They might have taken it for granted that he would recover like a Ven-Diri would. But Ven-Diri have close families who would celebrate their return, not shun the undead person. In fact, if there is any trouble with Ven-Diri

families, it's that they don't want to acknowledge how hard it is to come back."

As Dorr was telling this to Lady Vinnavora, he realized he was also processing his own experience for the first time. Everyone told him he was looking good or asked him how he felt, but in such a way that he knew no one wanted an honest answer.

"What a tragedy." Lady Vinnavora shook her head. "To put such a good man through this...all for nothing. To lose him twice. Trova always comments on how Eustan doesn't take much interest in courtship or sex, as if he didn't feel that sort of love. I imagine the ladies fall all over him, but he's never been seen taking one anywhere. He will dance a bit, but it's only because he loves music."

"Music!" Sorla said. "He doesn't have any music. Maybe we could—"

"I can't imagine music would be enough for him to turn his entire mood around in a week or two," Dorr said.

"Yes...it's worth a try, but..." Sorla rubbed her head. "Are you sure his lack of interest isn't because of...I don't know...a forbidden affair?"

"Eustan!?" Lady Vinnavora looked incredulous. "Trova would probably laugh at the very idea."

"Well, I have to try! I'm at wit's end. I still keep thinking of this moment when he said I reminded him of someone. Has he ever been acquainted with a Fanarlem? I know this is really reaching, but I also know it's taboo for the royal families to have a romance with Fanarlem."

"Well, he cared about Fanarlem like he cares about the downtrodden of any kind, from what I understand. I do know he rescued..." Lady Vinnavora frowned. "It was years ago. I can't imagine this person would really matter."

Sorla seized on it. "A Fanarlem girl he rescued? Something like that?"

"Yes, many years ago when they were younger, Eustan did rescue a Fanarlem who had been escaping north and caught by

river bandits, and badly abused. He's a good telepathic healer, Eustan—and he nursed the Fanarlem back to health for a few weeks. Trova was very upset about what happened to the poor soul. It was one of those days when he came home cursing, wishing all Daramons—oh, forgive me, I mean Kalanites—would suffer. I can only imagine what the bandits would do to the poor thing...but then, maybe their entire life had been the same. It was a secret, but Trova said they were a *on'laksa*..."

Sorla exchanged the briefest glance with Dorr. She kept chewing her nail, betraying her tension and excitement.

Maybe this was nothing at all, but...

It also might explain everything.

CHAPTER THIRTY

SORLA KNEW Dorr had been skeptical about this quest, and so had she for that matter, but what options did she have?

However, now she could tell he was impressed. She had hit on something. The intimacy of telepathically healing someone for weeks... Sorla knew what that entailed, although she was not at all capable of doing it. Telepathic healers had to get very close to their patients, to take on their pain before dispelling it. It was impossible to imagine that experience had not affected Eustan.

An on'laksa!

They were the rarest type of Fanarlem concubine, only offered at one house in Atlantis. On'laksa were created to be dual-sexed. When Fanarlem were created, they were assigned a sex at birth based on the readings of their soul, and sometimes it was changed when it seemed to be wrong later, but in the rare instance that a young concubine-to-be seemed to have a perfect androgynous charm that could appeal equally to men and women, they were offered to the House of On'laksa in Atlantis.

Sorla knew on'laksa were extremely expensive, and this Fanarlem must have been some exceedingly wealthy person's treasure. Sorla shuddered to even speculate about their lives beyond that; in her years of servitude she was happiest when her masters paid little attention to her. This gave her plenty of space to feel ownership of her own soul.

“Are you all right?” Dorr asked her, and she realized she had let a heavy pause unfold.

“Yes,” Sorla said. “I just find it so terrifying to think of being an expensive Fanarlem concubine... If someone owned you like that, for so much money... well, and river pirates with an on’laksa... that’s also quite terrible to ponder...”

Sorla’s innards twisted as she realized she was going to have to find this person. She wasn’t very comfortable with Fanarlem like that. It wasn’t easy for her to talk about, but Meirin had occasionally expressed the same sentiment—an odd guilt at having escaped the worst sorts of fate.

“Do you know anything more about them?” she asked, brushing all this aside to get back to business. “Their name, or where they might be now?”

“His name was Arn—well, Eustan said he was known as male in the camp. I’m not sure there is anything to it. It just seemed like typical Eustan, giving someone a hand up and then moving on to the next mission.”

“Hmm. Well, maybe that is nothing, but...”

“Eustan is an excellent telepath, isn’t he?” Dorr asked.

“Yes. Level nine rank.”

“So he *could* hide his feelings...if he really wanted to,” Dorr said.

“Oh, yes,” Lady Vinnavora said.

“Does he normally nurse people back to health personally, for weeks?” Sorla asked.

“No...not that I know of,” Lady Vinnavora admitted. “I just know that Eustan and Trova were particularly angered by what happened to Arn. Eustan was part of the boarding party on the pirate ship and apparently he was in a downright rampage over it. I think everything about it just went against his sense of morality—the exploitative nature of on’laksa, and concubines in general, Arn trying to escape and the pirates snatching him up instead. I must say, I am sure having Arn as

a lover would have been far from Eustan's mind. He would have seen him as someone to heal and protect.”

“Eustan has about a week left,” Sorla said. “And the chances of anything are thin. But he does need someone... anyone who can reach him. Maybe because he helped Arn in that way, he would respond to seeing him again.”

“I was just thinking what Trova would say. You'd bring Arn there, and it's for nothing, but word gets out, and Eustan dies bathed in scandal. But...” Lady Vinnavora shrugged. “I don't care. That's why I stay here. I absolutely hate court dramas and prying eyes. Arn can stay with me if needed, and they can all whisper about both of us. Assuming he's quiet, of course, because I won't know how to amuse anyone.”

“And that we can find him. No family name, I'm sure,” Dorr said.

“I don't think that part will be hard at all,” Sorla said. “Every Fanarlem, sooner or later, has to go to a Fanarlem maker for repairs, and in Laionesse, there is only one name in Fanarlem repair. I guess I'll finally get that rib fixed.”

Among other things...

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THERE WAS no time to waste now. Eustan had six days. Sorla could feel the weight of impending tragedy pressing on her. Everything would change once Eustan was gone.

No, not 'once' he's gone. 'If' he's gone. You can't lose hope until you've pulled the last thread.

Even Rath seemed like he wasn't his usual good-natured self. She'd given him the gist of the story without offering details into Eustan or Arn's private affairs, just that she had one slim lead on a person who might help.

Rath had an ever-growing pile of orders now that it was spring and the royals were coming out of the slow winter season. He was buried under them, muttering and cursing under them, and had taken to having a running conversation with Blueberry about his stress levels.

"It's too much, Blueb. It's just too much. Of course I'll manage. We all will, eh? I know, you have a toy to lose and find again. That's keeping you busy."

Sorla had to hire a carriage, as the shop was in a slightly iffy part of town, where most Fanarlem in Laionesse lived. Most of them still did the same work they had done in the Daramon lands: sex work, service work, and dirty and dangerous jobs. Sorla's first job in her town was at a butcher shop. She had gotten plenty of satisfaction wielding a cleaver, but it wasn't exactly illustrious and despite her best efforts she sometimes got blood seeped into her stuffing.

The Fanarlem repair shop didn't reflect the general poverty of its clients, however. Just the sight of it suggested that the future would be ever-brighter. It occupied an entire building of three stories, and the storefront was spacious and clean, with a few plush couches and model figures on display. Sorla immediately noticed that the display included the usual six foot tall male body and five foot tall female body, but also one in between.

Stars above, do they actually make skeletons the height of a normal woman now?

"Hello! Can I help you?" A man stepped up from the workroom, which was visible behind him through double doors, bustling with employees readying orders.

"Are you Mr. Trinavel?" she asked. He fit the description: a flesh and blood man with light reddish hair. He wore a long light-blue tunic with loose sleeves, and his demeanor was gentle, as if he was used to soothing traumatized clients.

"Yes indeed, how can I help you?"

"I'm Sorla Thanneau, Grau and Velsa's daughter."

"Grau and Velsa's daughter! Wonderful! I've just had a letter from your father recently, in fact. His work is so exciting. Having a potion maker of that caliber in our corner really could change everything."

"He is always working very hard on potions," Sorla said, a little surprised to hear Grau described that way, because she suspected back home that everyone liked him but thought he was slightly insane. He'd spent years trying to crack formulas to make Fanarlem hair grow, to waterproof skin cheaply, and other ambitious goals, with only minor victories. When he reluctantly attended a party, he didn't have much else to make conversation about.

"We sell a lot of the spells he developed to make skin taste sweet, but of course it's the strength and waterproofing spells I'm really hoping for. Anyway, I'm sure you're tired of hearing about him back home already."

“Not really,” Sorla laughed. “I think you’re the first person I’ve met who is this interested. No wonder he writes you so often.”

“Really? How depressing. But then, why am I not surprised? No one ever does expect much from Fanarlem. We’ll show them yet.”

“I hope so.” She wondered how Mr. Trinavel, a flesh and blood Miralem, had gotten so interested, but she had more important things to worry over. “My first business today is actually to find a Fanarlem named Arn.”

“Arn...”

“They may have come here at some point in the past several years. An on’laksa.”

“Arn! Oh, yes, yes. I know Arn. They were about the finest Fanarlem I’ve ever seen. I hope they’re doing all right.”

She felt a spark of increased hope that Eustan might have cared for Arn in some way. They were probably exceedingly beautiful and charming.

In fact, it probably wouldn’t be very good for Arn to see Eustan again. The same way I just know Seldon could never really share a life with me, but Dorr could...

“Where is Arn now?” She would have to deal with that problem later.

“They’re a musician. World-class at playing the bastir. I’m sure if you asked at the concert halls, you would find Arn in no time.”

“Music! Of course... Thank you, this is exactly the information I needed.”

“Glad I could help. Is there anything I can do for you, or are you just on a mission?”

“Well, I have a broken rib...”

“Ah, an easy fix. We could do that now, or would you rather make an appointment for later?”

“How much are those skeletons?”

“You like the new model, eh? I’m thrilled we can finally offer a good mid-size. Well, you’re probably looking at a hundred ilan, all-in, skin and stuffing, before upgrades. I’ll do it for seventy for Grau’s daughter.”

“Huh...” Sorla did have nearly that much. “Well...it’s a lot of money just to be taller. And I need...um...some other things, maybe...” She was hoping he got the point without her having to spell it out.

“You can think on it. I have more skeletons on order. And you do lose a smidge of coordination. Five feet is really kind of a sweet spot, but I also think metal skeletons will be coming into general use when the war settles down, and then you don’t have that problem as much. You really get superior strength and speed with metal. So if you adjust to the height now, when we have metal upgrades in five years, let’s say, then it’s an easy swap. And I’ve heard there are some really interesting possibilities with new materials.”

“Okay, well, I’ll think about it,” Sorla repeated. “I can see why Feirin likes writing to you.”

“And I to him! I hope your parents come visit again some time. Stop by again soon. Best of luck finding Arn.”

“Thank you, I will.” As Mr. Trinavel turned away, she also made her way to the door.

Ugh! Why didn’t I say anything? Maybe Dorr and I will drive each other crazy before we ever that far, but...I don’t want to deal with this when it’s overdue.

She felt quite alone with her problems; flesh and blood people never had to navigate buying their own sex bits, and she wasn’t even sure Meirin would understand.

She shook it off, refusing to get distracted. She should just go to the apothecary and enlist Dorr to help her find Arn.

The carriage took her to the apothecary, and from its safe confines, she saw his neighborhood from a different direction. Now she saw the breathtakingly macabre temple which was decorated in a siding of bones and skulls. She audibly gasped at the sight of it. A boulevard leading to the temple was

guarded by statues of their stately death gods in hooded robes and draping sleeves, with a strip of green park for promenading. It was a nice day, and women were out strolling in black veils, dark gowns and gloves. They really were pretty odd. She wondered what it would be like to live here.

The apothecary door was open to the fresh air, and Sorla sent the driver on his way. Dorr was inside looking over a book and drinking ice water with mint. When he saw her, he seemed to brighten, his dark eyes hopeful.

“Sorla! Come in. I’m just trying to look up the potion for swamp fever. Haven’t made that one in ages. We don’t have swamps. Rolaven just came back from the front; he was one of my old mates...and he’s in one piece too. Swamp fever, I can handle.”

“That’s great! Do you need to finish it immediately? Because...I have a lead on Arn, the on’laksa. They’re a musician and Mr. Trinavel thinks we’ll find them at the concert halls, but...I could use an escort...”

He immediately started capping bottles, and then gave the counter a brief wipe. “Of course. That quest would take you to some interesting neighborhoods. I’ll just close up for the afternoon,” he said, grabbing a walking stick with a handle that looked like an animal skull. “As far as music halls, I have a good idea where to go. We can walk to the Scarlet first.”

“New cane?” she said. “It gives you a sophisticated air.”

“Yes,” he grimaced. “I didn’t want a cane, but the limp isn’t going away. At least they had wolf skulls. My regiment called ourselves the Doom Wolves, which in hindsight just sounds silly, but...anyway, it’s also a family emblem. And Lord Gara needs a cane, and he’s the most powerful Ven-Diri of all, so I guess I shouldn’t get too self-conscious...”

“But is your limp a little better? Or am I imagining it?”

“I also got a thicker sole on my right boot. It is helping. Still stiff at the hip, but...maybe it’s still knitting. I’m not sure how long I’ll be healing versus, well, this is as good as it gets.”

Did you get your rib fixed? Gods, is this the conversation of old people already?"

She laughed. "Not yet. I...well, they have taller bodies now. They're expensive, but...I've always felt like I should be taller, my entire life!"

"How much taller?"

"Six inches."

"So you'd come up about here." He touched his shoulder. "That does seem beneficial. Is it hard to get used to a whole new body?"

"Well, it won't be worse than the jump from kid to adult. That was over a foot. And my first adult body was so clunky."

"That's how I feel about my second adult body..." He chuckled.

"Well, I worked with it. It'll be all right. I can reach things on top shelves if I get that new skeleton."

"You should go ahead and do it, then," he said. "I noticed that your workplace has as many shelves as mine."

They walked and talked, and he told her about his friend with the swamp fever, how he was a good sort of friend to have around, a quiet and honorable guy who was also up for anything. "Very easygoing for a Ven-Diri. I think he'll really like you."

"I'm glad you have friends. I took you for a loner."

"Not untrue. But I do have friends. I don't need them around constantly, but you can't really *help* having friends here. It's a close-knit community."

Beneath the easygoing conversation, she was painfully aware of his presence, and the things that remained unsaid. She still felt she ought to tell him...something. She didn't want him to think she was only using him as an unpaid bodyguard. But the words wouldn't come, and now it was a sunny day, which made the things he'd said to her in the rain with his coat over her seem like she may have imagined some of them.

They reached the Scarlet. By day, the venue was fairly quiet, but a woman cleaning the floors directed her to a manager's office, and the manager—a woman with immediate bluntness in her eyes and a plain, almost masculine-styled tunic, immediately said she knew Arn, of course.

“What do you want with him?” she asked, not unfriendly, but careful.

Now Sorla wasn't sure what to say, because the truth was, she wasn't sure if she was putting Arn in harm's way. She couldn't guess at the fallout if Eustan did care for them, but she wasn't naive enough to think there wouldn't be any.

“It's...confidential,” Sorla said. “But...General Froskar is dying. He wanted to know if Arn was all right.” The lie stung her lips, but it was out. She didn't know how else to manage this, although she might just be making a bad situation worse.

“Oh, no... I see. I know Arn has mentioned that the general was who got him ‘cross the river.’”

“Yes.”

“I'll give you his address. He should be home, though maybe sleeping at this time of day.”

Sorla noted that Arn was still presenting himself as male, instead of the dual gender signifier vai, which could mean a shift of identity or simply not wanting to complicate his outer life.

“Do you know what you'll do if Eustan does have some reaction to Arn?” Dorr asked, low enough that only Sorla would hear, as the woman wrote down the address.

“No, I really don't. It's feeling a little more all the time like something might come of this, isn't it? But if it did...”

“Well, all Seldon really asked was for you to coax Eustan back to life. If his reputation takes a huge hit afterward, well...”

“But it's Arn I'm worried about! He certainly didn't ask to star in a royal scandal.”

“That is true; I was so focused on Eustan, but you’re quite right. Arn is much more vulnerable. I think we need to tell him how dire the situation is...and if your hunch is true, he still has to decide if Eustan’s life means anything to him. We can’t drag him there.”

“No. That wouldn’t persuade Eustan anyway. This will only work if they both mean something to the other.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

SORLA COULD HEAR the beautiful notes from the open windows of the terraced house.

“This must be it.” She straightened herself up almost onto her tip toes, clenched and unclenched her fists, and finally, banged on the simple knocker.

The music stopped. A door shut, somewhere upstairs, heard through open windows. Shortly thereafter, a curtain fluttered beside the door. Sorla didn’t catch any glimpse of the inhabitant, but clearly she had been scoped out.

There was a pause, and then the door opened.

“Fans? I don’t usually sign autographs at home, but...I suppose I will make an exception for you, sister.” The voice had the languid Atlantean accent, too low for a woman, too feminine for a man, musical and somewhat practiced—just right for the appearance of Arn, who leaned in the doorway, already holding a quill pen.

“Not—not fans; well, maybe now, because your music sounded lovely,” Sorla said, a little dumbstruck.

Arn went beyond whatever her imagination had conjured. Thick hair of a silvery white framed his face, and his eyes were ice blue with a silver rim around the iris. His large eyes were framed with permanent black eyeliner, in the male Daramon fashion, nose small and sharp. He was that exactly medium height that Sorla wished to be herself, very lithe, with no breasts but with some curve to his hips. He had very fine hands with long fingers and silver fingernails. Although her

mind very much wanted to categorize bits into him as male or female, in truth almost every bit of him was perfectly balanced between masculine and feminine, and the only thing that broke the spell was mere fashion.

“Not fans?” He shrugged. “Well, don’t I seem the arrogant ass now. What is your business?”

“I’ve been following a thread,” Sorla said. “We might not have any business at all. But...I wanted to tell you, if it means anything to you, that General Froskar is dying.”

It did mean something. That was immediately clear. Arn’s breezy expression fell flat. “I heard he was sick...”

“He has actually been brought back from the dead. But... he’s refusing all measures to keep him alive. He’s sort of withering away, both in body and soul. No one really visits him, and it seems the only thing that might save him is to see someone he has a connection with. I don’t know if that’s you, but I do know it isn’t anyone else. His family doesn’t know his condition, and they’d be upset if they did. He only has days left.”

“Come in.” Arn’s hand collapsed from the door frame and he turned back into the room, then started pacing, dispensing with any niceties. “Go on and shut the door—it needs a good pull at the end.” He rubbed his forehead. “You know our history?”

“Not really. Except that he saved you from river pirates, and let you recover with him for a little while—that was the story, anyway.”

“I think of him every day...” Arn drew both hands through his hair. “We’ll say nothing of what went on before he found me. You can imagine. You might imagine that no one ever reacts to me like I’m just a normal person...”

“Yes,” Sorla said. “You’re strikingly beautiful. I can imagine that leads to a lot of trouble...”

“Well, all I can say about Eustan is that he *did* just treat me like a normal person. So much so that at first I kept wondering if he wasn’t right in the head. But no, he just took good care of

me. I was terrified of telepaths invading my mind, and he is powerful in that regard, but he very gently found out what I needed to heal and gave it to me, without ever wanting anything in return. I kept waiting for the other side of things. The caveat, the extracted promise, the favor owed. But there was nothing. He was just...a sweetheart. I've met a few in this world since, but he still stands above the rest of them."

"Do you think...you meant anything to him?" Sorla winced at the personal question. "I'm sorry. I don't know how to say it. Basically we promised him that we'd help him die—again—in just a few days. I'm looking for *anything* that might coax him to stay. The royal family is on the brink of capitulating to the demands of the Kalanites, and I'm worried for all Fanarlem—and everyone else."

"Oh, gods, what a loaded question. I don't even know you people." Arn now flopped flat onto a chair, legs hanging off the cushion in two rigid lines. "How do you know Eustan?"

"I'm working at the royal magical bake shop, and I can make pastries that taste good to the undead, because apparently dying messes up your sense of taste, at least for a while. So I've been feeding him. And this is my friend Dorr."

"My sister and I have been making the undead tonic for the general," Dorr said.

"Gods, poor Eustan...I can't bear thinking of him in that state. He did save my life, so I couldn't live with myself if I didn't try to save his..."

"I realize it's a loaded situation," Sorla said.

"I'll go." Arn got up again and glanced over his clothes, apparently deeming them acceptable, then grabbed a short coat from a peg by the door. "Right now, I presume?"

"That's—that's fine," Sorla said. "They're expecting me soon."

"I'll get us a carriage," Dorr said. He went ahead, watching for a cab with his arm ready to hail, while Arn gave Sorla a wry, sideways look. "You seem to have a good place in the world. What is your name?"

“Sorla Thanneau.”

“The Thanneaus were your captors?”

“No! My adoptive father.”

“Good.” Arn rubbed his chin. “Did you escape young, then?”

“I was fourteen.”

“So not extremely young.. Concubine?”

“House servant, and then, servant for hire.”

“So you really know nothing of that world.”

“Nooo. My mother was a concubine, but never...well, she was *trained* as a concubine, but my father bought her and he never made her do anything, and now he’s a Fanarlem too.”

“That’s a new one.” Arn seemed to take this in for a minute, but didn’t offer her any of his own life history in return, which was fine by her—she didn’t really want to consider it.

Dorr successfully caught the attention of a snug little carriage for hire, and they piled into it, Arn sprawling across two seats before Dorr and Sorla could even consider the arrangement. Sorla felt Dorr’s body close against her hip.

“I do think Eustan will have some reaction to my presence,” Arn said. “I don’t know how he’s felt over the past few years, or whether it will be enough. But while I was recuperating, and he was drawing me back to life, we had a lot of very long conversations. It felt charmingly platonic. It was hard for me to wrap my head around him at first. I thought, he must treat everyone this way and I don’t mean anything to him. But he also seemed lonely. I think he shared things with me that he didn’t usually share. And occasionally, an anonymous person will send me a bit of money, or I’ll swear I see his face in the crowd. In short—well, we’ll see.”

Sorla nibbled at her nails, caught herself, and forced her hands back to her lap. “But you didn’t stay in contact?”

“We certainly do live in different spheres,” Arn said. “And we weren’t lovers. There was no reason to stay close, exactly...”

Maybe this won’t be enough.

“You seem young,” Arn said, turning the conversation away from himself again.

“Twenty-two.”

“Young. And your fellow?”

“Uh...he’s—” *That* awkward phrasing again.

“I am also young, if that’s what you’re asking,” Dorr said, with a hint of humor.

“You’re quiet.”

“More often than not.”

“That’s good. When I see a Fanarlem and a flesh and blood person together, and the Fanarlem does more of the talking, it’s a good sign, because most of us were told to shut up.”

“We’re—we’re friends,” Sorla stammered, and then she was immediately pierced with regret when she felt the subtle shift in Dorr’s mood. He didn’t meet her eyes, and his glove squeezed the silver wolf skull.

“Well, that is what Eustan and I are as well,” Arn said.

He fell into silence then, and Sorla wished she had a bag of mending or something, *anything* to occupy her hands. She kept fumbling things with Dorr, and Arn intimidated her completely; he was beautiful and confusing and definitely older than she was. Whatever his history was, it seemed to ripple off of him. Sorla recognized that fragile dignity of a person who had survived something. She felt it in herself sometimes, but not like that.

As they came closer to the royal quarter, Arn finally broke the silence. “And what happens if he did love me?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Guilt twisted Sorla’s innards. “I’ve thought about that. But I don’t have a good answer... The prince...”

“What did he say?”

Sorla said, as much to Dorr as to Arn, “The prince has hinted at an interest in me, and—”

“Oh really? You do get more interesting by the minute, Sorla.”

“Well...” She tucked a strand of hair back behind her ear. “I think the prince is a good man, in general, and very lonely. Maybe like Eustan. But...I know the only thing he could give me is a life where he’s the only thing in it. I’m afraid he thinks I’d be happy just kept in his chambers somewhere, with gifts and visits from him.”

Arn shivered with disgust. “You would not.”

“And I know it. I never would. He isn’t the man I love.” She glanced at Dorr. His eyes flicked sideways, briefly.

“I’m done giving up any part of myself for a lover. Eustan or anyone else,” Arn said.

“I wouldn’t ask you to,” Sorla said. “Even if that means he chooses to die. I have a lot on the line, but I wouldn’t ever ask someone else to give up their freedom.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Arn’s pale eyes met hers, with a glint of steel. “We’ll see what comes of it soon; maybe nothing at all.”

Sorla had a lot of practice in hiding her nerves, but she certainly felt it balling up inside her when they reached the side entrance to the palace, where the guards were expecting her—but not Arn. And it was certainly impossible to pretend Arn was not worthy of notice.

“Who is this?” the head guard asked, staring him down.

“Arn Girayu,” he said, in that unmistakably foreign accent. “I’m here to pay my respects to the general. I owe him a great debt.”

Thank goodness he knows how to explain himself.

And although Arn neither thrummed with magical power nor looked physically intimidating in the least, it was obvious

she wasn't the only one intimidated by his sheer charisma. Of course, Arn was surely getting a telepathic assessment as well.

“All right, very well...” The guard showed them in.

“Gods, it's dark in here,” Arn muttered, but as their eyes quickly adjusted from the bright spring day to the shadowed room, they both saw Eustan, in a state of collapse on the floor.

We're too late.

“Eustan—” Arn choked out his name, and then rushed to his limp body. “Eustan, please!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“WHAT HAVE they done to you? Or did you do this to yourself?” Arn struggled to pull Eustan up fully onto his bed, shoving him onto his back so he could see his face and take his hand. “You’re so cold...”

Even though Arn said he thought of Eustan every day, and that the general saved his life, he didn’t seem inclined to emotional displays. It was clear that Arn was overcome now, clutching Eustan’s hand and finally pressing his lips to the cold fingers.

“Please come back. They said you had a few more days... and you do keep your word...” He bowed his head. His shoulders shook. Sorla backed up against the wall, trying to make herself invisible.

Sorla knew her bakery job was over. She had nothing else to offer. She would have to find work in the Ven-Diri-Ashi, and that would probably be fine.

Then she remembered that the real point of this wasn’t her job, of course, it was the *war*, for fate’s sake. It was about doing all she could to keep up morale and avoid signing treaties with the Kalanites!

“Arn...” Eustan’s voice came, so ragged it was barely a word. “Is it...really you?”

“It’s me.”

“You came to me...”

“Yes.”

Eustan pulled the slender figure to his chest and put his arms around Arn tenderly. Arn started choking on soft sobs.

“I’m sorry...,” Eustan said. “I pushed you away.”

“No, no. You were wise. You didn’t want to keep me because you always cared more for my welfare than possessing me.”

“But you wanted to say yes, halliri, and...I felt all my obligations.”

Now Sorla was quite sure Arn had not told her the entire story of his relationship with Eustan, and that Lady Vinnavora hadn’t known it either.

She definitely felt she should leave them alone, and she quietly opened the door, although being a door, naturally it let out a slow and agonizing creak.

Eustan struggled to sit up, holding Arn close. “Sorla...do you have food?”

“I have a tart in my bag...”

“I would be obliged.”

He’s asking for food. He’s actually asking for food!

Did this actually work?

She didn’t dare hope.

When she came over to him, he said, “How did you know about Arn?”

“I asked everyone if there was anyone you’d ever loved...”

“Goddess, you must have talked to Trova,” Eustan said, between two bites of tart. Even the food couldn’t bring any color to his deathly pale and sunken cheeks. “He was the only one I told that I...I don’t know. I refused to admit how I really felt about Arn back then.” He turned to the other Fanarlem, now speaking to them directly. “As soon as you were feeling well enough to work again, I brushed you off and blamed my duties, but...I kept thinking about our conversations. Sometimes I have slipped into your audiences when I’m on leave...just to see that you’re happy.”

“I knew I’d seen you.”

Sorla could hardly believe this was working out just as she envisioned in her wildest fantasies. Eustan would clearly need a long time to really recover, but he was lit from within now, and Arn really was shining like a star. They were holding each other like they would never let go.

“Can I nurse *you* back to health now?” Arn asked. “I have a favor to repay.”

“You never owed me anything,” Eustan said. “And I’m in a miserable state.”

“I don’t care.” Arn grazed Eustan’s lips with a kiss, and the general seemed unsure how to respond.

Arn smiled. “I couldn’t help it. I wanted to do it back then but I knew it would just complicate things. I assume these vows of yours don’t count after you’re dead?”

The kiss felt especially startling, not at all what Arn led her to expect. But if this was working so well, why did she feel such a sense of increasing dread?

“Sorla.” Now Eustan turned to her and straightened up, taking on a military bearing, although he was visibly struggling against his physical weakness. “Tell the guards I’m leaving, and Seldon can come to see me for an explanation. I am leaving my post effective immediately, and I want no arguments. They have broken the codes of Vallamir but I won’t make a stink about it if they don’t.”

Sorla looked at him, and then a little desperately at Arn. Arn offered no help.

“General, the king and queen are on the very edge of surrendering to the Kalanites!” she said. “It’ll be a very dangerous situation for Fanarlem especially, as well as the future of Laionesse.”

“I have given my all to them,” Eustan said wearily. “I have given my life. I have asked for nothing. If we’re that close to losing, well, I’m only one man. What do they really think I can do?”

“He’s right,” Arn said. “And look at him. He’s not fit for anything but rest for quite some time. It sounds like we don’t have that kind of time. And are you sure that isn’t just a story they told you?”

“I don’t believe the king and queen will surrender,” Eustan said. “But I also...simply can’t bring myself to care anymore. That life was drained out of me. I fought because I thought I must, seeing horror after horror...and now...I need to mend.”

Sorla slowly nodded. She couldn’t blame him. General Froskar had been fighting a long time, up through the ranks, always admired because he was never too good to draw his own sword. Just saving Arn from the river pirates alone must have been a scarring experience, and he probably had many other stories nearly as bad.

But what will the fallout of this be?

She stepped out of the room, leaving them alone, to try and explain an outcome that wouldn’t be good for anyone except—hopefully—the two people she had reunited.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

AS SOON AS Sorla left the room, she met the serious faces of the guards, who were waiting just outside.

“What is happening in there?” the woman asked. “We all sense it. Is that Fanarlem General Froskar’s *lover*?”

“I’ve never seen a Fanarlem like that one before,” one of the male guards said, with increased suspicion. “Some sort of...very...particular sort of concubine, weren’t they?”

Sorla’s eyes darted to exits. She was not even very comfortable with on’laksa herself, much less to explain Arn to hostile guards, but at the same time she felt anger bubbling up in her, that rebellious streak she had carried with her as long as she could remember. “Does it matter?” she asked. “General Froskar is acting like a real person for the very first time since the day I came!”

“I think you know it will,” the female guard said. “I think you know this isn’t the task the king and queen gave to you.”

Sorla could feel their telepathy pressing on her, surveying her to make sure she was telling them the truth. They were upset with her and they wanted her to feel intimidated—and it was working. Sorla wasn’t stupid. She knew when defiance met its limits. She couldn’t make enemies of the royal family.

Dorr stepped in, his voice steady. “And I think you know that there were no other options. You can sense Eustan’s feelings. You’re saying you’d rather he die than spend any time with a Fanarlem. Is that how the king and queen feel?” He spoke with a tightly controlled but unmistakable disdain.

The female guard's cheeks flushed slightly. "We'll handle this as an internal matter from here," she said. "You are dismissed."

Sorla and Dorr walked out through the gates, onto the street. Dorr silently hailed another carriage, which took no time at all in this part of the city.

"I'll take you home," he said.

"Home...to the royal bakery," she said, nervously. "I don't think that will be home for long."

They settled into the carriage, sitting opposite each other now. She fidgeted with the curtain, opening it and then deciding she preferred it closed. He opened his mouth, about to say something, and she knew he was going to offer her help. It wouldn't matter to him whether she cared for him or not. That was just the sort of person he was.

She couldn't hesitate for one more moment.

"Dorr," she said quickly. "It's reciprocated."

"It's—what?"

"Your feelings. The other day. You saying you missed me. What if I said I miss you too? Whenever you're not around."

Relief and surprise flashed across his face before he composed it into something careful. "Do you really have to ask what if?"

"Maybe," she said. "I've never...experienced this before. There was a boy back home I missed all the time, but that was not reciprocated. Not in the way I wanted it to be. And I haven't thought of him since I left. But I'm not sure what comes next."

"Do you reciprocate? Do you...want me to court you? Nothing happens unless I know that for sure."

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes."

He leaned a little closer, scraping a clump of his thick black hair sideways. Half of it fell right back. He was looking

at her like she was something wondrous, but he didn't quite know what to do with her.

His eyes dropped. "I'm not a pretty sight," he said, his voice a ragged whisper. "I just got the stitches out. The scars are bad. I can't just have them smoothed out by the corner shape-shifter. Undead flesh needs particular magic, and that's in very short—"

"Dorr, that is the last thing you need to worry about," Sorla said, taking his hand and pulling off his right glove. "I don't mind scars. Or if you're a little patchwork-y. You don't know this, but I wasn't made to be a pretty slave. Until my parents rescued me, I was just a cheap mess of parts, and if I tore my skin or broke something, it got fixed with anything on hand. People turned away from the sight of me."

His eyes widened. "Sorla..."

"I have never told that to *anyone* since I was given this body. But I would like to think...I was still lovable. Meirin and Feirin loved me, even before they could afford something better for me. Still, I know you would never be saying any of this to that girl. You just wouldn't have thought of it. Nobody would. In fact, we just wouldn't have met." She pulled off his other glove, and ran her fingers over his mismatched hands. "But that girl is still inside me."

"Well...I have never deluded myself that I was a very beautiful man. I never had any shape shifting to improve matters either. But I hope I prove worthy of courting you. It is true that we probably wouldn't have met in those circumstances, but...there are many beautiful Ven-Diri women and none of them have ever gripped my thoughts the way you do."

"I think most people think I'm sort of cute at best," Sorla said, smiling crookedly. "Sometimes children cry when they see me."

"What children?"

"Royal children. Who have presumably never seen a Fanarlem before."

“You’re brave...extremely determined...and interesting. I can’t stop wanting more of your company. And—you *are* beautiful.” He caught her hand in return.

Then he grazed her cheek with his fingers, and she shivered. She felt that itching, needy feeling she used to feel around Ruven, like she wanted to crawl right out of her skin unless he...

He leaned closer, and she could feel the warmth of him. His hands were, admittedly, rather cold, but his body was warm. She lifted her face.

The carriage stopped.

“You live so close to the palace,” she whispered.

“Closer than I did yesterday, somehow.”

“Yes... But we can...um...talk inside?”

She threw open the carriage door.

I have to get a new body.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THE ACHING HARDNESS between Dorr's legs was the best reminder he'd had yet that he was back to life, and it felt like all the zest for life and relief at returning that he might have felt was hitting him now.

It was easy to cool himself down as soon as he thought of her hands meeting the scars, and taking her in his mismatched arms. His hands were always so cold now. He knew that wasn't likely to improve. The undead always had poor circulation.

Maybe she didn't care, but he did. Each time he bathed he was fighting grief and revulsion, thinking of Loreven, wondering how his comrade had died, imagining his own self cold and lifeless, being stitched together.

It does get a little better each time I confront it.

He knew this was the difficult part of recovery. The slog. He wasn't improving visibly day by day any more, and he wasn't sure when he'd reach the end of his progress. Una and other neighbors just seemed to see that he was back and doing fine, but it was his life, so he noticed every failing, from how tired he was at the end of the day to how his toes turned blue on colder days unless he put them right by the fire and rubbed them back to life. When he forgot the tonic one morning his heart rate slowed down and the color drained out of his face.

Sorla should be courted with patience and care, anyway. I should go very slowly. And if I go slowly, maybe by the time she touches me, I can handle the sight of myself.

Sometimes she seemed far beyond her years, but there was also a childlike side to her, and clearly no experience with men. He wasn't experienced either, but he suspected he knew a lot more. He didn't want to take any advantage of her. Above all, she always needed to feel safe with him.

He could still feel the soft touch of her small fingers on his, when she had taken off his gloves.

He was shocked by the news that she had once been the sort of Fanarlem that was just patched together. It was an uncomfortable thought, that this girl could ever have been that alone, given so little.

From the first time he saw her, her spirit shone so bright that he wanted to think he would have noticed her no matter what she looked like, but she was right—they wouldn't have even crossed paths. Although the Miralem didn't usually offer very good jobs to Fanarlem, it was a given that their employer or a charitable religious group would get them a more dignified body right away, glossing over that past.

He showed Sorla in the back door, toward the upstairs, but Una intercepted them from the kitchen.

"This must be Sorla! Finally!" she exclaimed. "Oh, gods, you're adorable! So what are you two doing?" She folded her hands together under her chin and swayed back and forth a little, her black dress rustling, looking like a cat who'd caught a lizard.

"Una, we've had a day," Dorr said. "I'll tell you about it later. Let's just say we may have initiated a minor apocalypse."

"Oh? But—"

"If there was ever a time for you to become a dignified Ven-Diri lady, this is it."

"I *am* a dignified Ven-Diri lady." Una did straighten up and stopped her little waltz of glee. "I'm excited to meet the girl you've said *so* much about and supportive of...whatever you need. I'll be in the kitchen." She started to turn away and then hastily added, "Do you need anything?"

“No,” Dorr said. “We never do.”

“All right,” Una grumbled.

“Your sister seems fun,” Sorla said, once they were out of earshot.

“Una can be both exuberant and prissy, and she may give you whiplash, but yes. She is fun,” he agreed. “I love her for her many good qualities, but sometimes I also want to drown her in the well.”

“Is that how the Ven-Diri express affection? Talking of murder? Because I can tell you do love her.”

“You’re picking up on the cultural vibe here, I see.”

“I think it would be wonderful to have a sibling,” Sorla said. “And I can’t imagine seeing someone without getting to know their whole family too.”

“Is that so? Because I was thinking I’d put that off for ten years or so.”

“They’re not that bad, are they?”

“I hope not. It’s just that I am by far the most low-key member of the family, and sometimes they exhaust me.” He shook his head. They were in the parlor now, passing the altar of bones before coming to the sofa, matching chairs and fireplace. He moved a book, a stained and empty tea cup, and a cloth mouse toy off of the furniture.

Sorla paused at the altar.

“Well, there’s some of the family right now,” he said. “I apologize for the macabre decor.”

“Will your family...have problems with me?” Sorla asked. Of course her mind must be lingering on the cruel words of the Miralem guard.

“No,” he said, glad he could reassure her of that. “Our religion is all about tampering with life and death. There are no taboos or judgments against Fanarlem in our holy texts. I’m not very religious, but it influences us all. No one has put any thoughts in my head, or Una’s, or any of my friends, that it’s

wrong to bring people back, or...even to manipulate souls, if one's intentions are good. In short, Fanarlem are considered both equal and moral."

"You don't even think it's wrong to create Fanarlem children?"

"Are we already having that conversation?" he asked.

"Ack! No, I didn't mean it like that; I was really just curious because it's hotly debated among Fanarlem. But—*someday*, in theory—"

"Don't worry, I don't think anyone should have children hastily while they feel like this."

"This?"

"*This.*" He drew close to her again. Oh yes, he would court her carefully and slowly, but he still wanted her close. He wanted to feel her touch again, and again. "Not long ago I wished I had just died, and now I feel like the happiest man in the world when you walk in the door. On a practical level, I know no one feels like that forever. But if we're lucky, it'll turn into something better. Something...that lets you know you're always safe here."

"Yes. Like my parents," Sorla said.

He held out his hand and touched his fingers to her palm. She curled her fingers around his.

"Whatever happens from here, you did the right thing," Dorr said. "And if the royal family doesn't appreciate your hard work...there will be better opportunities. I'll help you as much as you want me to."

"I hope it was the right thing," she replied softly. "I hope I didn't put Arn in danger."

"They chose to go."

She nodded. "Thank you for all your help. I...probably should go back to the bakery tonight so I can explain this to Rath."

"Are you sure?" He didn't want to let her go.

“Yes. Rath will have my back. I need to feed and cuddle Blueberry.”

He couldn't argue with that. “Will you come by tomorrow? I'll close up for one more day and take you somewhere. Get your mind off things.”

“Will you take me on a tour of your neighborhood? Does the temple have bones inside or just outside?”

“Oh, if you want a properly morbid Ven-Diri date, I'll give you one.”

“I do! Just no fleshy corpses.”

“Only your tour guide.”

“Then I can't wait.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

YOU HAVE HEREBY BEEN TERMINATED from the services of the royal bakeshop of magical confections. Please vacate your assigned housing by the end of the day.

THE OFFICIAL LETTER came the next morning, and it was signed by the king and queen, not Seldon.

No mincing words there. The coldness of the letter sent a matching chill down her entire body.

“What bastards!” Rath said, not mincing words either. She ended up telling him the whole story and he was red with anger. “Those royal bastards! Froskar was ready to die and you went above and beyond your duties to find some reason for him to keep on going, and all that fuss because, what? They want to tell their hero who he can spend his time with? I’d like to see our useless, weak-brained king and queen lead an army! You ignore them. You and Blueb can stay here as long as you want.”

“That’s tremendously sweet of you, Rath, but...I think I’d better go. They sound furious at me, and they’re the king and queen.” Fates, this was not the royal attention she dreamed of when she left Dor-Temerna. “I can stay with Dorr, I’m sure, on the sofa or something, and then I’ll find an apartment.”

“Are you sure, young lady? Is that proper? If the town guard comes asking for you, I have a good straight face.”

“On the sofa!” Sorla insisted. “His sister lives with him. We won’t be alone. And the next day I’ll talk my way into a job at the Ven-Diri bakery. If not that, then somewhere. I’ll even wear all black if I have to! I have money for a place. Don’t worry.”

“Well, I’ll write you a glowing reference.”

Rath spent an hour writing this damned reference, driving her to absolute fits of nail-biting by acting like it was nearly done, then suddenly scratching it out and writing it fresh. But he had been an excellent boss and she was sorry to leave so soon.

“I wish I’d been able to master that magic,” she said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help.”

“Oh, don’t be hard on yourself. Not everyone is good at everything., What you do, you do well. That’s all you can do.”

He insisted on paying for her cab fare, and called out, “Don’t be a stranger! Come sit in the garden sometime! I’m gonna miss having your company!”

Sorla waved at him, but she couldn’t even fully take in the goodbye. As soon as the carriage turned the corner, she settled back with a miserable dread. Blueberry nudged her hand. She petted him half-heartedly and he rested his head on her thigh, clearly sensing her distress.

Maybe it was just her imagination, but she felt a shift in the city itself, as if a storm was coming and she was the only one who could feel it.

Of course, Dorr was happy to see her, and Una immediately tried to feed her but ended up just feeding Blueberry instead.

“Your own apartment? Do you really think you should be living alone?” Dorr asked.

“Brindy’s family has a room to let,” Una said.

“Brindy? Curses, no,” Dorr said.

“That sounds all right,” Sorla said.

“No, never mind. I was wrong. *We* have a spare room to let,” Una said, flashing a little fangish grin at them both.

“I don’t want to accept anything from you yet, Dorr,” Sorla said. “I can make my own way. I’ll look for a new job here tomorrow. And if you could introduce me to Brindy, I’d be obliged.”

“I’d be happy to. Brindy is one of my best friends,” Una said. “Dorr just doesn’t like her, and it is true that she is my most annoying best friend, but she has a lot of good qualities and then you and I and Brindy could do all sorts of fun things together.”

Sorla tried not to look at Dorr, who was grimacing, and reminded herself that she was used to all sorts of annoying people and Una’s friend wouldn’t be anywhere near the worst.

“I wonder where we could introduce you to work,” Una continued. “We have a couple of bakeries in the neighborhood. But...”

“I figured I would take her to Fathan’s,” Dorr said.

“Fathan’s is gone,” Una said. “They decided to join the military instead and shut the place down. Only the grandma stayed but then she ended up taking a pilgrimage to Drennalyl instead.”

“Oh... So that leaves...”

“Yes,” Una said.

“Oh dear, what does that leave?” Sorla asked. “As long as they don’t have something against Fanarlem, I am very good at getting along with people. I can adapt to nearly any circumstance.”

“I don’t doubt that,” Dorr said. “But...is it just Ronka’s and Eternal Confections left, then?”

“Yes, that’s it,” Una said. “No one could work for Ronka. He already makes the best bread you can imagine, but he works alone. He makes a big fuss about the secrets of his art and how he is the best baker who has ever lived, except for his

late master that taught him, and anyway...that just won't work."

"And Eternal Confections is run by a couple of ancient corpses," Dorr said. "Not literally, but you would truly think they had died and the revival didn't take. They make old-school Ven-Diri pastry. It's called Eternal Confections because all of it is soaked in liquor so you can keep it for a long time, and I wouldn't be surprised if they sleep in the barrels to stay preserved..."

"We really need a nice, normal, modern patisserie like Fathan's was," Una said. "You should just open one. Save some money up and in the meantime you could work here."

"I want to make my own way and not rely on your kindness," Sorla said. "If the bakeries won't have me, I have experience with butchering."

"*Butchering?*" Dorr asked incredulously.

"Mm-hm. I can make cuts out of a whole hog in no time."

Una giggled. "I can see why you're so enamored with her," she said to Dorr.

"I can't wait for you to bring home a man so I can embarrass you at every turn."

"You won't. You can't. When I fall in love he will already know how much I love him, as will I in return, because I intend for passionate love letters to be an integral part of the courtship."

"We'll see." He glared at the door. "I think I'll spend some time by the fire, and Sorla can join me, and you can do absolutely anything that involves being in a different room."

"So cruel. All right. I understand you want to..." She puckered her lips and tapped them, like she was pointing at a kiss.

Dorr balled a napkin and tossed it at her face, and she caught it and flung it back. Dorr left his chair and held a hand to the doorway with an aggravated sigh.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Una,” Sorla said, finding it all rather cute, since she had never had siblings but when she was young and was the companion of little Kora and Ilora, they often played and fought in similar ways. Of course, looking back, Sorla had not been treated the same as Kora and Ilora, and had to watch herself more, but when she was that young she didn’t know any other way of being.

Dorr gave her a crooked smile that seemed half-apologetic, but there was a glint of pride in his eyes too. He did love his family.

“Your independence is one of the things I admire so much about you,” he said. “No matter what it is, you always try to manage it on your own.”

“Yes, even if I fail horribly...”

“But I wish you’d stay here,” he said softly, drawing her close to the sofa. He put a hand on her shoulder and then ran his thumb along her collarbone. It seemed almost absent, but it was making her antsy. Then he drew away to leave her at the sofa while he put a couple more logs on the fire.

“It’s true that we’ve barely begun,” he said. “But maybe we’ll enjoy living together...and we just won’t stop. If it goes wrong, move out then. If something happens in the night—like an air raid on Laionesse—I want to know where you are.”

“That is a good point,” she admitted. She knew Otaré and other border cities had been attacked in the night by the terrifying flying machines that were too high and too fast for all but the most skilled telepaths to reach. The Kalanites had their own sort of dragon now, and unlike real dragons, they could keep making more. It was a suicidal mission for the pilots, but that never seemed to be a problem when the Kalanites preferred suicide to war wounds.

“Is it appropriate, in your culture?” she asked. “If I live here?”

“Well, we’re not having accidental children. And—don’t get me wrong. I don’t want to rush this relationship. I am just genuinely worried.”

“Me too. I’m scared I made things even worse,” she admitted, in a whisper.

“You saved Eustan. You can’t control it from there.” Satisfied with the fire now, he reached for her, and then he stopped, and took off his gloves. He touched her cheek.

Oh yes, she thought.

This is what I dreamed of with Ruven, and all I got were little teases. I never knew exactly what he was really thinking. He was always hurting me without even knowing it—protecting me for a flash and then withdrawing with a teasing grin.

No wonder I never liked being protected.

But Dorr means it, doesn’t he? He wouldn’t just slip away once the trouble was past.

Her eyelids sank heavily as he leaned closer, and she put her hand on his, lifting her chin, bringing their faces close together. His hands were cool but his mouth was warm as he pressed his mouth to hers, kissing her lightly, so lightly.

Too lightly. She returned his kiss with more force, signaling to him—hopefully—that he didn’t have to be *too* gentle. She ran her hand across his cheek, feeling stubble and jaw bone and heat, and wanting more of him. He plucked at her lower lip with more force.

As he kissed her, his hands moved to her chest, urging her closer slowly, and then he suddenly pulled her right up against him and she felt that he was hard, and breathing heavily.

Her skin was tingling all over, but she was painfully aware she didn’t have anything to meet him with. His pelvis was hot and hard, grinding against her stomach as he kissed her again, and she knew she was supposed to have that feeling too. Hot and focused. Her body ached for it.

I have to see Mr. Trinavel again tomorrow and spit it out somehow.

That was when he pulled back, catching himself, and she knew he was thinking of his own wounds and scars.

“Too much,” he said. “I’m sorry. I’m not making a good argument for you staying here. When you’re near me, I just... want to be closer.”

“Don’t apologize! You weren’t reading me wrong. I want you. I want everything.” She slid a hand to his neck, and behind his collar, to his back. She felt him tense.

“I’m not afraid of your scars and your mismatched parts,” she said. “I know you don’t really want to see them, or think about them the way you have to think about a body when you use it this way. But let me help you. I know all about changing bodies and parts, and stitches, and ugly bits. What would it say about me if I was afraid to look at you? A long time ago, when I was ugly, and enslaved, and had no one to love me...I decided I was worth something anyway. I was good at what I did and determined to keep going, and everything else was just a shell.”

“You were right,” he said. “You truly are worth something. You’re quite a woman.” He pulled her closer again. Sorla couldn’t remember when anyone had referred to her as a woman and not a girl, and she hadn’t realized how much that word alone could be so exciting.

“And you’re quite a man yourself,” she said. “I yelled at you for protecting me, but I didn’t give you credit for always treating me like we’re on the same footing. It’s such a simple thing that when I’m with you I almost forget that other people don’t do that. And I yelled at you for defending the enemy, but I realize...that is part of your character. You see everyone as individuals first, not as their culture or race or status.”

“That’s hardly unusual, and I should hope it’s not really worthy of praise.”

“I don’t think you realize how bad most of the world is at it. I don’t really see Kalanites as individuals first myself. I get so mad at the very thought of them, but Feirin was a Kalanite, and so is our family friend Kessily, so...”

“I can’t take credit for that.” he said. “But I appreciate the attempt to claim I’m in any way remarkable and not just a

boring local apothecary with an un-medal-worthy record of military service and bad dreams.”

“Honestly, all I want in life is for it to be happily boring,” she said. “But the world still needs us just the same. And I need you...”

“Sorla...” He kissed her again, and now both his hands went to her waist and he pulled her close, so close that his heat was her heat, and it still wasn’t enough. Her fingers twitched to pull off his shirt.

“But I—um—I do have to take care of some business first,” she said reluctantly. “Before I can have you.”

“‘Business’, that sounds very ominous.”

She gave him a pleading look, but how was he supposed to understand? Clearly he had never thought about this before.

”I’m unsexed,” she whispered. “I have to see the Fanarlem maker so I can have sex with you.”

“Oh—that’s—” He looked as taken aback as she feared. “I hate to ask, but...do you know what—happens?”

“Of course I do!”

“What happens?” he asked, with a serious look like he was now the Professor of Bedroom Activity.

She laughed. “I should hope *you* know.”

“I’m asking because I don’t trust that any Kalanite gave you great information about it. Did your mother talk to you?”

Her laughter died because this was uncomfortably perceptive of him. “Well, I know what rape is, because I was warned about it, many times. And I know sex is the same act, but with respect and love.”

“They’re not at all the same,” he said, looking unsurprised and gentle. “There is a lot more to sex with someone you love than just that. It’ll be my first time too, so—”

“It will!?”

“I certainly don’t have any old girlfriends knocking around. Do I seem the type?”

“Back home, I mean—in the Kalanite lands—men always see a Perfume Woman when they come of age so they know what to do. I don’t know why I thought you’d do that here, just because you’re a Daramon...”

“No. It’ll just be the two of us, figuring it out. I have certainly read some literature, however, so I know where to touch and kiss and nibble that you’ll probably like best. Although you can answer that better than a book, in the end...”

“Ohhh. Well, I haven’t read anything so I will have to start from scratch figuring out where to touch and kiss and nibble *you*.”

“Gods,” he muttered. “Don’t even say those things yet.”

She grinned. “I feel much better. It’s so nice to know you’ve never been with some experienced lady before.”

“We don’t want anything to do with those customs here.”

“I do like it here,” Sorla said, leaning more heavily against his chest.

“I’m glad.”

Suddenly his arms were around her again, and he was holding her close, and she realized just how much fear there had been, deep inside her. She knew how good love could be, because she knew her parents had that, but actually allowing her body those feelings and possibilities...it felt wonderful to be close to someone, and want to be closer still, and not to feel any misgivings about it the way she always had with Ruven and Seldon and everyone else.

“If the Kalanites come back,” she said. “If they come here...”

“I’ll always protect you from them,” he said, and his voice was still a little raspy, but instead of seeming sickly and alarming, it was comforting. “I swear it. If there is ever a moment you can’t protect yourself, I’ll be here.”

“Okay.” She shut her eyes against his chest.

“Tomorrow, let’s get you your new taller body. And then how about I take you on that proper date?”

“Perfect.”

He pulled his feet up onto the couch, and her with them, and she slept together with him for the first time—more like a cat than a lover, draped over his body, soothed by the sound of his breath. It was a good sleep, and there were a few perks to being so much smaller than him, while it lasted.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“WOULD you prefer if I wait outside?” Dorr asked her, as they stood outside the Fanarlem body shop. While Sorla was staring at the sign, feeling extremely anxious about making such big changes to herself, even when she was sure they were right, a Fanarlem girl came along selling flowers.

“Just one bit for a tulip, sir and miss,” she said, her eyes huge and imploring in a somewhat cheap face. “A bouquet for one ilan.”

Sorla didn't need or want a bouquet of tulips, but she handed over the ilan, feeling that she had no choice. She couldn't say no to a Fanarlem girl, even though she suspected the girl lurked in front of this shop just to take advantage of this guilt.

As soon as Sorla had an armful of tulips and the girl had her coin, she scurried right off, and Sorla sighed. “Come in with me, and don't let me leave without telling Mr. Trinavel everything I need. I'm feeling very tongue-tied.”

“Would you like me to hold those?” he asked. “I'm sure Mr. Trinavel hears all kinds of requests every day. Fanarlem can be anything, and I'm sure if flesh and blood people could be anything, they'd change things too.”

She opened the shop door, and her eyes immediately flitted to the taller body on display, thinking that it did just feel right. A moment later, Mr. Trinavel appeared from the back and his face lit up.

“Sorla! I’m so glad you’re here! Goddess, am I excited! I hope you’re as excited as I am. Your father...”

“My father what?” Sorla asked, but Mr. Trinavel was rushing off to the back again.

He returned with a scrap of cloth in hand, looking as gleeful as grown men were possibly capable of. “Look at what he’s sent me! Feel this skin.”

Sorla ran her fingers along the sample and it made her own skin seem rough in comparison, even though she had a high grade of material and spell work. The fabric was so well-treated with spells that the individual threads weren’t visible even upon the closest inspection, and the texture was soft and smooth as a flower petal. He handed it to her and when she took the scrap in her hands as a piece, she could feel how supple it was, almost more like the very finest kid leather money could buy.

“What is this?” she asked.

“It’s regular medium-grade cotton skin treated with the spell your father sent. When you soak it in the spell, it comes out like this. Softer than anything I can offer, but also entirely waterproof and so strong that if it was any stronger it wouldn’t take the needle. But it does. You can still hand mend it, but barely. And it’s cheap. He said he can make a whole vat of it for five ilan.”

“Feirin did *this*?”

“Well, he’s been working on it for years, as you know.”

“Yes...but there was always something that didn’t work at all.”

“That’s potion making for you. Well, look at how many decades upon decades it took for Fanarlem to go from animated dolls patched together from raw fabric, to you being hired by the royal family. Every subtle expression on your face is because a potion maker spent years and years trying to improve Fanarlem. But while the Daramon potion makers only wanted aesthetics for their own selfish purposes, I think you’re holding the first piece of a new era. With this skin, rain and

spills are no longer a danger, and it's almost impossible to accidentally cut or tear. This is a functional improvement first and foremost."

"I see that! I don't believe it, but...I'm touching it, so it must be real." She held it out to Dorr so he could feel it. She nearly wanted to skip out the door and tell the entire street that Grau had made this. "When will it be ready for sale?"

"For you, right now, if you want it. And I won't charge you anything, because, in all honesty, you will be a bit of a test. Of course, if something doesn't work out, I will make you a new body, also free of charge. If this *does* work, your father and I will discuss larger scale production here, and a nice cut of the profits for your parents."

"He sent enough for that? For me? And...what if I want a taller body?"

"Yes, we should still have enough. We do have to make it custom, so it will be about six weeks, but you can have any alterations you want."

"Six weeks... I...uh..." *Well, now I can't say a word. Six weeks? It isn't that long, I guess. I certainly can't tell Mr. Trinavel that I am so eager to get things going with the dead guy my parents just nervously sent me off with at the beginning of spring that I can't wait six weeks to have sex with him.* "That's fine."

Dorr glanced at her, and clearly he didn't want to say anything either. He wouldn't want to look like he was the eager one.

Mr. Trinavel seemed to actually notice Dorr for the first time. "Oh—and you have a gentleman with you."

"Yes," Sorla said. "This is...Mr. Tondan, my...*suitor*." She hoped this would get the point across that she needed things she was unsure how to discuss with any middle-aged flesh and blood man who kept a regular correspondence with her adoptive father.

"Good morning," Dorr said, his cheeks flushing slightly. She had never seen him come close to blushing before, and

she thought it must be a good sign for his recovery along with being quite charming. “I came for moral support today.”

“Would you like to speak to my head fabricator, Sorla? She is also Fanarlem and can help you decide on the details.”

“Yes, please.”

Relief rushed through Sorla when Mr. Trinavel offered Dorr a seat and then led her back to the workroom, where he pulled a sweet-faced Fanarlem woman from some pattern work.

“Sure! Let’s go talk,” she said, in response to his request, and now Sorla was tucked off into a quiet back room, away from the men, and the woman pulled up a cushy blue chair beside the window and a currently unused fireplace.

“I’m Hara,” she said. “I’ve heard so much about your family. Grau and Velsa’s daughter. How wonderful!”

“Yes,” Sorla said, amused by this. In Dor-Temerna where her baking was well-known, it was more often that Grau and Velsa were known as “Sorla’s parents”. “I’m sorry I was away for the moment Feirin figured this out. They must have been so excited!”

“I’ll bet your father is a perfectionist, because it’s better stuff than I imagined. I can’t wait until we can make it available to everyone. But I’m sure you’re tired about hearing how wonderful Grau is.”

“Well...it’s mostly just here,” Sorla said.

“Not for long, I’m sure. But...let me guess. You need your full sexuality. And you don’t want to wait six weeks.”

“I—” Sorla melted with relief. She could guess, by her energy, that Hara was older than her or Velsa, and was familiar with this conversation. “I know six weeks isn’t very long. I don’t even know if we would—”

“Love, it’s not for you and him, it’s for *you*. I’ve seen this more times than I can count. We’re made just like flesh and blood people and we have the same souls, but we’re all made without the ability to feel or act on sexual desire unless or until

a Daramon deems us for that purpose. Then we come here and we have to ask for it and pay for it ourselves, usually when we are well into adulthood. And all along the way, we feel the loss, but...you're also missing a lot. It's not just sex itself, it's all the feelings along the way, and feelings you can give yourself."

"Is it? I always wondered; I felt it would be that way, but...no one ever talks to me about any of it. And my Miralem friends would wait until I was gone to talk about things. I know they do. They'll giggle about it sometimes and do that thing where they shut each other up because I'm there."

"I know exactly that situation from when I was younger. Well, they're figuring out how to talk about it too, and they don't want to say the wrong thing with you. I can swap you out for sexual parts today, it's very quick and we can just move them to your new body when it's ready. I felt a great sense of relief and wholeness when I came here and got mine, and I was past thirty. I didn't even have sex with anyone for a few years after that, but it was still a huge relief!"

"I already feel relieved, just knowing someone else felt this way..." Sorla felt unexpectedly like crying. This had been a heavier secret than she ever realized, just to want what other women had.

"This is a normal reaction," Hara assured her. "Has anyone talked to you about sex before?"

"Not...exactly." Sorla realized now that she didn't know much at all.

"Well, hold on, let me show you..." Hara stepped out for a moment and Sorla was still quivering with nerves.

"This will look better all stitched on, of course," Hara said, walking in with an awkward looking part. "Your gentleman out there is a pretty large man. Is it serious with him?"

"Yes, I believe it is."

"Well, if he's too big you can change that later. Tight is good, especially for us because we don't have muscles, and you may feel a little pain when you're first starting. But you

being in consistent pain is not good, so come right back. This little passage is where your partner would enter, and the far end of it is very well secured to your innards and has a portal spell, since, as you may know, when men get excited, they spill a lot of seed. It's still a little messy because the portal won't catch everything, and you want to use a lot of oils during sex with flesh and blood people. If you ever have a relationship with another Fanarlem, it's not as important, but real people chafe very easily at everything—saddles, new shoes, and you. The new skin might help with that, but we're not making these out of that yet. This is like a face; it takes a lot of sculpting with a special potion.”

“I see,” Sorla said, but in fact it was an overwhelming amount of information and she wasn't sure what to expect. The idea of Dorr being too big, hurting her, and then making her all messy inside wasn't that appealing, and the womanly parts were not pretty. She kept thinking of cutting open a pomegranate and how they busted open into bumps and folds and juice everywhere. Well, real women must be even worse, Sorla considered. And Dorr had never been with a real woman, as she now knew, so hopefully he wouldn't think her parts looked weird.

“Most importantly, you want to know that for women, often the most pleasure isn't from sex but from this little fold here. When you first get your womanhood, since you've been waiting so long to feel these things, you may find it's very sensitive and you might have very strong feelings of desire, agitation, and sort of an itch. It won't last forever and you can also rub this spot and relieve it yourself. Does this all make sense?”

She desperately wanted to ask Hara how it all went when she finally did have sex, and what kind of man—or woman, for that matter—it was with, but she was way too shy about it, so instead she found herself just breathlessly agreeing to the procedure, ending up in one of the private rooms on a table, waiting for Mr. Trinavel to join Hara in the room and gently knock her out telepathically for the next hour, because he was the only one with the telepathic skills to send her into a gentle unconsciousness.

“Don’t worry, very routine,” he said. “Hara will handle this and I’ll get right to work on the new, taller body.”

“Thank you,” she said, as he put a hand on her head and she passed right out.

Sorla hated being put unconscious; Velsa and she had always agreed that it was better to be awake when one’s body was repaired even if it involved a lot of pin-prick sensations and the embarrassment of being taken apart, but Hara assured her Mr. Trinavel would be immediately shooed from the room and she would do it all very quickly. Apparently it was way too sensitive and ticklish an operation for consciousness. Sorla wouldn’t have trusted anyone besides another Fanarlem woman with this.

Now Hara was waking her up again, and the sunlight coming through the curtains looked a little different, so Sorla knew some time had passed. “You’re all done and ready to go. No charge for this either.”

“I can pay!”

“No, it’ll just be part of the new body. Mr. Trinavel is so excited about the possibilities of what Mr. Thanneau is working on, I think he’d give you anything you wanted.”

She didn’t feel any different, and she had woken up fully dressed, mostly just wanting to get out of there.

Dorr was waiting in the front, flipping through a pamphlet titled “Fiber Flesh and Skeletons of Steel: Predictions for the Future” by...oh. Mr. Avelin Trinavel. Of course. She wondered again how he had come to devote his life to Fanarlem, but she didn’t really feel comfortable asking either.

“All good, let’s go,” she said. “They’ll tell me when the new body is ready.”

He picked up the wilting tulips and walked out with her. “You were back there for over an hour. Did you accomplish your quest?”

“Yes,” she said, her face feeling uncharacteristically warm. She patted her cheek and it was still the same temperature as

her hand, so she must be imagining things. As she looked at him, she was feeling a distinct pulse between her legs.

His brow was furrowed, and he had this expression of empathetic distaste that showed he understood why she felt so awkward. He put a hand on her shoulder lightly as they walked, like he was checking on her physically but also mentally as he asked, “Is everything all right? They didn’t hurt you or anything, did they?”

“No. It was just the most awkward thing of my whole life. And I hate going there. They’re all very nice, and I can’t even explain why I dislike it so much.”

“You don’t have to explain. Having a body is awkward. And here I thought it would be easier for Fanarlem.”

“And I thought it would be easier for flesh and blood people because you’re normal.”

“Normal? Well, you can’t possibly mean me.” He grimaced, and his hand rubbed her shoulder a little in reassurance, and she started thinking about how much she liked his company. She felt like she was seeing his real self these days, and she liked his real self quite a lot.

She thought about how she had fallen asleep on top of him last night, and sure enough, between her legs she was feeling itchy, and a wild heat. That had to be her imagination because her body didn’t generate heat, but she could swear it was.

“Are you sure you’re all right? You look dazed.”

“I’m *not* sure. I feel very agitated. And sort of hot and itchy.”

He scratched his head, near the temple, messing up that thick, black, wild hair of his and she just wanted to dig her own fingers into it. “Spirits,” he muttered. “It sounds like you just hit your belated adolescence.”

“Hara warned me this would happen. I guess it’s all pent up from my entire life up until now.”

“Almost everyone goes through this, just at a younger age, the first time you get hit with an infatuation, so I don’t want to

be your first infatuation. Take a deep breath—or—”

“I understand.” She tried to imagine a calm space in the center of her body. “But you don’t count as my first infatuation. I’ve definitely been infatuated before. It just wasn’t so *physical*. I didn’t expect to feel any differently just walking beside you, and instead it’s quite intense!”

“You’re looking at me like you want to eat me,” he said, and then he got that little blush again. “That came out wrong.”

“No, you’re quite right. I don’t really want to eat you, but it feels like I at least want to tell you I’m going to. Like I would say to a baby wyvern, except...”

He laughed and gave her a look that suggested it was mutual, and he was finding this hopelessly adorable. She didn’t mind if he thought so. She wouldn’t mind if he *told* her she was hopelessly adorable.

”How about we occupy ourselves with a proper date first?” he said, with maddening patience.

Sorla imagined the calm spot inside her again, like the ocean on a calm gray day with slow, gentle rhythms of the waves. Lest she think of something much earthier instead. “Okay. A proper Ven-Diri date, as you said. I want to see more of your home than just your shop.”

“If you don’t mind skeletons and gloom.”

“It might be the perfect counterbalance to this mood.”

“You might as well know what you’re getting into. To the temple it is.” He flourished his cane to hail a carriage, and she thought, despite his warnings, that he seemed as eager to show her his world as she was to see it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

ON THE SHORT ride back to the Ven-Diri-Ashi, Dorr asked her about her parents, and Sorla delighted in telling him how they had adopted her, how right from the start Grau let her nap in their bed and Velsa took her to the library, and so she knew immediately that they would be very different than anyone she'd ever worked for. Before long, they had taken her in as a member of the family.

Eventually she got to the story of when Grau fell afoul of the bandits, leaving out the part where a lot of that was Dalaran's fault, and they slaughtered him in retaliation—or tried to.

“Meirin did everything she could to bring him back, and he did come back. They told us he might not. But I know he didn't want to leave her either.”

“Interesting. I know it is much more difficult to revive someone into a different body.”

“Can I ask you a serious question?”

“Of course.” He stopped his idle glances at the window and met her eyes. Sorla, who didn't usually notice the eye color of flesh and blood people because their eyes were smaller and subtly hued, noticed for the first time that his were a beautiful shade of winter sky gray.

“You said you're glad you were brought back—now. But...I don't mean it arrogantly, but do you think you'll still want to be here, even if we had a fight, or the sheen wore off? I guess I'm asking—it isn't because of me, is it?”

“I decided I wanted to be here when I heard you were off with the prince,” he said gravely. “When I thought I might never see you again. I hadn’t been home in a long time. I’ve also changed and the place I thought I didn’t want to be feels more like home now. So, no, it’s not because of you, although you certainly don’t hurt matters. You were the spark, shall we say, but now the fire is going along.”

“Just checking.”

The carriage slowed to a stop, and he took her hand. “Don’t worry,” he said. “I do want to live, Sorla. One thing I realized through being away and then talking to you is that there are a lot of things in my neighborhood, my culture and religion to be proud of. Even if I could still have children of my own, I know my parents wouldn’t put up too much of a fuss over you. Before I left to go fight, I mostly just saw the things I didn’t like—the stricter elements, the emotional distance we sometimes have. I always thought I wasn’t much like other Ven-Diri, and now I realize I wasn’t that special. I was just young.” His gray eyes were serious. “This place isn’t perfect, but it is my home, and there is a lot of acceptance and kindness in our ways, too. I want to show it to you today.”

He stepped down from the carriage, and she hopped down with a grip on his hand, and they were in front of the temple.

For the first time, as he said this, Sorla realized that if she wanted to live in Laionesse and she kept growing closer to Dorr until they reached an inevitable conclusion, then this would be her home. Not just Laionesse, but this particular pocket of it. Among the worshippers of the death gods.

The Ven-Diri temple had a steeply pitched roof with heavy eaves, the points adorned with elaborately carved spirit beasts. Although stylized, they could be identified as wolves, dragons, owls and other creatures, with fanged grins, sharp beaks, and eyes of precious stone. They were a bit fearsome but also endearing; whoever carved them walked a careful line between the two.

Under the eaves, protected from rain, the exterior of the building was covered in bones, every last inch. The bones

were shaped around the tall, narrow windows and the big wooden doors, each opening guarded by a skull or sometimes a pair of them, twin skulls grinning at one another above the door frame.

A pair of guards watched over the building.

“Good to see you back!” one of them greeted Dorr. “I figured you were when Una didn’t come here to bless your spirit every day.”

“She can get some sleep now,” Dorr agreed.

“Who is your lady friend?”

“This is Sorla Thanneau, a baker, from Dor-Temerna.”

Both guards gave her a small bow as Dorr pulled open one of the doors. They were double Sorla’s height and groaned at the movement. This temple had surely been here for centuries.

“Nar calla n’omshan.” A young man in a black robe greeted them, lighting two candles, which he handed off to them. “Welcome, and reflect in peace.”

Inside, the cavernous ceiling reflected the steep roof outside, and the entire back wall was a tableau of figures, both statues carved in wood and real skeletons dressed in cloth robes. Candles illuminated the scene, while the tall windows were only slightly cracked for ventilation, bringing in scant light. Sorla’s eyes could not look anywhere but the frozen faces of the statues and skeletons, rendered oddly lifelike by the warm, shifting glow of the candles.

At the very top tier was a skeleton clad in a black robe, hands outstretched and holding a lantern in one hand and a string of bells in the other. Just beneath him were two statues of dark, beautiful Ven-Diri women, one bowing her veiled head and the other looking out and holding a beckoning hand to Sorla from her perch on high. In her other hand she held a vial close to her breast.

This, of course, was only the beginning; there were twenty different figures across the tiers, each with their own symbols, gestures and attire that no doubt meant something.

Dorr looked at her carefully. “This place can be a little... macabre, to outsiders. And I am not very devout. The rest of my family is much more so.”

“You said there are Fanarlem who worship here?”

“Yes, a dozen or so. Mostly the servants of Ven-Diri families, and one couple who converted.”

Sorla was studying each figure, and how the skeleton at the top seemed to be leading the way somewhere with the lantern, while the lady below him beckoned, holding the hand of her grieving counterpart. There was a skeleton musician and two small painted dancers, the three of them lit by a lantern on a pole in the hand of another skeleton in a bright red robe. At the very bottom were two statues laying down, as if in effigy, closed eyes and hands softly folded at their chests, but their mouths were almost smiling.

It made it seem as if the entire scene was a dream of the sleeping man and woman, with the skeleton at the top spinning the scene for them, and she said as much to Dorr.

“Maybe that’s the case. Our time in the spirit world is just like a dream. But all the figures are supposed to represent the guardian family of Nar Calla, the near spirit world. At the top is Dormon Uthra, the god of all the dead, his wife Tarabrinna who welcomes the dead, and his daughter Unadarbrinna who cries for them. There’s Rithin, the keeper of bones...we have a feast for him in February where all the altar bones get brought out for some air...” He pointed to the statue of a man holding a skull, that presumably belonged to the headless skeleton kneeling beside him, bowing his headless spine in gratitude.

“It’s a lot to take in, and I’m not sure I could ever be devout either,” Sorla said. “But it’s fascinating. Were you never very religious, or did that have something to do with the war?”

“Both. When I was young I just wasn’t very interested. I’m not the fanciful type. It seemed like one of Una’s stories, although I’ve never met a necromancer who doesn’t swear the gods are real. When I was on the front, I didn’t want to think about death all the time. Still, the priest told me once that

thinking it was all a story was good enough. You don't actually have to think that when you die, Morarith will take you to the house of Dormon Uthra, or that when I came back from the dead, Unadarbrinna would actually stop crying for one day the way the legends say. The stories are just saying that we're all going to die, and when we do, we won't actually be alone. Maybe that's true. It's comforting, at least."

"Did it comfort you when you were dying?"

"I guess it did. When I really got down to it, I thought of Morarith coming for me, Dormon Uthra waiting" for me, and maybe more importantly, I thought of my family thinking the same thing. Like the idea of this god was a link that would bind us beyond death." He arched a brow. "How's this going? Still aroused?"

She burst out a laugh before clamping it down. "It helped a little maybe. It is a rather philosophical topic to balance with wanting your hands all over me."

"Oh man." He put a hand on her head and looked at her like he was tempted. "We'll move on." He walked back to the door and blew out his candle, nodding that she should do the same. They returned the candles and went back into the light of day.

They strolled the grounds, which had a graveyard with elaborate pillars and sculptures of stone to mark the resting places for the bones of all the different clans. The ground sagged and bowed and some of the stones had tilted along with it.

"I thought you kept your bones on the altars," Sorla said.

"Well, not all of them. That would be a lot of bones."

"True. So how do you decide which to keep?"

"It's written in the Doreth'thannan, our holy books, exactly what bones go to which relation, and when we die our bodies go to the Bone Tender. They strip off the flesh and separate the bones according to the book, burn the name of the dead into them, and then the rest are wrapped in a shroud of silk to go in the family vault."

“Does your family have a stone here?”

“Of course.” He showed her the six-foot slab of weathered stone depicting the skeleton with the robe and the lantern on a pole, above the Tondan name, and below that, a small locked door. All the other stones were similar, although some had different gods or decoration on them. She assumed the bones were placed in the locked door, and wondered if there was a vault beneath each stone. “This is the stone of my father’s clan, and my mother’s is...” He took a few steps, glancing back to see if she was following, as Sorla was taking her time looking at the details. “I’m not unsettling you yet, am I?”

“No. I’m fascinated. I’ve never even seen a Kalanite graveyard. They’re only for really rich people there. And the Miralem only have the venna tree groves. If Ven-Diri Fanarlem die, are their bones still kept like everyone else’s?”

“I don’t know. I doubt the Doreth’thannan says anything about it, so it would probably be up to the priest. You’re certainly welcome to keep your bones next to mine when you die as far as I’m concerned.” He gave her a fond look. This must be the Ven-Diri language of love.

“I’d like that. Maybe not the part where some of them sit on an altar, but...I think you do have close families here, and even after someone dies, you remember them. I envy that a little, because I don’t have ancestors.”

“Every family has to start somewhere,” he said.

His mother’s family stone had a guardian wolf carved into it instead of a god, as her family name, Fiararatha, meant “Northern wolf” in an older dialect. A few venna trees, with their smooth white trunks, were planted around the edge of the graveyard, symbolizing death and renewal even if they were not used to mark individual graves as the Miralem did.

“Have you had enough of this yet?” Dorr asked, as they reached the opposite corner, where another intricate gate allowed entry, just like at the edge closest to the temple.

“It has been a pretty heavy date, but anything less and I might rip your clothes off.”

“Definitely not in public,” he said, blanching. “Do you want any lunch or should we just keep touring the neighborhood?”

“I don’t need lunch, no.”

“I wouldn’t mind a cup of tea, myself,” he said. “I don’t want any food but yours, but I’m thirsty.”

“I’d be happy to have tea with you.”

The cafe was small, elegant, and smelled of fresh bread. Each table seated no more than four, and there were only ten of them squeezed in between a deli counter and the walls with a gray and purple paper and dark wainscoting. All the patrons were ladies, in long black dresses, with veils pinned back to eat, sipping from delicate china.

Sorla felt glaringly bright in her white and red dress, and childish in her knee-length hem and ribbons, although this was standard Miralem clothing. In this setting she seemed like she’d come from a carnival.

An older woman, lovely in a sharp, hawkish way, looked over at Dorr the moment he walked in, and then studied Sorla. Sorla braced herself for an unpleasant encounter. Even if the Ven-Diri accepted her generally, no one was harsher with scrutiny than older women with that sort of face.

The woman got to her feet. “Dorrithan! Oh, how fortunate! You’re back, and I heard Dalaran was the one to pull it off? I hardly believe that lazy boy was sober enough to actually do some necromancy.” She squeezed his arm. “And who is this? Bringing a girl to a cafe? Dare I hope dying snapped a little romance into you? He was always such a serious boy. I’m—well, they call me Auntie Mel. Actually, my grandmother was Dorr’s great-grandmother’s sister.”

“This is Sorla,” Dorr said. “She’s a baker who moved here from Dor-Temerna.”

“A baker! Well, you can never have too many of those around. You aren’t working at Eternal Confections...are you?” She clapped a hand to her mouth like she feared for Sorla.

“No, um, just looking for a place to work now,” Sorla said.

“Well, I’ll ask around for you! Why, it’s quite possible one of the restaurants could use a baker.”

“That would be wonderful! Thank you! I have years of experience baking for the family cafe back home.”

“We just need to get you some nice black dresses. I’ll let you get back to your date; no one wants an old woman meddling in that.” She gave Dorr’s arm another squeeze before rustling off. He looked slightly embarrassed while Sorla couldn’t stop grinning.

Sorla thought it would take a long time to feel like Laionesse was home, but the last thing she expected was to like the Ven-Diri people so much. Sure, they probably weren’t perfect either; she certainly sensed some prissiness, but they all seemed to accept without any dismay or even surprise that Dorr was courting her.

It was so astonishing that she hadn’t even known to wish for it in her wildest dreams.

An very serious-looking girl with big round eyes seated them in dead silence, fluttering menus in front of them like fallen leaves. “Summon me when you are ready,” she said, in a low, borderline ominous tone.

Sorla hardly noticed how strange their waitress was; the happiness inside her could not be contained, competing with the hot wild feeling between her legs. She wiggled her ankles, trying to resist an urge to run her legs up and down Dorr’s legs.

I like him, I like his sister, I like his home. I like everything so much that I’m not sure I’ve ever been this happy in my life!

He looked at the tea menu, and she looked at him, and he stopped and looked at her. She realized she was doing a little fidget-bounce in her chair.

“You’re so cute,” he said huskily, “that I can’t stand it.”

“So don’t,” she said. “Just drink your tea and let’s go home.”

She was afraid he was going to protest, to say it was too soon, and he still didn't want her to see his injuries or whatever else, and she could tell all that was whirring around in his mind, but then he put the menu down, held up a hand to summon the waitress back, and said, "Okay."

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

THEY WALKED home as the sun was setting, talking and laughing, hand in hand, so happy together that everyone they passed had to give them some sort of smile in return, even if it was the most reluctant, grim smile from the most crotchety looking old Ven-Diri man. Sorla now knew she was in love, with someone who loved her back, and she was about to be touched and kissed and licked and hopefully all-around ravished, and she could hardly contain herself for wanting him, and—

Arn was leaning against the front door of the apothecary, dolefully smoking a long-handled pipe, with a leather traveling bag on the ground. Eustan was beside him, and both of them were covered up with hooded cloaks, but there was no mistaking them. Even from a distance, Arn looked graceful and Eustan looked very sickly and shivering.

Oh, no.

Sorla had not exactly forgotten about Eustan, Arn, Seldon, the royal family, the war, and everything else, but as long as she was so happy she just assumed that everything was just as well with them too.

But the spell was abruptly broken.

“Can we crash here for a few days, perhaps?” Arn asked.

“Are you okay?” Dorr asked.

“The royal guard was in my neighborhood, apparently looking for my apartment; we just escaped their notice and I left my servants to distract them as long as possible,” Arn said.

“I wasn’t sure where else to go. The Ven-Diri district is its own little world, and we need a source of tonic.”

“They want to drag me back to the palace,” Eustan said. “They want their general...”

“No!” Sorla said. “But they can’t! I mean, you so obviously need rest.”

“They were planning an offense this very week,” Eustan said. “And they seem to think even the sight of me and a few inspiring words would rally the troops. Maybe it would.” But he sounded exhausted, drooping against the wall.

“Come on,” Dorr said, offering Eustan an arm. “I know how you feel, and you should just rest up by the fire and have some leftover pie.”

Eustan tried to pick up the traveling bag, and Sorla rushed to grab it for him. Arn didn’t even try, and Sorla got the sense that Arn had always had servants. Dorr unlocked the door, and let them in, helping the shambling Eustan along while leaning on his cane, but generally Dorr seemed to have his strength back.

“And it’s not a problem,” Dorr continued. “We have a spare room and the sofa here. It’s the first one up the stairs. I’ll put your things in it.”

“Thank you,” Arn said, trying to sound breezy like he was checking in to the finest of inns. He followed Sorla into the parlor, but he couldn’t hide a certain fretful, pained expression.

“I’m so sorry,” Sorla said. “I feel like this is all my fault.”

“You wouldn’t be wrong,” Arn sighed. “I had a very peaceful life. Music, safety, adoring crowds. But...lonely. You offered me a temptation and I snatched at it...”

He didn’t sound without regret, which did nothing to assuage Sorla’s guilt. “I knew it might be trouble for you,” she murmured. “I knew it and I just couldn’t help following the thread. My whole job rested on saving Eustan, and maybe the entire *war*, and...”

“I wasn’t trying to make you feel bad,” Arn said. “I just don’t know what to do. I’d like to help him, but no one has ever expected...*help* from me before.” He sat on the sofa, looking into the mostly-dead fire, taking a drag from the pipe and holding the smoke in for a long beat. Sorla knew that tiralem nef could actually relax Fanarlem, unlike alcohol. It smelled like dry leaves burning. “I know how wonderful he is when he’s well, but...he is far from well.”

Dorr came back with Eustan and two plates of rather past-prime pie. She would make something good in the morning if she could use the Tondan family kitchen. Eustan sat next to Arn on the sofa, and Dorr and Sorla took the chairs with the imposing carved wolf arms that sat off to the side, but Dorr barely sat down before he started fussing with the fire. Soon, two cats were circling, their tails shaped like question marks, and Sorla wished the cats would actually ask some questions, because for a long moment no one seemed to know what to say.

This is all my fault. The royal family is angry and they’re looking for Eustan and I’m the one who started this.

She had no idea what would happen, and nothing seemed like a good decision. There was a palpable connection between Arn and Eustan that Sorla sensed even now, the way they kept looking at each other and sitting close, but it was more strained than at first meeting. Their history together seemed brief and long ago.

She needed a solution, some comforting thing to say, but nothing sprung to mind.

“Let me take a stab at this situation,” Dorr finally said. “Eustan, you went with Arn to recuperate at his home.”

“Yes,” Eustan said. “I told the guards I was leaving, and they let me go, and Arn got us a carriage.”

“And your will to die waned when you saw Arn.”

Eustan glanced at Arn, and he seemed a little brighter whenever he laid eyes on him. “Yes,” he said, in his ragged, half-dead voice. “How could I tell Arn I wanted to die? They

had been through so much...and I was the one who once told them things so similar to what you told me. That there was still something to live for, and the goddess values all of our lives. And now they're a successful musician. How can I sit before Arn and tell them I'd rather die now?" Eustan did use 'vai' to address Arn, and Sorla felt this really did fit Arn better. "But —"

"You don't want to be the general anymore, do you?" Dorr said. "That's what this is really about. You'd rather live than die, but maybe you'd rather die than go back to war."

"You hit close to the bone with that one. My will has just drained out of me. And the truth is, when I first found Arn, I wanted them to stay. Or I wanted to go with them. Either one. I knew they were in a vulnerable place, and I wanted to protect them. I had already sworn a vow of chastity, and I really thought I was above having that sort of focused interest in a single person, but I couldn't stop thinking...about you, halliri." Halliri—silver crystal—was a fitting pet name for Arn. "I just didn't know what to make of any of it, and I felt so trapped in my duties, that when you said you should go, I just let you go."

"And I didn't really want to go," Arn said. "I knew I had to or people were going to talk."

"Yes. The more I considered it, the more I understood that, but I'm not sure it was a good reason to lose you."

"I don't entirely get the problem," Dorr said. "If you'd already made a vow of chastity, who cares if you were with Arn? I mean—of course I understand you might be breaking a vow, but... Well, actually, I don't understand why anyone makes a vow of chastity to begin with."

"It is said, among the scholars, that only a person who has sworn off the carnal pleasures can truly live a life of the mind," Eustan said. "As a boy, it made sense to me. I didn't like that uncontrolled feeling of lust. It seemed to get all my older siblings into so much trouble. When I went away to study, they showed me spells and meditation techniques to cast all those feelings aside."

“I guess that makes sense,” Sorla said a little miserably, glancing at Dorr, still thinking that if she could just pluck him from the room right in the middle of this and learn some things about carnal pleasures, that would be much better than this conversation.

“And it’s an unbreakable vow? That you made as a boy?” Dorr asked. “Gods, this just doesn’t sound right to me, not that it’s my business.”

“No, it’s not unbreakable,” Eustan said. “But among the royal families, women choose the husbands. For normal people, it’s about love, but in my rank, we still need those proper alliances, no better than Kalanites, just the other way around. Young women and mothers choose the marriages and men don’t get much say in it. The vow of chastity among the scholars allows the royal men to protect themselves from an unhappy marriage. If I broke the vow I’d have to get married. I could have had Arn as a lover, a secret, but I would *never* do that to them.”

“You can’t have children now,” Dorr said.

“I know, but—” Eustan coughed, looking exhausted by the speeches. Arn patted his arm, suggesting he should stop, but he went on, “We still can’t have Fanarlem husbands and wives, and I could never have brought Arn into that world without subjecting them to terrible treatment. It had to be either my position or them. I felt I had no choice then, and I have no choice now. I can’t go out and work myself into a bloodthirsty rage on the battlefield, or make cold and calculating strategies about how to destroy our enemy. Even if we do lose...it just can’t be up to me to fix anything now...”

“It sounds like you haven’t had any rest from it for a long time,” Sorla said. “And no one has had more expected from them than you. You’re only one person and everyone needs love, and quiet, and rest, sooner or later.”

“But what do we do?” Arn asked.

“I need to talk to Seldon,” she said. “I just need to explain all of this to him.”

“Talk to Seldon?” Dorr’s eyes widened. “Sorla, I don’t think that’s a good idea. The royals might find some way to make you take the fall for this.”

“Seldon isn’t going to hurt me, or put me in prison. I’m sure of that. He’s being forced into a marriage, too. He’ll understand if I talk to him.”

“Then I’m going with you.”

“No. I need to do this alone.” She knew Seldon was going to get jealous if Dorr came along, and having a peace talk would be impossible. “I’m going to the palace now before this gets worse. Dorr...please trust me. I can do this.”

“I trust you. I don’t trust *them*.”

“It’ll be okay. I made this mess. But I can also fix it.”

CHAPTER FORTY

SORLA WAS MUCH MORE TERRIFIED than her declarations implied, but she just marched onward. There was no other solution. Seldon *would* understand.

Dorr watched her carriage leave, and she didn't dare look back and see the angry concern on his face. But at least he didn't stop her.

The carriage brought her to the gates of the palace. When she told the guards her name and asked for Seldon, one of them escorted her to the door.

"The crown prince will be eager to see you," the guard said. "I'll show you to his quarters and we'll let him know you're here."

The other guard nodded. Sorla followed, more anxious by the moment, as this was the first time she'd arrived alone and unexpected. The rooms seemed even more imposing and unfriendly than before as the guard led her down now-familiar corridors, showing her to the room where Seldon gave her the snack spread.

"Have a seat and wait for a moment," he said. "I'll keep watch outside the door."

"Watch for what?" Sorla asked, but he didn't answer.

A few long moments stretched, and she studied the lavish furnishings. There was still just the one magical light that caught all the shiny bits all across the room and cast eerie shadows on the paneled walls.

The door opened. Sorla leapt to her feet, too nervous to sit now.

The queen walked in, with two guards, and no sign of Seldon.

Sorla took a small step back as the queen gave her a hesitant little smile. Queen Irina was quite young, with a plain appearance, her dark hair pulled back in a twist that was more practical than fashionable, wearing a coat dress and somewhat dirty boots. She was generally known for being dim-witted and loving animals, but Sorla had learned at an early age that kind people still couldn't necessarily be trusted.

"Hello, Sorla," she said. "I remember you. You and your parents. You are a very valiant family, very brave. This time, I'm afraid, you have...overstepped, a bit?" She pursed her lips. "I am aware of everything that has happened with General Froskar. Do you know where he is?"

"I—I do, but he can't go on as a general anymore."

"We have one desperate offensive planned to take back the river," the queen said, her face turning a shade redder with panic. "Goddess, it's desperate, Miss Thanneau, you must understand. If our men and women could just *see* the general is alive... Anything to boost spirits. Everyone knows now that Kota has fallen...and Otaré, hanging by a thread... Everyone is looking to us now and we can't show any weakness. Whether you cooperate or not, our telepaths will find Froskar before the sun rises, and he *will* make an appearance. He *will* give a speech. This is about far, far more than one single man."

"Are you saying the telepaths are going to force him to speak?" Sorla asked, in a whisper. She knew she shouldn't be implying that the queen was about to commit such a horrible act, but how else did they plan to make Eustan give a speech?

"You're not a queen. You're very young," the queen said. "Sometimes this is what has to be done. Believe me, I've learned it all the hard way. And before you leave, this memory will be taken from you. I am preparing a letter, some money, and a carriage to take you back to Dor-Temerna. Your family

will be comfortable, you will be safe, and you won't remember what happened here, or with the general."

"My memories...?" Sorla could hardly choke out the words. "This is wrong. You can't make Eustan be a hero. Maybe you can make him speak, but it won't inspire anyone now. Have you *seen* him?"

Gods, Dorr really was right. Everyone is just as bad as everyone else.

"Name me a better option," the queen said wearily. "I want to protect you, and all of my people. This is our only chance and we have to win."

"I can't leave Laionesse," Sorla said. "And what about Eustan? What happens to him after that speech?"

"You need to go. You haven't been a good influence on Seldon."

"And what about Eustan?" Sorla repeated, but the queen just shook her head. She whispered something to the guard and a moment later, the telepaths walked in to take her memories. Sorla could feel them, already brushing her mind, gauging her own power to resist—which wouldn't be much. The telepaths themselves, both men of advanced age, looked exhausted. These must be the ones too old to go to the battlefields. Everyone in the palace looked exhausted these days.

"Don't take my memories of this place and send me home," Sorla said, pleading now. "I'm in love with a Ven-Diri man! I want to stay here! I won't—" Sorla almost said she wouldn't tell anyone about this, but then she stopped. That would be more difficult. What Queen Irina planned to do would be overriding Eustan's own will.

"It must have been a brief courtship," the queen said. "If he still cares about you once things calm down, he can find you in Dor-Temerna, but I really think it's best if you go home." She waved a hand at the telepaths. "Please proceed."

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

DORR LET SORLA GO.

But he didn't like it.

"Was that a good idea?" Arn asked, when Dorr finally stepped back inside, having watched the carriage turn the corner.

"I can't tell Sorla what to do."

"So, no," Arn said. "It was a bad idea and you're already tormented over it."

"Well, if you thought it was such a bad idea, maybe you should have said something before she left," Dorr said, trying very hard to sound patient.

"I can follow her telepathically," Eustan said. "I'll just track her emotional state and if she gets very distressed, I'll go to the palace."

"You can do that from this distance?"

"I'm a level nine telepath," Eustan said. "I can follow her as far as she can go. I've tracked our enemies for a hundred miles or more." He paused sheepishly. "Not to brag. I just wanted to reassure you."

"Consider me reassured," Dorr said. *And terrified.* Gods, a level nine telepath in his house. He wasn't usually afraid of the Miralem but he also didn't have contact with the powerful ones, except a few healers when he was still playing a support role to them. And healers were different.

”Be careful,” Arn said. “You’re the one they really want back, and I can’t think of anything good to come of that either.”

“If they’re this determined to have me, I only have two options,” Eustan said. “Capitulation or to escape this kingdom entirely. But I can’t allow Sorla to suffer in my place when I know I’ll have to face the consequences anyway. I need to decide, and in the meantime, I have to protect her.”

“I should be the one to protect her,” Dorr said. “At least she’s begrudgingly accepted that I might, now and then.” He smiled wryly. “She’ll hate it if we bring you into the mix.” Dorr recoiled at the idea of letting a telepath deep into his mind. The Miralem were his neighbors and allies, but all his deepest thoughts and feelings were not something to share with strangers.

But I can’t save her alone. Eustan wouldn’t be here without us, and now I’ve got to let him repay the favor and protect us both—just this once.

“Eustan, if we need to rescue her, can you work your telepathy through me? That would keep you off palace grounds.”

“Of course,” Eustan said. “As long as you’re open to it.”

Arn glanced at him anxiously. “Isn’t that taxing in your current condition?”

“Everything is taxing...in my current condition. But I’ll manage. I always do.”

“I’ll be right back,” Dorr said. “I’m grabbing a few things from the apothecary.”

Dorr went downstairs to the shop. A little charm spell would help so Eustan wouldn’t have to work so hard. Silk now had a bed in the shop and sprung up to jump all over him while he located the exact bottle.

He still wondered if Eustan could recover. He looked so ill and gaunt, and although he was acting more normal in general, Dorr knew he still had yet to meet the hero of Laionesse. Eustan was known for his bright demeanor, his ability to bring

hope, and none of that was in evidence. His soul *was* certainly damaged, even if not as badly as they first thought. *Recovery will take much longer for him than it did for me...*

He went back to the parlor, where Eustan sat with unfocused eyes. A cat had climbed into Arn's lap and was enjoying a lavish petting. "She has reached the palace..." Eustan said. "She's very tense... I don't think Seldon is there. She might be alone... Yes, I think they've left her in a room somewhere. The Sociable Room, that one's called, so he'll probably be along in a moment..."

"Is she all right?" Dorr snapped out, unable to contain himself.

Eustan suddenly struggled to stand. "It's the queen. The queen is there. Her mood is..." He trailed off. "This isn't good. She doesn't want to hurt Sorla, but she will."

Dorr was already at the stairs. "If my sister comes home from work, don't let her go after me."

Dorr ran into the street, loping quickly with his cane and probably looking quite undignified, but he would run until he found a carriage to hire—or reached the palace gates. Finally, a cab. He waved his hand frantically, flashing coins, practically inviting someone to take advantage of him if they could just get him there.

The coins were pressed into the driver's hand. "Palace. Drive fast, please."

"Aye, sir."

Dorr took a liberal dose of the charm spell as the carriage pulled up to the gates. The guards were already staring at the common conveyance as it left him there.

"Good afternoon," he said. "I'm here to see Prince Seldon."

The guard was a young man, probably Dorr's age, although he looked younger. Of course, most people Dorr's age did look younger; he had that sort of face, which was a lucky thing now that he was frozen in time by his death. Looking very young forever was a particular sort of hell. The

guard smiled at Dorr, a big friendly smile that showed the charm spell was definitely working. Then he said, “For what purpose?”

“It’s a private matter.”

“Aw, you’ll have to do better than that.” The guard thumped his shoulder, still grinning, sort of reminding Dorr of Silk if she could take human form. “I’m a guard. I have to guard the place, you know.”

Damn it, how could someone look so taken with him and still be of no help?

“My name is Dorrithan Tondan,” he said. “I’m an apothecary, and...I have a contract with the royal family to supply a very crucial potion. It just came to my attention that I have a bad batch of vervain and the potion is tainted, and I need to get a replacement to Prince Seldon right away.”

“Oh—yes, I see. That sounds serious indeed. Can I bring the potion to him?”

Oh for gods’ sake. “I need to deliver it directly. To give him instructions.”

The two guards looked at each other, probably conferring telepathically, and now they would probably check him to see if he was telling the truth.

This was where he had to trust that Eustan was following along and could make it appear that he was telling the truth and not just spouting nonsense. He held his breath as the guards touched their hands together, making their telepathy stronger through the conduit of touch. Dorr held his breath.

“Follow me,” the young man said, breaking the spell.

“Thank you,” Dorr said, hiding his relief behind a small cough. “It’s urgent.”

As he followed the guard, he felt a sudden steady presence in his mind, as if he was being watched. He looked behind him, but that was useless—it was coming from inside, and although he knew the little tingle of being telepathically checked, he had never felt anything like this before.

It's Eustan. Don't be alarmed. I need to stick close to you.

Dorr shuddered back from the presence.

And you have to stay open to me if you want to help Sorla. The queen is planning to take away Sorla's memories of Laionesse and send her home...and then come after me. I couldn't help listening in. We have to tell Seldon—he wouldn't do this. I can't manipulate the royals directly; they have strong protections, so you'll need him.

Dorr struggled not to resist Eustan. He knew he had to keep himself vulnerable in order to help Sorla. But with their minds so close, he felt the strain in Eustan.

This might kill you, Eustan.

If it does, it does, Eustan replied. But I think I'll manage. There's another life I should have lived, and...I'm starting to want that chance.

All right. Let's do this together.

The guards showed Dorr to a reception room that seemed much too glittering and formal for his faded black work clothes, and left him to wait for Seldon. A clock on the mantle seemed to tick in slower time than usual.

“Oh, you're the Ven-Diri fellow Sorla mentioned...” Seldon walked in, his eyes giving Dorr a brief appraisal. Dorr felt his entire skull tingle with the intrusion. Dorr realized he was in a different world at the palace. The royal family probably felt quite justified in using telepathy on strange visitors. Seldon looked frustrated, apparently not getting what he wanted.

Eustan's protections held.

“I didn't realize you were the same man who was making the revival tonics for General Froskar. And you say the one from this morning was tainted? How could that have happened?”

“I'm really here about Sorla. She's in the palace right now meeting with your mother, and she's in distress.”

“Sorla? Here? No one told me.”

“Exactly! And if you don’t want any harm to come to her, we’d better hurry.”

“How would you know?”

“Go to the...the Sociable Room first, and I’ll explain later.”

Seldon’s brows glowered, and Dorr noticed that while Seldon looked conventionally handsome in his portraits, in person he could have been Dorr’s cousin. Sorla definitely had a type. “All right,” he said.

Dorr followed Seldon down a hall, and then another hall, and just when Dorr wondered if the whole thing was a never-ending labyrinth, he tried the handle of two closed double doors.

“Sorla, are you in there? Mother?”

There was no response. Seldon looked at Dorr like he suddenly believed him.

The telepaths arrived just before you. Put your hand on the door handle and I’ll get it open.

Dorr grabbed the handle and immediately felt a vibration and click as the door unlocked. He threw the door open.

“Sorla!”

Seldon was right behind him. The queen whirled toward them, her boots squeaking on the parquet. “Seldon—I’m sorry. I’m not going to hurt her but you know as long as she’s so close—”

Sorla, meanwhile, was unconscious in her chair, legs splayed and hands in weird positions like she’d been springing up to fight when they knocked her out. Dorr rushed to her and the two telepaths backed off a little. They moved defensively to the queen.

“What did you do to her?” Dorr asked. Everything in him wanted to rage, but he managed to keep the question controlled. “She worked so hard to save the general. No one throws herself into a task like Sorla, and she found a way to bring his soul and his will to live back. And this is how you

repay her? Scaring her like this with your power when you know how helpless she is against a queen?”

“I wasn’t hurting her! I think we all know it would be better if this whole thing had never happened, and I was just going to take her memories of all this and send her home.”

“You think she didn’t make any other memories while she was here that have nothing to do with this?”

“She loves him,” Seldon said. “Just let her go. Leave her alone, and Eustan too. It’s over. I told you.” He rubbed his forehead. “All this started with me. I wanted to go fight and it was my blunders that got Eustan killed. If he hadn’t been protecting me with his telepathy when everything turned to shit, he wouldn’t have dropped his own defense and taken a shot. And I invited Sorla here, knowing it wasn’t just to give her a job. I wanted to see her again, and I didn’t have any good plan for what I was going to do. I’ll never be Somon. I’m a blundering idiot.”

The queen reached behind her, blindly searching for the back of her chair, but instead Seldon put an arm around his mother, and she started to cry.

“All these years of war...all the dead...”

The telepaths, two men old enough that they might remember the War of the Crystals, made some attempt to soothe her. “My lady, Laionesse is not lost, and never will be, as long as we’re still standing.” Frankly, Dorr thought, neither of them looked like they’d be standing much longer, regardless of war or peace.

Seldon left the queen to the telepaths and walked up to Dorr, but his eyes were on Sorla. “What she must think of us now... I’m sorry, Mr. Tondan. I never meant for this to go the way it did. The last thing I wanted was to hurt Sorla when I’ve always liked her so much. I didn’t mean to get her wrapped up with Eustan, or...to punish her for saving Eustan. I know my mother didn’t either. It’s this war. This—war. For nothing.”

Dorr flexed his right hand. A dead man’s hand. All for nothing.

But he was starting to feel bad for Seldon.

“I know,” he said. “I understand. I lost friends. I’d like to say I tried my best out there, but I’m not always sure. I don’t know if I would have behaved differently, in your shoes, than to try anything to get Eustan out there again.”

Seldon gave Dorr a nod. “Take care of her. I’m sure she’ll be happy. You’re extraordinarily handsome.”

Dorr was briefly thrown and then he remembered the charm spell. “She’s not an easy one to take care of, but...”

“What? What is happening?” Sorla was stirring, immediately trying to stand up. Dorr offered her an arm. She pinched herself and then she pinched him.

“Ouch!”

“I’m not hallucinating, am I?”

“You’re not supposed to pinch me if you think you might be hallucinating.”

“Yes, but I realized it doesn’t feel like much when I pinch myself... My head feels so fuzzy.” She shook her curls, trying to clear whatever the telepaths had attempted to do to her, which had clearly addled her a bit.

“It’s all right, Sorla,” Prince Seldon said. “Your memories are safe and you can go home. I’m extremely sorry. For everything. You’ve acted with the best of intentions and we responded with the worst of them. I hope you know...that I care for you, and I want you to be happy, and someday when things calm down, I’ll invite you and Mr. Tondan to the palace for a proper dinner.”

“Thank you, Seldon.” She looked at him earnestly.

“And you can return to the magical bake shop, if you like. I’ll write Rath a letter to notify him.”

“Well...about that. I can’t actually bake magical pastry,” Sorla said. “I only make the normal kind. And undead people happen to really like it. That’s about it. Rath needs a better partner than me for all those orders, I’m afraid.”

“You’re not a magical baker?” Seldon scratched his chin.
“Are you sure?”

“Yes! I’ve tried and tried.”

“But your parents...”

“I’m not my parents.” She twisted her fingers. “I’m sorry, but I know what I am good at, and I think I’d rather stick to it.”

“I understand. I’m not my parents either. All right. Well, then, I’ll send a reference letter and you should be able to get a job anywhere.”

“Thank you. I really have appreciated our friendship all these years. You gave me so much confidence.”

“I can’t believe you needed it, but...I’ve appreciated your friendship too.” He looked downright yearning when he saw Dorr’s hand at her arm, supporting her, and Dorr couldn’t blame him. Sorla was wonderful, and Seldon seemed to know that he couldn’t offer her happiness. He didn’t seem like a bad fellow after all, just one with a lonely position, trying to fill the shoes of Prince Somon. If Seldon’s circumstances were different, maybe everything would be different, but Dorr wouldn’t dwell on that anymore. So much of life just seemed like luck, so he would just have to enjoy all the luck that came his way.

Seldon smiled grimly. “Go home. I’m calling off the search for the general. Tell him he can go home too.”

“No need...”

They all turned, startled, as Eustan dragged himself through the door.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

“PATCH me up as best you can. I’ll rally the soldiers. I can’t ride with them, but...I’ll give them what I can.”

“General Froskar!” the queen shrieked. “Is that you? Goddess above, you poor man!”

Eustan looked near collapse. The telepaths hurried to his side.

“You might have to prop up my old corpse behind a curtain like Lord Jherin, but...I guess my heart is coming back. I can’t let us lose to those bastards. I’ll help, but I’m not giving up Arn or making them keep company with anyone who acts like an ass around them.”

“Of course,” Seldon said. “Arn is welcome in the court.”

“Seldon—” The queen didn’t sound as sure about Arn.

“Eustan and Arn are both welcome in the court, because we are not the Kalanites, isn’t that right?” Seldon said. “We have a place for everyone here, don’t we? I wouldn’t want to tell anyone that my parents, the reigning king and queen, don’t really follow the teachings of Vallamir that say every soul is equal and the poorest of folk should stand beside kings.”

“I would like to think the world works that way—” the queen began.

“Well, it never will if we don’t try,” Seldon said.

The healers were clearly itching to try and give Eustan as much health and energy as they could, and the queen composed herself. Any battles over Eustan and Arn would be

saved for another day. Someone mentioned that the king had just returned from the theater. Seldon showed Sorla and Dorr out, clearly signaling that their work was done and he would take care of things from here.

“When you get back, send Arn back to us in the carriage,” he said. “I swear I’ll take care of...them.”

“I certainly hope so,” Sorla said. Her head was starting to clear now, but she could still feel an echo of the telepaths invading her mind and knocking her unconscious, and she wouldn’t forget that feeling any time soon. “I’m going to feel very bad telling them to get in this carriage and go to the palace if they’re treated like a pariah.” Sorla didn’t have any standing to boss around Seldon, but she couldn’t help trying.

“I swear it on my brother’s soul,” he said, betraying loneliness in his voice. Sorla knew how much he’d loved his older brother. “Whenever I end up being the king, I want better things for Laionesse. You’ll be impressed with me, even if it’s from afar.”

“It won’t be that far,” Sorla said. “Just one neighborhood away.”

“Yeah,” Seldon said, but she got the feeling she wouldn’t be hearing from him anymore. Their years of correspondence were over. She wouldn’t be dreaming of confessions of love from a prince anymore, and she’d be all right without them, but now she hoped he’d be all right too.

“Take care,” she said. “And...really. Thank you.”

He waved at her, and then gestured at the driver to carry them off. At that moment, his fiancée Kanalem came running out to him. She must have just heard what happened, and she also gave Sorla a hasty wave before putting a gentle hand on Seldon’s shoulder.

Sorla’s jealousy over Kanalem was gone, and she did seem like a good-hearted person. If Seldon had to get married, she hoped that it could still work out in the end. If Kanalem did find Seldon ugly, her body language certainly didn’t suggest any revulsion.

Sorla looked at Dorr, relieved to be back with him, when it all seemed to be over. "That was quite a rescue. I can't believe I missed all that."

"Eustan had as much to do with it as I did."

He told her the story, with his sturdy arm around her, and her head heavy against his shoulder. She never got headaches, but whatever the telepaths did to her had given her one now. The headache didn't really matter, because she was so relieved, and she felt so safe in the arms of this ridiculously handsome man.

"Mm...well, thank you for not listening to me when I told you not to come after me. I've been proud of being on my own for so long, but...I'm starting to like this feeling too." She slid her fingers between his. "You're so beautiful."

"Sorla, it's the charm spell. It hasn't worn off yet."

"It's not the charm spell! I was already charmed." She looked up at him. His eyelids lowered, his face craggy and brooding as he made some attempt to resist her.

"No one would call me beautiful. It's not fair for our first love-making to be under the influence of a charm spell."

"It's not fair for our first love-making to be interrupted by Eustan and Arn hanging around!"

He grunted, reluctant—but not convincingly reluctant. She pulled him into a kiss. The carriage arrived back home, where Una already seemed to be talking Arn's ears off.

"...so she goes into her bedroom and the monster is in her bed, and of course she freaks out—quietly, because you don't want to upset a monster, but where is she going to go with a thunderstorm outside?" She was waving a book around. "And then the monster says her *old name*."

"This is the same monster with the skull head?"

"Oh, hello, Dorr! I was just keeping your guest amused."

"Were you?" Dorr asked.

“Tremendously,” Arn said. “I love stories about sympathetic monsters.”

“You can borrow it,” Una said, handing the book over.

“You might not see it again,” Dorr said. “Arn, Prince Seldon has welcomed you to the palace, and Sorla extracted a promise from him that you *will* be welcome. I guess you know what Eustan went to do.”

“I know,” Arn said. “He needed to try. As he was coming back into himself, I could see he wouldn’t forgive himself if he didn’t try. My work here is done, most likely...” They rose, and fished a few coins from their pocket. “I’ll buy the book from you. It’ll give me something to read at the palace. I’ll check on him and see about this ‘welcome’, anyway, but miserable experiences are always improved by a book.”

“Yes, indeed, and that one will be perfect!” Una said. “I think. I haven’t finished it yet. But Vira said it was excellent.”

“Take care,” Arn said, leaving as breezily as they had arrived.

“What a day!” Una said. “It sounds like I missed absolutely everything. Can I make you some tea? You have to tell me everything about it.”

Dorr looked at Sorla. Sorla looked at him, intensely.

“Later,” Dorr said. “We have some things to discuss privately.”

“Oh,” Una said. “Ohh. Well, then. Maybe I’ll go see Vira and borrow her copy of *The Monster of Storms*, then...” Looking a little disgruntled, she peeled herself off the couch, carefully transferring a loaf of cat from lap to cushion, and put her shoes back on.

And...they were alone.

Finally.

“Where,” Sorla said, “is your bedroom?”

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

DORR SWEEPED an arm around her and carried her up the stairs. Once she was six inches taller he probably wouldn't be doing that anymore, so it seemed like a good idea just this once. Although as he realized her weight was making his limp worse, he regretted it almost immediately.

But then she wrapped her legs around him, and her arms around his neck, and her hands dug into his hair, and he was hard, hungry.

He dropped her on his bed and leaned over her, kissing her. She tugged at his shirt, and then pushed off his jacket.

He tensed as her hands grazed his scars, through his shirt.

"Dorr, it's all right," she said softly. "I promise you." Her hand slipped under his collar now, meeting his bare flesh with her fingers, so small and soft against the scars. There were places he briefly lost track of her touch; his skin was too damaged to feel anything in places.

"It's okay," she whispered. "And I swear it's not the charm spell. You know it's all I've been thinking of."

"We don't have to rush things," he said, although it was probably too late for protests as soon as he brought her to the bedroom. "I don't want you to have regrets."

"I won't. I want to know what these feelings are like," she said. "And I trust you with them. If it turns out we rushed into things and we part ways after all...what does it really matter? At least I'll be more informed about what sex is."

“Well...maybe this is easier for you than it is for me,” he grumbled, almost in a whisper.

The room was dim, but the moon was bright and he should probably light a fire.

I can't hide any more. Lorvaran's arm is my arm, Lorvaran's leg is my leg, and I must accept it. I can't stay shrouded, never touching skin to skin.

When she reached for the hem of his shirt, he pulled it off for her. His breath came quicker, and she sat up, drawing closer. She stroked his jaw, and then his neck and shoulder, the slightly ill-fitted arm, the fingers, grazed with the tips of hers. Wordlessly, her hand marked his flesh, made it not the hand of a dead man, and not just Dorr's, but Sorla's and Dorr's together.

She kissed the scars, where he couldn't even feel her lips, but he felt her hands now caressing his back, and her hair falling soft against his chest.

“There,” she said, as if some formal ritual had been completed.

“Are you sure you've never read any books about making love?” he asked. “So far I think you're doing a better job than I am.”

“I don't think I need books to know how to touch.” She smiled. “But you can show me what books can teach, if you want.”

He kissed her. “I think we need a fire.”

“Are you cold? I'm not!”

“I'm always cold. And...I've just been dreaming about how beautiful you'll be by firelight.”

She sat up, looking anxious and overly dressed, chewing the tip of her nail-less finger. “Okay. Hurry.”

He could feel her eyes on him when his back was turned, looking at him as if she really couldn't turn away. All the knots deep inside him that had bound up with the horror of his

death and revival were slowly falling apart, and he took a slow breath.

It really is good to be alive.

And she was so beautiful. His animal brain was so anxious to get back to bed and strip off all the clothes she was wearing that he was fumbling with the kindling and tinderbox, but finally, the fire was started and he could give her his full attention.

Hands on her apron, loosening laces, and then hooks, and buttons. So many different damned fasteners. She tried to help at first, but he nudged her away and she quickly understood this was part of the pleasure. Her eyes were wide, looking at him, excited but also nervous. He really hoped he didn't hurt her, although he'd stop if he did. He definitely wasn't going to *enjoy* stopping, though.

Finally, the dress was off, revealing legs, still clad in stockings and boots with too many buttons, and a plain little undergarment tied with a drawstring. He helped her lift off her blouse, and her chemise came with it, showing her small breasts. Her nipples looked exactly like flesh and blood ones, small and hard, and he wondered if they always looked like that or if they relaxed. But the rest of her was not quite as realistic; her skin was so very smooth, and she had tiny lines of stitches at her shoulders and neck, a slightly uneven waist with a little hard bump against her ribs that she put a hand over as soon as he started looking at her.

“My rib isn't fixed! Oh, damnit. I forgot to ask about it at the Fanarlem shop! It keeps poking out. That isn't romantic at all.”

“It's perfect,” he said. “All your imperfections are perfect.” He reached back and started working off the buttons of her boots, because that would take a while, and he took a deep breath, for patience. “I'll never be able to prove it, and maybe it sounds...unlikely. But. I really think I would have fallen for you even the way you used to be. I'm sure it would have taken longer. I know I would have tried to talk myself out of it more. But I know your eyes are always the same. And how the hell

could I have looked in those eyes too many times and not felt anything?”

“Dorr...you don’t have to tell yourself you would have felt anything for me then. No one would.”

“Look, you’re right. I can never be sure. But it torments me to think there could ever be a world where you could look at me and I wouldn’t feel anything.” He pulled off her right boot. “And I want to tell you how beautiful you are, but I also hate to say it. I’m afraid some part of you, deep down, might think I only mean you’re beautiful now. And if you can love my scars, and my weaknesses, and my cold hands... I want to give you that, too. I can’t, really, but...”

“I never really have felt beautiful before,” she said. “Just cute. Not like a...a beautiful woman. And...more *oddly* cute than just cute, actually.”

“You are a very beautiful woman,” he assured her.

“So does this mean I can be touched, kissed, and nibbled in the places I’ll probably like now?”

“If I ever get your boots off.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

HE DID GET the boots off, and unfastened her stockings from the buttons sewn on the back of her thighs, which felt like nothing when she took her stockings on and off herself but was deliciously ticklish when he did it.

Now she was naked, except for the underthings that still covered the womanly parts she had yet to even see on her own body, and she found herself getting a little frozen with nerves the same way he had.

I'm so glad it's him. And I'm so glad he never went to see a Perfume Woman! He's never going to know what it's like to be with a flesh and blood woman.

She wasn't too worried that she was inferior to real women. But the idea of having him forever, so he never even knew what a real woman was like, was strangely exciting.

And she would soon realize this was a normal kind of thought to have as he was sliding his hands down her body, and then up her thigh now, beneath the underthings, caressing her buttocks and trailing his fingers along the stitches at the top of her legs, and then his mouth on her breast, his tongue flicking the nipple, and then nibbling... This was when her mind could grow free and wild and hungry, a different type of free than the everyday working kind.

Now his hand worked forward, to the little fold, the spot that had been burning all day, and he pressed his thumb to it and circled, and she whimpered desperately, clutching his hair.

She felt like she was shattering, and she couldn't stop moaning, and then she went limp, making a weird little groan.

“Gods, that fast?” he said. “I barely did anything.”

“We're not done, are we!?” she cried. “I mean, *that* wasn't sex, was it?”

He met her eyes as she grabbed his arm, and she realized how wild she must look. He looked so close to bursting into laughter, but she had a feeling Ven-Diri men did not burst into laughter during sex if they could possibly help it.

“No,” he said. “I just read that I should touch that spot to get you in the mood so you're more likely to climax during intercourse and you just...went right off. Should I touch it again?” He growled. “I hate to look like I don't know what I'm doing.”

“Well, so do I! But I'm sure you can touch it again—oh! Oh, it's...ooh, it's really sensitive now.” She sat up and gripped his shoulders, but he didn't stop, even when she let out a more strangled moan.

“If you tell me to stop, I'll stop,” he said.

“Don't stop,” she panted.

He put his hand on her shoulder, and slowly pushed her back against the pillows. As he kept caressing his thumb over the folds, slowly, he drew off her final piece of clothing, and she could see how she was made now, with a split that made two little mounds with the fold tucked between them, and then that passage, and it was a little terrifying to her, even through her pleasure, how much power this spot seemed to have.

But she knew the feeling of Dorr's arms around her, and that he would protect her. Everything would be all right now.

She relaxed into Dorr's arms now, as he drew his hand back to finish getting his own clothes off, and she tried to help him again, but mostly just got in the way, and thank the gods he had some oils around, so he didn't have to go find some downstairs.

“Do I put it on me or in you?”

“It’s probably less drippy in me?” Just when they reached some rhythm, they would be reminded that they didn’t know what they were doing.

“True. All right. I’ll go slowly.” Now, a slick finger, inside her, deeper, in a hot, sensitive place that hadn’t even existed yesterday. And then, he drew back his hand and wiped it on a handkerchief, and pressed close to her, very close, but slow, his eyes making sure, and making sure again, but the answer was always yes and she opened her legs wider.

It didn’t hurt, at least not in a bad way, just that she felt very tight around him, but Hara said that was good. And she immediately understood what she had wanted all this time. This feeling—of being so close, even invaded, a little—with a little pain and more than a little awkwardness. She didn’t mind that at all. She could trust him with pain and awkwardness.

“Is it good?” he asked.

“It’s good,” she said. “Very good.”

“We’re in agreement.”

“For once.” She grinned.

But in fact, she didn’t think they would disagree as much these days. Only just the right amount, to keep things interesting. She wanted a boring life with him, but never one where she was actually bored.

And so it was.

Mostly.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

EUSTAN'S SPEECH was quickly immortalized by one of the court musicians, and the song spread across the town, a rallying cry. The men and women went to battle, to win back the port of Duiran, so Laionesse and Otaré could move supplies swiftly again.

Fresh warriors rushed in from every corner, along with the sizable standing army. The city was thrumming with hope, and the certainty that they simply *could not lose*.

And then the results of the battle came, swift and terrible, telepathic cries that flew home like the doom-filled spirits in Una's novels.

The Kalanites took losses, but the Miralem took more. The Kalanites had a newer type of flying machine that came on even faster and higher, which was not properly factored into the strategy, or at least that was the excuse—but maybe they were never going to win, no matter what they tried. Their formations crumpled under the assault, the telepaths were overwhelmed, and—in short, it ended much like other lost battles, only with even less hope for mounting a better offense next time.

It was clear now.

The Miralem could no longer win.

Maybe someday, if they learned to develop the same weapons as the Kalanites. But not anytime soon. Despite some bustling workshops devoted to studying the remains of the

Daramon's machines, they were far from having any idea how to make them so well, or so quickly.

Those were the blunt facts, that Sorla could hardly even bear to hear, so Dorr read the Ven-Diri newspaper and only told her the most crucial tidbits in the gentlest way. Not that anyone could really escape reality.

The city of Laionesse mourned, as the king and queen met with the enemy generals to negotiate peace on the neutral island of Sam Ima. Everyone knew who had the upper hand, and who would come home bruised.

SORLA MOURNED. When they heard the news, she went extremely quiet and then abruptly rushed upstairs. Dorr found her sobbing into a pillow like her heart was broken. When she saw him, she tried to smother her cries.

"Nah, cry it out," he said. "You'll feel better."

"I *can't* feel better. I just don't believe it. I can't believe they could win. I wish you'd killed them all!" Her voice broke, and she started crying again, and he knew there wasn't much he could do right now except hold her.

The terms of the treaty didn't console her much either. In general, they might have been worse, and Dorr suspected many Kalanites would be furious that General Calban was sending food to Otaré and offering housing to Miralem refugees.

But for Fanarlem, very little would change. Fanarlem would remain free in the Miralem lands but not in the Kalanite lands. There would still be those who hunted free Fanarlem for a profit, escape would remain perilous, and few Fanarlem would ever have the resources to attempt it.

"You're safe here," Dorr promised her. "I doubt anything will change in the Ven-Diri-Ashi, or even Laionesse itself. And your family should be safe in Dor-Temerna."

"I know," she whispered. "I know I'll probably be all right, as long as I keep taking reasonable precautions. But all my

people who are still there, more created every day, are treated so badly that I feel like it isn't even fair to be happy." She rubbed her head. "But I know that doesn't do any good either."

"No, it doesn't. Especially when your happiness is so infectious. The best thing you can do is treasure it and share it as much as possible. And you just have to make some peace with it. Every time I touch you with this hand, I know that I'm only here because someone else died. It still doesn't feel quite comfortable, to enjoy that touch, but what good would it do now if I didn't enjoy anything? I'd guess the best thing you can do is just brighten your corner of the world, like you always do."

"That's such a fresh-in-love thing to say," she said. "I don't feel like I'll brighten anyone's day like this."

"But it's true. You know we can't fix this situation. Just like Eustan couldn't fix this war. The Miralem might still prevail someday, but even if we won, the Miralem weren't going to make helping Fanarlem their top priority either."

"I know. Feirin was always saying the best way to get somewhere is to make Fanarlem stronger and cheaper to make, and I guess he's getting some real work done. It seems like that will take a thousand years, but...I guess it was always going to take a thousand years."

"A thousand? Maybe two hundred. Maybe you'll live to see it."

"I don't know if I want to be two hundred years old. Will you be dead?"

"Long dead. That tonic will give me eighty good years and twenty more decrepit ones at best. But if you don't outlive me you won't get the most stylish mourning dresses."

She laughed. Una had been moping about giving up her mourning veil, claiming that she would sell more books if she looked sad and mysterious. But she had met Una's friends and it was true that they all had mourning veils, and Sorla knew that squirmy feeling of wanting to do just what her friends did.

“I don’t want to think about outliving you by eighty years, twenty of them decrepit!” she said.

“Well, then you probably picked the wrong place to be. As soon as my parents return from blessing my last dead soul they’re going to start speculating whether they’ll be alive for round two.”

Sorla laughed. “But wouldn’t one hundred years from now be your normal lifespan anyway?”

“Yes, but I wouldn’t put it past my parents to outlive me again. They’re stubborn that way. But don’t worry. They’ll also love you, I’m sure.”

“I hope so. I’m excited to meet them...but a little nervous.”

At that moment, Dorr heard some noise downstairs, and Rowel called, “Dorrithan, you should come downstairs straight away.”

“Is that your parents now?” Sorla said, looking panicked, which was the same thing he was thinking.

“We have a visitor!” Rowel continued. “Miss Una is entertaining him, but he wishes to see you.”

Now Dorr was thinking maybe it was Varrie, home safe and ready to pay him back for the courage potion, but when they came down, it was a slight, trim man in necromancer robes. He looked more haggard and underfed than when Dorr last saw him, but he was grinning more broadly than Dorr thought was legal for necromancers.

“Saralengar!” he exclaimed.

“Dorr—you are alive and well. Thank the gods, I had very thin hopes when I sent you off to that deadbeat cousin of yours. As you can tell, you were a very ambitious spell, mate.”

“You’re the first person I’ve seen from our regiment since I came back. I’ve been wanting to ask all this time, what the hell happened to me exactly?”

“Shall I pour you some wine?” Una offered.

“Please. The stronger the better. Thank you, love,” Saralengar said.

“You’re quite welcome, even if it is all your fault I can’t wear a mourning veil anymore...!”

Sorla snorted.

“That battle we lost you in was the worst I’d seen,” Saralengar said, settling into one of the chairs. “I’m sorry if I’m making myself overly at home, but I literally just got into town and came straight here.”

“Please do. I’ll sit as soon as I relax,” Dorr said.

“Our regiment was so unlucky that they called us the Doomed Wolves ever after. All the bodies came in and I was looking over the dead ones. Most were the Miralem. I had easy revivals, and then I had you, and well, you’d lost an arm and your leg was going to have to follow. I might have screamed several choice expletives, because the rest of you was still good. You’d just bled out. You would have been an easy revival too, but of course I’m not bringing a man back like that. I just kept thinking, back home in my own lair I’ve got a hundred arms and legs in vats, you know...”

“Your lair?” Sorla asked, like she wasn’t sure she’d caught the word.

“Well, of course, I’m a necromancer. What should I have, a boutique? Nothing like a nice cozy lair lit with two flickering candles. Come visit any time. I always work better when I can just barely see.”

Sorla laughed. She probably thought it was a joke, and it probably wasn’t.

“Then I heard this terrible...gurgly shouting. It was Lorvaran. He was alive and the healers were trying to save him, but...” Saralengar paused. “His face had basically been blown off. And there was internal bleeding. He couldn’t even speak; he was just making these sounds until one of the healers read his mind so she could tell me his thoughts, and he was saying that you two were close in size and to just use him to fix you.”

“Shit.” Dorr rubbed his right hand. “He wasn’t dead?”

“Technically, no, but I swear to you on Dormon Uthra’s bells that his recovery was going to be very long and very difficult, if it was possible at all. His guts were all torn up, he’d lost an eye, and his entire jaw. He could see—one eye and all—that if I could just get a good arm and leg on you, you’d be all right. But the healers would be working hard on him for weeks just to keep him alive. They were already stretched thin. And then—fixing his face might take years.”

“Shit,” Dorr repeated. He closed his eyes. “He was in that kind of pain?”

He felt Sorla draw close and comforting to him, and then Saralengar took Dorr’s right hand.

“He wanted you to go home to your family. It gave him a lot of peace to think he might be giving you a life ahead. We always say, some things men aren’t meant to stay alive for, and his injuries were in that category, and he knew it. You know he’d say it was worth it, seeing you today. We’re Ven-Diri. It’s nothing to get depressed over! He was happy to depart and see what’s next.”

Now Dorr was the one crying, in a silent battle of tightly shut eyes and insistent tears. Saralengar gave him a quick embrace and pat on the shoulder. “It’s good, my friend, all good.”

All that and I wanted to die. What would I have done, on that journey home, if I was alone?

Sorla held him tight, nestling against his side, and he was sure she guessed what he was thinking.

“It is all good,” she said gently.

“Unbelievable about this war, though,” Saralengar said. “All that for fucking nothing.” He finally took the drink from Una. “But I survived. You survived. No mourning veils in my house either. It’s almost a shame not to have any funerals to fuss with. Next winter I’ll go to Drennalyl to offer my blessings to the ones who followed Morarith onward. Are you thinking about it, Dorr?”

“What is Drennalyl?” Sorla asked.

“It’s our haven,” Dorr said. “Our holy city, where you can ask each god to bless your dead loved ones at their own temples. I’m just not that into the religious stuff, but—”

“Yeah, but it’s beautiful, and it has the best night life in the world,” Saralengar said. “There are basically no Miralem unless they’re converts and it’s in the mountains so no one bothers us. It has wonderful energy. And it’s a great place to find a wife, although maybe you don’t need that now. I think you have a good story to tell me.”

“We’re not married...”

“Yet,” Una supplied wickedly.

“Thank you for that, Una.”

“You’re welcome!” she chirped.

“But, yes, this is Sorla Thanneau, and I haven’t proposed to her. Yet. But I think we all know where it’s going.”

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

IN THE WEEKS TO COME, almost everyone came home: soldiers, sailors, sorcerers. The streets seemed to swell with people again, and it was common to see old friends and acquaintances spotting each other across a cobblestone path and crying out with joy.

All of Dorr's friends came home, and there were more parties than Dorr would normally enjoy, but Sorla loved parties, especially these. Everyone liked her and told Dorr he'd found a good match, and the other young women quickly began inviting her to theater dates and they loved taking her out to buy Ven-Diri dresses because when her new and taller body was finished, she had to buy an entirely new wardrobe. Sorla glowed with the attention. He knew now that she had never been welcomed like this anywhere else, and he was quite proud of his friends, appreciating them in a new way.

Everyone started pairing off with a hungry speed, and some couples were marrying quite hastily under rumors of pregnancy, so Dorr was hardly even sure when to propose to Sorla because he didn't want to announce their wedding the same week as someone else.

The one person who never came home was Varrie. No one knew what happened to him, and this clearly weighed on Una. She was still working at the bookstore, in Varrie's place, and every week that he didn't return was certainly noticed there.

"I mean...I just keep thinking about him coming in asking for courage potion, and—he wasn't even ashamed to ask for courage potion! I'd almost say it was brave of him, but he was

always like that. So painfully nice and naive like a baby kitten. Whenever I think of him dying in some horrible way, all scared, it's just like thinking of a baby kitten dying."

"I know," Dorr said. He didn't like thinking of it either. "Hopefully the mixture helped. And no one's found a body yet. Maybe he just got lost."

"He could get lost. I can certainly imagine him wandering off somewhere for weeks just going, 'Hey, fellows? Where'd you go?'" She mimicked him, with some exaggeration.

"Asking random cows if they've seen his regiment," Dorr said, grinning slyly until she laughed.

"Well, I hope so," Una said. "Even if it does mean I have to give up my job, or work with him."

Then Dorr's parents came home from Drennalyl, and that was quite the hubbub. Of course they'd had plenty of letters about Sorla by now, and the meeting was an exhausting but generally joyous occasion.

Dorr loved his parents, but they were both much more like Una. They were talkative, and had stayed in Drennalyl even after they knew Dorr didn't need blessings just because they loved the bustling social life there.

Sorla was there to greet them, of course, looking unusually nervous and wearing entirely black. She liked Ven-Diri clothes, she said, because she seemed to get more respect wearing them.

"That is no surprise," Dorr said. "Lots of Miralem think every last Ven-Diri can talk to the dead. They tend to give us a respectful distance, and if you're dressed like us, you're part of the clan."

Usually, she still had a spot of color, the same way Varrie always did: some bright red ribbons or a short green cloak or light blue stockings. Not today.

"You're Sorla!" his mother said. "Oh, my. How luminous. Very yellow aura. May I touch your hand? Yes, yes, wonderful energy. And I heard you're working at a new bakery here?"

“Yes, my old boss at the magical bakery decided to retire there and open a bakery here,” Sorla said. “He was tired of taking complicated orders from the royals, and he knew I needed a good place to work. We specialize in cakes and pies for the undead and anyone who needs to calm their mood.”

“Is that still all you’re eating, Dorr?” his mother asked. “Just pie?”

“Well, I’m starting to get my taste for things back,” he said. “But it’s mostly still fruits, grains, mild vegetables and herbs. And mostly if Sorla makes them.”

“But I love cooking!” Sorla said. “And I mostly like eating the same things as he does.”

“I was a little shocked when you wrote that you’d let Irlana go,” his father said.

“Well, she wanted to retire anyway,” his mother said. “I imagine she let herself go once Sorla arrived.”

“But I hired her when I was a young man! I would have liked to say goodbye.”

“She lives two blocks away, I’m sure you can,” his mother said. “Don’t harangue Dorr about that after he’s been through so many trials.”

“I wasn’t haranguing anyone. I was just hoping for Irlana’s liver.”

“How was Drennalyl?” Dorr said, hoping to change the subject.

“Oh, *wonderful*,” they both said in unison, and then, “Since you’re managing things here, we wanted to make an announcement to you all... We’ve decided to move back there once we’ve finished settling up affairs here. We’ll get the business in your name properly, and your mother can finally set up her medium business.”

“And your father can finally get into acting.”

Dorr shot Sorla a look of relief. That was precisely the right amount of distance to have with his parents. “Wonderful,” he said.

This also clearly meant they needed to plan a wedding. It was time to formally propose.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

SORLA WOKE on a Monday morning in August, thinking of the pastries she would make that day with all the summer peaches, juggling that with shaking off a bad dream, but she'd always been prone to those. It was, at least, easier to move on when her return to the waking world was such a wonderful sight: a bed crowded with wyvern, dog, and man. Usually she was the first up, but not today.

Dorr was sitting up, apparently waiting for her to awaken. He had a determined look in his eye.

"We're going on an outing today," he said. "I told Rath you wouldn't be in."

She wriggled with excitement because she knew just what this was. It wasn't exactly a secret. They'd already been sharing a bedroom for months. But a wedding was still special. Her parents never got a wedding.

She knew Dorr must have something special planned today.

"Wear the outfit you like best," he said, as he reached for his best clothes himself. Sorla didn't even have to think twice before she put on a newly acquired dress with a collar made of fine black lace, beautifully edged with a small ruffle that framed her neck, and gently puffed sleeves with a similar ruffle that fell just past her elbows. She always preferred her sleeves just past the elbow so she could work dough without getting them dirty. The waist was nipped and the skirt was full so she looked like she had more of a figure, and she had new

shoes with a small heel and pointed toes and leather clasps that looked like bows. She put her only set of jeweled clips in her hair to hold her curls behind her ears, and spun from the mirror to show Dorr.

“Is this good enough for your plans?”

“Well, I hope so,” he said, mysteriously.

They took a carriage to the fancy shopping district where Sorla had only been once with Una. They hadn’t bought anything, of course. These shops were north of the palace and were patronized by both royal families and well-to-do merchants and the like, and currently they were the place to buy the new imports.

“We’re not buying Kalanite goods, are we?” she asked, even though she knew he wouldn’t do that.

“No, I checked. Well, there was a bit of money that went to the Kalanites, at one point, but this is domestic product. Have you guessed where I’m taking you yet?”

“No, but maybe that’s because there is so much to look at that I can’t think straight,” Sorla said, suppressing a sigh of yearning.

It was hard to resist Kalanite things, to be sure. She clutched Dorr’s glove like he might tether her from going into any of the stores, her arm extending out when she flitted toward shop windows. There was a store of soaps and toiletries, and although Sorla didn’t have to bathe very often, it was certainly nice to have gentle soap that smelled of lavender or rose when she had to wash her hair. And it was also nice to have white powdered cleanser, all ready-made in a shaker jar for scouring sinks and stubborn dishes.

“Gods, don’t look so dreamy-eyed over cleaning products,” he scolded. “Of all the things.”

“But I would use all of those! There is nothing like a gentle, lovely-smelling cleaning product.”

“It just makes me feel like you clean too much.”

“I really don’t mind. Especially cleaning up after you because you also clean up after me. It’s very romantic.”

“I never have to clean up after you; you never leave a mess!” he said.

“You have,” she assured him. “On the rare chance that I fall asleep with a mess, you always take care of it. And more importantly, you—”

“Clean up after Una,” he finished for her. “That is true. Well, she’ll move into her own little place soon enough, if she doesn’t get married. I thought her and Saralengar were hitting it off, but it just fizzled.”

“She seems picky,” Sorla agreed.

“Well, no wonder, always reading about men that don’t exist who never have chilblains or indigestion or bad hair or bad moods...”

“And they’re independently wealthy,” Sorla said.

“With the finest horses and estates...”

“And just that one little problem of turning into a beast at night or having a poltergeist attached to them,” Sorla said.

“A minor nuisance, at worst.”

There was a new shop to sell expensive mechanical objects, such as phonographs and the circular discs that went with them to hold the music. One of them was playing tinny music that could be heard through the open door. Velsa would have loved that, but Sorla was more enthralled by the ranges, compact and shiny compared to the big clay beast she was working with now.

“We’ve gone from cleaning products to ogling ovens,” Dorr said. “It’s time for the surprise.” He led the way, urging her not to linger at shop windows now, to a little storefront with a sign that said, “Photography—Lifelike Portraits.”

Sorla’s mouth fell open. “Are we getting a portrait?”

“Yes, indeed. I remembered that you wanted one. I didn’t even know what they were, but I stopped by here a few weeks

ago to find out, and I've since learned that they are wonderfully unsettling. We'll probably start a fashion to get them."

"Meirin thinks they are even more unsettling for Fanarlem," Sorla said. "She has a photograph of herself and she hates it. She thinks she looks like a big dead doll."

"Even better!" Dorr gave her his small, teasing smile. "Maybe I'll look like a corpse and you'll look like a big dead doll and everyone will be envious."

Based on what Sorla knew of the Ven-Diri so far, this was probably true. They loved to be vaguely disturbed, that was certain, but once you expected it, it was part of the charm.

They walked into the store and a sweet woman of nondescript age, her hair in two long braids, greeted them cheerfully. "You came back, sir! With your girl!"

"Yes. I have the appointment for eleven."

"Oh, and I'm so happy about this. We just got in a new type of camera that has a much faster exposure, and it really takes care of that weird stiff appearance in the photographs I showed you the other day. I haven't photographed a Fanarlem but I think it's going to do a much better job at capturing your expression. You can smile now!"

"Smile?" Dorr made a face and tugged at his cheek. "No, no. That would make for a very strange portrait."

"Not at all! They're so cheerful. They really capture the moment. I'll show you." She took out a folder and spread out some photographs. Sorla gasped aloud at how astonishingly lifelike they were. It was true—the people weren't stiff like the photograph by her parents' bed that Velsa only kept because it was all they had of Grau's flesh and blood body, but grinning, smirking, even laughing, and that liveliness and excitement of getting the photograph captured was also reflected in their eyes.

Dorr still looked unsure. "Do you still have the older..."

"Camera?" she finished.

“Dorr! I don’t really want to look like a dead doll,” Sorla said, elbowing him. “Not if we can do better. Do you really want a photograph of me like *that*?”

“You have a point, but I’m not going to smile. Just imagine if everyone had a portrait of themselves *smiling* on the wall.”

“I guess it could seem flippant, or something,” Sorla said. “But I like the smiling ones.”

“If you really want to smile, it’s fine,” he said.

“No, I won’t. We’ll have a proper portrait.”

“Maybe someday you can get another one,” the woman said. “They’ll probably get a little cheaper eventually. I can take you back and get you settled right now; my last appointment is already done, as you can see. Watch that step there.” She led the way to a room in the back with ample windows, set high in the wall, casting generous light on a big backdrop painted with apple trees. Apple trees were good luck to the Miralem so it made sense that they would want them in their portraits. In the middle of the room was a box that Sorla recognized as the “camera”.

“You can both stand, or both sit, or any other configuration,” the woman said, gesturing to a few chairs around. “Unfortunately I only have the one backdrop. It’s all very new, of course.”

“Where did you learn to make photographs?” Sorla asked.

“Oh, my father was a trader and I used to go to the Kalanite cities with him as a young woman, before the war,” she said. “I was enraptured by them. He bought me a camera even though my grandmother still thinks they’re some sort of demonic device.” She laughed.

“In Ven-Diri portraits, normally you would sit and I would stand beside you,” Dorr said. “To show that I would protect you. But you might not like me looming over you.”

“I do think I’d rather stand with you,” Sorla said. “I like showing off my extra half a foot.”

“I thought you’d say so,” he said. “And it suits us.”

They got themselves arranged, with a few gentle suggestions from the young woman, and as she returned to the camera to take the photograph, Dorr took out a small box.

“You knew it was coming,” he said. “But I hope it still feels fresh...like every day with you does. Will you marry me, Sorla? I want to finish what we’ve started...and spend my days with you until I’m dead for good...if you’ll have me.”

Sorla had known it was coming, and yet he was right—this moment did still feel as fresh as if she’d never imagined it once. She didn’t think she would have a photograph...or an absolutely stunning necklace of gleaming jet, in a shape like wyvern wings.

“I will have you,” she said. “Of course I will. With all my heart!”

The only trouble with it all was that when the photograph was developed, they were both smiling, and Dorr never did allow it to be hung on the wall, but kept it tucked in a black folder like some forbidden thing, only to be shown—with embarrassment—to their most trusted friends.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

SORLA RUSHED to the door the moment she heard the knock, brushing past the excited barking of Silk and the excited squawking of Blueberry, and opened it with barely a pause before she was in her parents' arms. Her wedding week had finally arrived, and her family with it.

"It's so good to see you," she said, feeling close to crying.

"Oh, Sorla, you look amazing! This height really suits you!" Velsa said.

"And this skin looks great. What genius invented that?" Grau said, inspecting her arm.

"You were born for dad humor, I'll say that," Sorla said.

"What? He's not a dad. He is sort of your father but he's a young and sexy sorcerer!" Velsa cried.

"Mhm." Grau sounded skeptical. "I'll take Sorla's words as a compliment because my father had no sense of humor at all, and we would have been better off if he did. The skin is perfect. Even the way it moves. Flex your hand, Sorla."

Dorr walked up to them as she was dutifully flexing her hand while Grau stared at it closely.

"This is my father, the potion maker," she said. "Grau Thanneau. And my mother Velsa. And this is Dorr, and..."

"My parents and Una will be here shortly," Dorr said. "Good to finally meet you."

“You too,” Grau said. “Thank you for giving Sorla a good, safe place. It’s been a hard year, but it sounds like things are going really well in your immediate sphere.”

Sorla was so happy to have them here, and they felt just as familiar and dear to her as always. Velsa was still wearing the same old jacket over a new dress, and she still had the same soulful eyes, glancing around with a hint of concern because she would want to be entirely sure that all was right in Sorla’s world. Grau had the air of good humor and good fortune that he always seemed to have even when one could argue a lot of unfortunate things had befallen him. He still wore clothes that looked more Kalanite than Miralem, but as a Fanarlem he could get away with it. Fashion was not something he spared much thought for.

Dorr showed them the apothecary shop, and Grau took a whiff of all the tonics with a potion-maker’s interest in the trade. They showed off the house which was now theirs. Dorr’s parents had gifted it to them for the wedding, with the only caveat being that they had to pay for Una to have her own apartment if she was not getting anything of the house. This was an acceptable deal for everyone.

Sorla brought out some of her pumpkin pastry, and inevitably they talked about the aftermath of the war, which weighed on everyone even though it was true that life in Laionesse itself was often downright merry.

“Well, I’m meeting with Mr. Trinavel tomorrow,” Grau said, “and we’re finalizing a deal for the new skin—Veltrix.”

“It should be Grautrix,” Velsa said.

“But that sounds terrible,” Grau said. “I wanted to call it Petal-Soft Knife-Hard Skin so it would be obvious, but Velsa thought it needed a name, like a baby.”

“Like a *product*,” Velsa said. “And we have some very exciting plans with the money. We just bought a house on the hill outside Dor-Temerna with seven acres and we’re starting a little school for Fanarlem who want to develop their sorcery and telepathy!”

“A school!?! For kids?” Sorla was shocked by this. Neither of her parents had a great affinity for kids.

“No, no, no. Not *little* kids. Just the reasonable ones,” Velsa said. “At least twelve. At *least*.”

“And only Fanarlem, so we won’t have to feed them,” Grau said.

“Although they can eat, if they want to,” Velsa hastily added. “I think we should probably teach them upper class table manners.”

“That’s wonderful!” Sorla said. “You’re both very good at taking care of older children. And making them feel loved. So...”

“It isn’t what I thought we’d be doing,” Velsa said, “but if we can’t put a stop to what’s going on with Fanarlem and the Kalanites, we feel like the best thing we can do is help Fanarlem learn to wield real power. We’ve always noticed how our Fanarlem friends are a lot more anxious about strangers or traveling, when Grau and I never are, because our magic is such an equalizer. We know we can take care of bandits ourselves.”

“I do envy you that,” Sorla said.

“But it takes a long time,” Grau said. “Here it took me eight years to crack that potion.”

“Sorla can make calm cakes now,” Dorr said.

“They’re very weak,” Sorla lamented.

“You know you have to start somewhere,” Grau said.

“Or I can just do what I do,” said Sorla, who really had no plans to learn magic beyond the calm cakes when she could be spending her time perfecting new recipes.

Then, Dorr’s parents arrived and there was a fresh round of introductions and refreshments and a wall of Tondan family chatter that left Sorla’s parents in silence, but that was typical of them in crowds. She knew they mainly wanted to see that Sorla had a place in the family. Velsa used to gently tell her that although Ruven’s family was very nice, Ruven himself

just wasn't quite right for her, and Sorla would feel like *what does she know?*

But now, everything felt right, and in two days' time, she would marry the man she loved.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

THE NIGHT BEFORE THE WEDDING, Velsa, Sorla's mother in law, and Una led Sorla to a small cottage on the Ven-Diri temple grounds, within the graveyard. Sorla had long assumed this was a shed for tending the grounds until they started planning the wedding and Dorr told her this was where the spirits of the dead would bless the marriage bed, and in theory if they were capable of it, a spirit might choose to be reborn with them as parents.

"Back in the old days, this is where we'd tell you what sex was!" Dorr's mother said. "Thankfully we don't usually leave brides so uninformed and inexperienced these days. I know you're already well-versed, same as I was when I got married."

"Besides, books tell us absolutely everything now," Una said.

"Probably not everything, Una," Dorr's mother smirked. "I might have to talk to you yet."

"No, no, no. I'll talk to my friends."

"I love this custom," Velsa said. "It's such a cozy nest. I'm not sure I'm quite used to all the graves and the black..." She glanced out the window. "But it's certainly a better idea to have the sex before the wedding night. I was at Grau's sister's wedding and it was a horror."

"Yes, this gives you time to run away!" Dorr's mother laughed.

The cottage was like a room at a better inn, with a large curtained bed, a fireplace, and a few lanterns. According to custom, the room was decked out in flowers and greenery, some black silk underthings on the bed for her to change into, and a flagon of honey wine that made Sorla wish she could know what it was like to feel its effects.

She took off all her clothes, except for her stockings, because she certainly wanted to feel Dorr fuss with her little buttons. She took one moment to admire herself in the mirror, because she was still quite in love with her new body. She finally felt perfectly like herself.

Then she donned the silk underwear, poured some honey wine for herself and for Dorr, savoring its sweetness if nothing else, and got into bed just as he came in. The women would have been guarding the outside until he showed up, and now they would all leave them alone until morning.

She brought him the cup of wine.

He sloughed off his coat. “Gods, you’re beautiful.”

“We finally made it.” She smiled.

“We’ve certainly attended enough other weddings this year. But I’m glad we gave it the proper engagement period.”

“Well, we had to wait for your parents to leave.”

He smiled. “Yes. Exactly.”

“Not that we really waited...”

“And whose fault was that?”

“Mine. All mine.” She pulled him to bed and he drank the wine on the way. They fell against the covers, kissing. He felt her up and she tried to strip him down, and then he had to make a fire first because it was cold.

By now, she’d had many months to learn his body and hers at the same time, and she knew when to be rough and when to be gentle. They were pretty good at talking things out, and even better at reading each other’s eyes and hands.

At first, it was slow caressing as the room warmed, drinking the wine, discussing the amusing little dramas that happened whenever crowds of family and friends got together.

But before long, his fingers slipped under her clothes and he handled her roughly, knowing just where she liked to be touched and how hard, while she grabbed a fistful of his hair, took another swig of wine, and kissed him with the taste of wine on their tongues. She kissed him deep and didn't care if her tongue felt like a wad of cloth in his mouth. He could deal with it. She liked the taste of him.

She was gasping, growing tense, and he stripped off the silk underwear free, tossing it off somewhere. She yanked off his trousers and his undershorts in one go and slapped her hands to his buttocks, wanting him hard, deep, and immediately.

If the spirits were watching, she imagined they were quite satisfied.

IN THE MORNING they were awakened at the crack of dawn by the clattering of bones knocking together as the wedding guests called out for them to wake up and get married already.

"We have to put up with it," Dorr said. "This is about the only time the Ven-Diri cut loose—or get up this early."

"I know it's only fair when we did the same thing at their weddings...but..." She forced herself to sit up and Dorr still hadn't moved an inch.

"No," he decided, closing his eyes. "Sleep."

"You have to!"

"Tell them I'm feeling extra dead."

"You don't look extra dead. You have a glow."

"Ugh."

He finally dragged himself out of bed, took his tonic, and donned his wedding suit. The flashiest piece was a black velvet coat with silver buttons and the thin edge of a white

lace shirt at the cuffs and collar, above a black silk necktie. It was very handsome, but she could tell Dorr did not want to wear white lace, not today, and never again.

Then he helped her to dress, which was a Ven-Diri custom. A husband played servant to his wife on the morning of the wedding and then opened the door of the cottage to present her to all their family and community, to show his pride and protection of her.

Although some of it still had a whiff of the male-dominated Daramon world, Sorla hadn't argued with it. She found she rather liked the traditions, just for one day, knowing they had been followed for centuries, because Fanarlem had no traditions or families, and she wanted to feel the fabric of it weaving around her, the spirits of ancestors blessing her, and even the tomb waiting to hold her bones next to Dorr's.

Her gown was a shimmering black silk, a gift from Dorr's grandmother, with heirloom jewels given to her by many different family members. A shawl of sheer silk, embroidered with a wolf skull for Dorr's regiment and maternal line, rested lightly over her shoulders. Sorla was starting to appreciate the limited Ven-Diri color palette and the love of emblems, jewelry, extravagant draping and fringes and veils. It had an air of mysterious magic about it.

They stepped out, and everyone started to sing a procession song, "Hey-la, Marry in Autumn". Sorla was fairly sure it had the same tune as a Miralem drinking song.

They were cheered along to the temple, up to the dais, and family and friends filed in behind them, clacking animal bones. Then they settled into their more usual solemnity, and Sorla looked up at the flickering lantern-light on the faces of the gods. She had been to the services a few times now, and she was learning the stories, of how Morarith was once a lost soul who first lit his lantern to guide a kind and grieving widow to find her husband in the spirit realm, and how Dormon Uthra gave the gift of revival to his followers so his daughter would stop crying over the dead for one day.

She agreed with Dorr that she would never believe all this had actually happened, but she was starting to enjoy this collective story of a big messy family of skeletons and spirits, not unlike real life.

“Dormon Uthra, lord of the spirit world, I present to you two mortals on this day...”

She saw all the faces of friends, family and neighbors she was getting to know. Una and her annoying friend Brindy and her very serious friend Vira, many of Dorr’s old friends, Auntie Mel and various cousins, some more distant than others, and every undead person in town, who loved her pastries. Rowel was minding Silk and kept slipping her treats and scratching her ears, trying not to look as if he was enjoying this too much.

The corner of the temple where her family sat was very small, but Velsa was watching, twisting her hands, looking very close to happy crying. Grau was covering his mouth with his hand, so probably the same. Velsa had Blueberry, who kept getting alarmed at one lady’s fancy hat throughout the ceremony, and fanning out whenever he spotted it. Sorla had to suppress her laughter every time. There was also good old Rath and even he looked close to tears. He was probably thinking of his late daughter, she realized.

They sent invitations to Seldon and his new bride, Eustan, and Arn, but she already knew they wouldn’t attend. The prince and the former general could not just drop in on weddings unnoticed. Their presence would generate so much talk that no one would think of Sorla and Dorr anymore.

But with a jolt, she realized that there were four people sitting behind Grau and Velsa, wearing cloaks, that no one else seemed to see—but they were familiar. When she met their eyes, Prince Seldon gave her a warm smile, and Kanalem wiped away her own happy tears. When Seldon saw her surprise, he pointed at Eustan.

Eustan—fair and shining again, and giving her and Dorr a nod of gratitude, and Arn all silver-eyed, enigmatic charm beside him.

Thank you, Eustan said, just a brief brush of his mind to theirs.

Of course— Sorla realized. *Eustan is using his telepathic power to make sure no one sees—so they don't draw any attention away from us.*

In a matter of seconds, they all exchanged an understanding, but before the service ended, they had slipped out again, back to their own world of the palace.

It was a relief not to dream of princes anymore.

“Dorrithan Tondan, what can you offer Sorla that she may carry with her from today until the day she ascends to the spirit realms?”

“My loyalty...my protection, whether you want it or not.” He smiled. “Poor attempts at humor. Hard work whenever hard work is needed. Devotion...admiration...and love.”

“Sorla Thanneau, what can you offer Dorr?”

“Trust. And...gratitude for that trust. My joy, and my cooking, and teasing, and more pet wyverns than you probably will want. My devotion...and dedication...and love. Of course.”

“May the gods let your love live on beyond death, but within my powers, your union is blessed upon this earth,” the priest declared. “You are now joined as husband and wife.”

Right here, all was well. She was ready to properly begin a happily boring life.

THANK YOU FOR READING! I have already had a couple people ask me if Varrie is coming back and yes! Of course there is more in the works...lots more. I've been indie publishing since 2016 and I started with Velsa's story and then took over five years just to “write to market”. It was fun, but it didn't have my soul. This world and these people are real to me. I dream about them and think about them in idle moments, and that is really what I want as a writer. I love worlds that live and breathe, like the ones I adored as a kid and teen: Elfquest,

Valdemar, Middle Earth, manga that run for a zillion years... I've been saving up my money so I could buy myself time to do my own thing. Quirky, cross-genre things that are dear to my heart.

So this is a shift for me, although I am still planning to release some more steamy fairy tales too. They're what I'm best known for as I write this, and I have always loved fairy tales. I would love to see Fairy Tale Heat reach volume 20.

Still, this is MY world. It started when I was 11, with the Ven-Diri (then known creatively as "Dark Worlders") and the "doll people". It's been so fun to revisit them and develop out their death gods a bit more. I have tons of extra information on this, so if you are the type who loves the "Companion" book to long-running book series, consider supporting my Patreon, where I plan to give some background info on the characters and their world, and maybe even some glimpses at embarrassing teenage comics. (Man, shit got weird back then.) Currently there is only one tier for just \$3 a month.

<https://patreon.com/user?u=34222724>

And of course you are always very welcome at my Facebook group!

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Lidiya writes quirky fantasy novels and fairy tales, has an entire wall of manga in her bedroom, and works at a bookstore in the mountains in a town fit for a Ghibli movie. She has three weird cats and buys organic hot cocoa mix in bulk.

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