

# The Voice Inside My Head

Keira Aro

This story is a work-in-progress and is not representative of a final product. Sections may be added, removed, or changed at any point. Readers are encouraged to contact the author with any issues or concerns found with the content of this story.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

This story may contain descriptions of events or scenarios that may cause an adverse mental reaction to some readers. Readers who have a history of such reactions are encouraged to either not read this story, or have a trusted friend pre-screen it.

©Copyright 2017 Keira Sylæ Aro. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law. For permission requests, write to the author at the address below:

Keira Aro  
1579 Twin Oaks Drive  
Toledo, Ohio 43615  
United States of America  
keira@calref.net

# Contents

<b>I</b>	<b>Scribe</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>The Storm</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>The Statue</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>Awake</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Sapphire</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>5</b>	<b>Summons</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>The Return</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Silence</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>The Tower</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>9</b>	<b>Regret</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>10</b>	<b>Bells</b>	<b>63</b>



# Prologue

Saol. Our world. A continent, blessed by the gods, that has witnessed the birth of humanity, and cares for it to this day. Beyond the glimmering shorelines, only endless waves and storms to tear apart the ships unlucky-or foolish-enough to stray too far away from the continent.

The first men and women of Saol faced a difficult challenge. Harsh deserts and frozen mountains littered the landscape, and savage beasts roamed the forests. However, the Six Gods saw the devotion of these people, and granted upon them the gift of magic. Children grew up to become wizards, their hands spewing flame and ice and lightning, and thus civilization was born. With the terrors of the night whimpering away from the arcane force of the wizards, villages became towns, and soon kingdoms rose and fell through the ages. The land of Saol grew rich from the history of wars fought, children raised, great works of art created. For thousands of years humankind lived and died.

But there was one place humans could not venture into, and expect to survive. In the center of Saol, mountains higher than all the others, colder than all the others, eluded the ever-growing grasp of humanity. None who entered its valleys were ever seen again, and soon the Sapphire Mountains became known as a haunted, terrible place. Unfortunate prisoners were marched into the valleys to die, and kingdoms grew along its foothills, knowing naught but ice wolves dared to cross the glaciers and frozen forests of the mountains.

Until one day, when an expedition was formed, a force of a hundred men and women, determined to find a passage through the hostile land. Even armed with the latest in wizarding knowledge, half died in the first month. The next month, half of the remaining were gone as well, their corpses left in the snow to be torn apart by scavenging beasts. A grim situation, but out of the darkness a light shone, a second gift of the gods. They had seen the struggle of the men and women of the expedition, and gave upon them their second gift to humanity: Magery. It was like the power the wizards knew, but...different. Things never before thought possible, even with wizarding powers, were achieved in seconds. But the gods would not give this gift without conditions. They decreed, that this power would course through the veins of those strong enough to wield it, but only for those born in the frozen hell of the Sapphire Mountains.

But with the power of magery, eternal winter was pushed back. Great enchantments bound to the power of leystones warmed the air and diverted winds, and for the first time grass grew in the valleys. Although the high mountaintops were still inhospitable, life erupted along the chill mountain streams. The ice wolves and other horrors, their names long forgotten to us now, were beaten back from the mountains, their existence relegated to myths and stories told to children.

And thus the nation of Sapphire was born.

**Part I**

**Scribe**



# Chapter 1

## The Storm

I glance up the road ahead as the lightning flashes again, closer than before. Of course a spring storm would strike, on today of all days. The last thing I want is to be caught in the open when the hailstones started falling. Another glance, this time behind me. Nothing. Just more of the dense chest-high foothills brush, basically useless as shelter.

I'd started my journey back from Dawn, a small city on the coast, three days ago. The Lord there had needed scribe work done, but his court scribe had fallen ill. Normally I didn't travel outside of Sapphire for work, but it was hard to turn down a nobleman's gold. Two weeks of fairly-simple transcription, mostly just keeping a record of Lord Dawn's court, had left a decent pile of silvers in my coinpurse, definitely worth closing shop back home for the time being. Which was all good and well, but not much help for my present situation, stuck in the open with black clouds menacing in the sky behind me. I turned off the road, the brush grabbing at my cloak as I pushed through it. There was a stand of trees, maybe half a mile away, tucked into a small valley. Better than nothing.

Light patters of hail start falling just as I reach the trees. I toss my pack under the largest, then take a look around at the area. There were only maybe ten trees, tall conifers, the ground covered in a thick carpet of brown needles. The whole valley couldn't be more than a stone's throw wide, with relatively steep walls, not quite small cliffs, but definitely close. The hail strengthens, a wind blowing through the valley. The trees were better than nothing, but not by much in this mess. I continue searching, a

big rock right next to a tree would be better, but I wa-wait, what's that?

In the wall of the valley, a cave? Definitely an opening of some sort. Probably with a bear sleeping inside, with any luck. Actually, given the tight-looking entrance, probably not. Even if there was a bear, I didn't have much of a choice, really, with the hail strengthening - now the size of southern grapes falling from the sky. I certainly didn't want to be around when the hailstones were as big around as apples. I run back to my pack and bring it with me back to the cave, and squeeze through the narrow entrance, dragging my pack behind me.

The inside is much more spacious, compared to the glorified crack I had entered through. Enough space to stretch my arms out and just barely touch each wall. The ceiling of the cave was rough, with broken-off stalactites. I look down, seeing to my surprise the ashes of an old fire staining the gray rock black. I bend down, feeling the ashes crumble away. It didn't seem recent, maybe a couple months old? Even with the light from outside, I couldn't see the back of the cave, just darkness stretching away and down. Too dark to go searching without light.

"Well, this'll have to do," I say to myself, dropping my pack and squeezing back outside to grab firewood.

The firelight flickers off the cave walls, smoke filtering out the cracklike entrance and into the raging hailstorm. I'd tried to sleep, but I kept waking up, covered in sweat and shifting around uncomfortably. After sitting under my blankets for half an hour staring blankly at the cave ceiling, I finally got up. "It's not like I have anything better to do," I mutter, staring towards the back of the cave. Probably nothing but rocks, but maybe a little walk would set my mind at ease and let me sleep properly. I fashion a bit of firewood into a makeshift torch and start walking.

The cave slopes down, heading further into the darkness. Further in, the ground becomes gravelly; it looked like all the stalactites that once adorned the ceiling had been broken off into little chunks. Probably not naturally, I imagine. Even with the stalactites broken off, it's cramped with the low ceiling, and I'm not exactly tall to begin with. As I continue walking, the cave walls transition from a natural smoothness to rough-hewn stone, obvious pickaxe marks remaining from where someone extended the cave. Further along, the rough excavation gives way to squared off walls of rough

---

brick supported by ancient-looking timbers. At least the ceiling was slightly higher.

I glance back, the light of my campfire barely visible. It didn't seem like it was that much of a walk? I square my shoulders and continue on into the cave - tunnel, I guess, my fingers idly brushing at the small dagger on my belt. I felt a bit nervous but for some reason I keep walking, my torch the sole illumination as I pressed forward. Ahead, I saw the tunnel open into a room.

I poke my head in. At this point the floor and walls had switched from rough bricks to smoothed and polished slabs of the same cave stone. The room, maybe twenty feet around, was nonetheless ringed in ornate columns that reached up to the high ceiling. In the center a round waist-high pedestal stood, made of the same stone as everything else, but with the finest stonework I had seen yet, with a small statue-like object placed on it. No entrance to the room besides the one I stood in. Every flat surface was covered in a thick layer of dust; while it seemed like there was some airflow in the cave and the tunnel, the air in here was dead still. For some reason I felt like shivering, but it wasn't cold. In fact, the entire cave had been...not pleasantly warm, but certainly not as cold as it should have been.

I step towards the pedestal, dust billowing up around my boots. No signs of any other travelers. I guess whoever built that old campfire didn't go down here. Another step, more dust. Although it's also covered like everything else in the room, I can see the little statue glinting slightly in the torchlight. Gold? Can't be, not out here. Another step, the step echoing around the columns. My eyes are weary from lack of sleep, and I feel a headache coming on. Another step, as I get closer I can see writing carved into the pedestal. Another step, and I'm there, looking down at the statue.

It's maybe a foot tall, a golden statue of a figure, a man, leaning casually on a long spear, too long to be usable it seemed, not that I was an expert on spear usage. A tassel hangs below the point of the spear, frozen in time by the sculptor's chisel - or whatever goldsmiths used. Hammer? Whatever tools they used, they were good at using them. I blew away some of the dust, leaning down to look closer. Even the buttons of the man's coat - a uniform of some sort, but of no cut I'd seen before - were captured in shining gold.

My attention turns to the pedestal, and more specifically the writing on it. I squint. Unlike the fine craftsmanship of the statue and the pedestal, the letters carved into it were downright shoddy and rough. Plus, they didn't make any sense. I could recognize the letters, but they were in some sort of unknown-to-me language. I cough and wipe away the sweat building on my forehead, still shivering slightly.

Looking around at the room, I confirm that there is nothing in the room besides some pillars, the entrance I came in, and this statue. I reach into my pocket and pull out a pencil and a scrap of paper - any scribe worth their salt had pockets full of note-taking scraps - and jot down the strange writing in the torchlight. Maybe once I got home to Sapphire I could see if someone in the wizards' tower or one of the temples know anything. I fold the scrap up and return it to my pocket, and stare again at the statue. I don't know how long it had been down there, but if the dust was any indication it had been quite awhile. That amount of gold would certainly fetch a decent price, and surely a merchant or noble might pay more to put it in their study or something. Money isn't exactly easy to come around these days, especially during the slow season. I wipe my hands off on my shirt and reach out to grab it.

For a brief second I realize that grabbing a mysterious object hidden inside a cave, surrounded by mysterious writing, might be a bad idea. But then my fingers touch the cool metal of the statue.

## Chapter 2

# The Statue

I tried to pull back, I really did. But I couldn't-I can't. My fingers are locked around the golden statue, both hands; at some point I let go of my torch. If I could see my fingers in the dimness I'm certain they'd be white from how hard I was grasping.

Inside my head I am being filled with emotions. Joy, sadness, rage, sorrow, lust, boredom, and more. I can't think, my head pounding as I am mentally assaulted. An eternity passes, if I could scream I would have screamed the entire time. Another eternity passes, more complex emotions begin to rise out of the cacophony of color inside my thoughts. Greed, hope, courage, love. My head is pounding, exploding a million times.

The gods must have rebirthed the world tenfold by the time it died down. Died down is a bad way to put it. I got used to it, pushed it down, the flood of emotions that filled my soul to its breaking point. Under my fingers the statue has dissolved into dust, my fingers feverishly grasping only the thick air of the cave.

The echo of the torch hitting the tiles of the floor startles me. I feel myself looking down at it, slowly blinking. I feel myself looking at my hands. I need to grab the torch. My hands refuse to move. They won't grab it. I...I can't move. I can't even breathe. I feel a sense of panic inside me, but it's different. I am panicking because I can't control my body. At the same time I feel myself panicking that I could. What? I struggle to breathe, ordering my lungs to fill to no avail. I try again. The panic grows, but at the same time rage at myself for trying. Breathe. My vision is beginning

to dim, and my panic is replaced with dread. This is how I'm going to die? A cruel joke by some ancient wizard?...No. I'm not going to die in a cave barely twenty years old.

For the first time since entering the cave, my emotions are crystal clear: determination. I pour all my willpower into taking a breath. Whatever has happened to me, I am better. I feel my lungs expanding, filling my chest with the still air of the room. My heart is pounding its way out of my chest. Relief fills me as I take another breath. It's when I also feel anger and sadness that I realize.

I'm not the only person in my head.

*Nice try*, I think to myself, wondering who-what-they are. A flash of anger. Rage. They didn't like my smugness, apparently. So that means they can feel my thoughts too. I grab the torch and raise it up to illuminate the pedestal, looking for any sign of the statue. Nothing, just a dust-free bit of pedestal where it once stood. I look again at the rough writing carved around where the statue was, and to my surprise I feel the other...being...go shockingly empty. For a moment I feel nothing from them, then slowly, something new. Fear.

By the time I return back to the cave entrance, the storm has passed. Strange, it certainly didn't feel that long. As quickly as I can, I grab my pack and exit the cave. Melting hailstones litter the area, broken foothill brush and tree branches covering the ground. A glimmer of...something...comes from the bundle of emotions in my head as I walk towards the road. Spending half the day in a cave meant I would have to catch up today, and I was already yawning from the lack of sleep. I grit my teeth and get walking.

As I make my way towards the mountains along the narrow road, I mentally poke at the bundle of emotions, trying to figure out what it is. I could feel it trying to respond, but it didn't seem like I could get more than overall feeling from it-irritation, sadness, and anger were most common, but beyond that, nothing. Even "thinking" words at it garnered little response; from my experimenting while walking, I figured it probably felt me the same way I felt it-a bundle of emotions sitting inside...whatever it had for a head. Did it think of my head as its head? The thought makes me shiver.

Ahead of us - me - a convoy of merchant wagons heading our way. As

they get closer I step to the side of the road, stopping as the head wagon slows to a halt and its driver waves at me, "Hello there," he yells in a deep baritone.

"How goes it?" I respond, glancing at the convoy. Out of Sapphire, I noted, recognizing the merchant's name, Greydale Trading, painted on the lead wagon. There were four wagons in total, open-topped, boxes of cargo covered in oilskins against the rain.

"Well," the driver responds, "I'm afraid we've lost our map in the hail. How far until the next village?"

"About three day's walk behind me," I reply, frowning as I point down the road, "Maybe two days for you lot? There's a waystop you should hit by sundown, good place to be if there's an overnight storm."

"Aye, safe travels," the driver says, nodding at me and getting his horses moving again. I wait until the entire convoy is past to continue walking, an uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. The bundle let off a burst of confusion. *This is Greydale's main run. They know the route better than any, certainly more than some random traveler on her first trip outside of Sapphire,* I think at it, knowing full well it couldn't understand me. I shrug my pack into a better position on my shoulders and continue walking.

I manage ten hours of walking before I can take no more. Staggering into a creekside clearing just off the road, in between yawns, I get my pack off and lay next to it in the afternoon sun, resting my head on the lumpy mass. I'll get an early start tomorrow, at least. I'm asleep a minute after closing my eyes.

*I'm at home, downstairs in the office-like shop I call my own. I refill my pen with chromatic cobalt blue ink, quickly transcribing the last line of Wizard Ulra's messy manuscript into precise calligraphy. A scattering of sand, and it's dry. Three hundred pages all and all, complete except for illustrations and binding. My first big job, flawless so far. Plus, now I can say I know something about leystones, other than what they are and how to find them. Ulra didn't cover that in his notes. Ulra didn't cover a lot of things, to be honest, but I suppose I wasn't the target audience.*

*As I wipe the excess ink from the tip of my pin, I hear the door open. I turn around, a professional smile, "Welcome, what can I-" I cut myself off as I lock eyes with the person who just entered my shop.*

I can recognize that I am dreaming, but as soon as dream-me sees the man who just entered my store, things shift.

*The hustle and bustle of a foreign city around me. I've never been here before, but it feels familiar for some reason. People move out of my way as I walk down the street, getting out of my way as if in fear. I look down at myself, yes, I'm still wearing my uniform, nothing untoward there. I shrug to myself, looking at the line of shops lining the way. One in particular catches my eye, a small shop, tiny really, but the sign over the door sticks out. A green pot of ink, shining against the smooth wood it's painted on, and below in a precise hand, a word, "Asera". A word I'd never heard before, but for some reason I knew it wasn't a word?*

*I don't know why I decided to open the door to that shop, I didn't need to purchase ink, or whatever a sign bearing a pot of ink meant. I step into the dim shop, under the dim light of a couple lanterns I see rows of books and scrolls stacked on shelves. A book merchant? The shop feels even tinier than it looks, but I suppose there isn't much foot traffic. As I glance around a woman sitting at a desk in the back sets something down, and turns to face me. As she turns, she begins speaking, in an accent I've never heard before, "Welcome, what can I—" Our eyes meet, and if she continued her sentence I didn't hear it.*

Did-did I just see myself? As I ask myself that I'm whisked away, back into the dream.

*"Ah, apologies. My name is Asera, how can I help you today?" I say, feeling a little heat in my cheeks. Why did I stumble over that? I look the customer over as I speak. He's definitely not from around here. Taller than I've seen before, wearing an immaculate uniform—military? Perhaps an officer looking for a book to buy, or perhaps notes to transcribe? Most of the officers that came in were literate, but that didn't mean they had good handwriting. Is he a lowly soldier looking to have me pen a letter? I don't think so.*

*"Um..." he says slowly, an embarrassed expression covering his face. He looked maybe thirty, forty, his brown hair just beginning to show gray. "I don't suppose you could take something down?"*

I feel things shift again, perspective changing.

*She stood as she spoke, and I noticed that she was short. Although*

---

everyone I had seen outside had seemed short as well. I guess that made her normal-height for around here. She seemed young, though, no wrinkles around her piercing blue eyes. Couldn't be older than twenty, looking at her. *Dæsn't strike me as very...aware? As if her thoughts are still on the book on her desk. As she speaks, she looks me over. I wonder if she thought I would notice. Gods, hopefully she didn't notice me looking her over. "Um..." I stammer out, wincing a little at the thought of what my wife would say if she heard I wandered into a shop just to see a young woman—a girl, really, and it wasn't like I was ever interested in books, "I...don't suppose you could take something down?" She smiles.*

My wife? What was going on? When did I get a wife?

*I smile. "Certainly, officer. A letter, I presume?" the man nods, and I grab a piece of paper from my desk, and a pen. I wave him over and sit down, setting Ultra's notes aside and making sure the pen is filled with my good black ink. "And what would you like it to say?" I ask, beginning a flourish at the top of the page. Even if the recipient couldn't read it on their own, I still liked to make my work look nice.*

*There's a pause before he responds. "Wake up." Okay. I scrawl it down. "No, wake up." What? I glance up at him, recoiling in shock as I see the expression on his face. Panicked, pale as a sheet. He meets my gaze, his gray eyes staring into mine. "Wake up."*

*"Are...are you okay?" I stammer out, a bit of fear creeping into my voice. I turn back to the letter, but before I can do anything I feel his hand on my shoulder, grabbing me roughly. He pulls me around to face him. My heart beating its way out of my chest, I try to push him away to no avail, "Let go of me!" I yell.*

*"Wake up!" he yells back at me, a fleck of spit hitting my face as he shoves me into the wall. I cry out as I feel something prodding into my back, shelves probably. "Wake up!" he yells again, basically a scream now. I hear a shatter and look down in shock to see my bottle of chromatic cobalt blue spreading across the floorboards. I grab at my waist for my dagger, but it's not there.*

*"I'm just a scribe, please don't hurt me," I yell back at him, tears trickling down my face as I realize there's nothing I can do against him, "I don't know what you want."*

*He shoves me against the wall again, harder. "Asera, if that's really your name. You. Need. To. Wake. Up." he yells, covering my face in more spittle, "We aren't safe!"*

*"We?" I cry out, "What are you talking about?"*

*"WAKE UP!" the man screams out, slapping me across the face, "WE are in trouble and you need to wake up!...RUN NOW!"*

I feel a sharp kick in my side, jolting me out of the dream—the nightmare.

# Chapter 3

## Awake

I cry out as I feel another kick to my side. I open my eyes as I try to push away whoever is hitting me. Under an evening sunset, the clearing I fell asleep in is painted in a reddish glow. A pair of legs, no, two pair. One of them swinging forward for another kick. I manage to feebly roll away, rising to my feet clutching at my side.

“Where do you think you’re going?” a man shouts. I look up, trying to get a better look at them, blinking the sleep out of my eyes. Two men, rough-looking, in tattered brown cloaks. The one that spoke has a scruffy brown beard, his hand resting on a short sword at his waist. The other man, younger of the two, mostly bald, nervously clutching a wooden club. Both looked like they hadn’t seen a bath in some time. Behind them, a pair of horses tied to a tree, comfortably oblivious to what was going on.

“Wh-what do you want?” I ask shakily, glancing between the two.

Beard man spits, “Just collecting our toll,” he says, gesturing with a coinpurse in his other hand. *My* coinpurse! I instinctively grab at my waist, unsurprisingly finding nothing there. They both laugh, Beard grinning, “Let’s see what’s in this pack of yours.”

“Nothing you’re interested in. Stay back!” I shout, grabbing my dagger from my belt and pointing it at them shakily. Why didn’t I just press on until a waystop? The foothills were full of bandits waiting to pounce on an unsuspecting traveler. The bundle of emotions gave off...smugness? Like it was saying *I told you so*. “Not a good time,” I growled at it under my breath.

They both laugh, Beard drawing his sword, “Why don’t you put that

puny knife down before you hurt yourself, girl," he says, smirking and looking me over, "We're going to take what we want, *everything* that we want, and if you don't cause trouble maybe we'll let you live." He takes a step forward, his balding companion following suit. I glance behind me, looking for a way out. "You can't outrun a horse, girl." Baldy says, "Just set down the knife."

"Come and take it, then," I say shakily, my fingers white-knuckled on my dagger. I was terrified, yes, but in my head the bundle of emotions had become red with anger. "But I'm not going to make it easy for you." The pair laughed and leaped forward, the bearded one slashing at me with his short sword. I duck out of the way, hearing the blade go just over my head, looking up just in time to see Baldy's club heading towards my face. I throw my off hand up to block it away, crying out as it strikes me. I swing blindly with my dagger, feeling it hit something, then roll away, trying to put distance between myself and them. The bundle of emotions is furious now, and...uncertain?

A line of red runs down Baldy's calf, but it didn't seem to be doing much to keep him away. They rush me again, I dodge a club swing, only to feel a sharp pain as Beard gets a slash onto my side. I stumble, reeling from the pain, which gives Baldy a chance to strike, tackling me to the ground. I scream as he throws a punch towards my face, deflecting it with my already-battered arm. I slash at him and miss in my panic, as I realize that I can feel not only the agony in my side and arm, but what can only be described as squirming from the thing in my head, mentally reeking of desperation. I'm so distracted by it that I don't even block the second punch. As I reel from his fist strike to my face and nose, I feel myself losing control of my body, just like in the cave, becoming a spectator to my own life.

I spent what had to be twenty minutes kneeling by the chilly creekwater by the clearing, trying to wash the bloods from my hands. I'd fashioned a scrap of ragged brown cloak into a bandage for the slash on my side, but there wasn't much I could do for my right arm, which I could hardly move. I'm fairly certain my nose is broken, but there isn't much I can do about that. I glance back towards the clearing, the bandits' two horses still tied to the tree, as they had been for the last hour.

I cup some water in my bloodstained hands, bringing it to my mouth

---

to wash out the taste of vomit. I didn't want to think about what had happened. I didn't have the tools for a proper burial, so I just dragged their bodies as far away from the road as I could, praying nobody would pass by on the road. They'd probably be bear food, but by that point I didn't care.

I dry my hands off on my legs, wincing as I stand, turning back to the clearing. I feel a pang of disgust and guilt as I see the quite-obvious trail of blood leading into the woods. Inside, the damned spirit gives off a reassuring burst of emotion, as if to say *It was self-defense*. "You aren't the one with blood on your hands, statue," I mutter aloud, knowing it can't hear me anyway. I grab my pack, growling in pain as my wounds protest to the added strain. I can't help but drop it a second later, my head spinning in agony. Now that everything had become nice and sore, it made for a painful experience. One of the horses snorts at me, and I shoot it a glare, flinging a string of expletives at it.

I sigh, feeling a flash of condescension from the statue. "Fine." I say to it, limping over to one of the horses and untying its reins? I think that's what the strings you drive it with are called. I walk it over to my pack, and one agonizing minute later I've got my pack tied to the empty saddle. "I suppose you both want a drink as well." I say offhandedly, untying the other horse as well and bringing both of them to the creek. As they suck in water with their horse mouths, I contemplate what a terrible idea riding would be, given that I've never done it before. Well, I couldn't exactly leave them tied to a tree to get eaten, but I could use them to carry my bag at least, until I found someone on the road willing to buy them. I set out down the road, each hand holding a pair of reins, limping back to Sapphire with a short sword strapped to my back. If I remembered correctly, there should be a waystop a couple hours walk away.

I woke up shivering, clutching my trusty dagger. I'd dragged myself into the waystop late last night, six hours after setting off. It was empty when I'd arrived, leaving the horses in the small pasture and collapsing inside next to the cold stone fireplace, too exhausted to light a fire against the cold spring night. That had been a mistake, based on the incredible soreness permeating through my entire body. I glance down, pulling aside the makeshift bandage, wincing at the swollen puffy mess around the wound. Not good. I toss the scrap of cloak into the fireplace and grab another from

my pack, holding back curses as I wrap it around my waist. A quick snack on a block of cheese from my pack, and I was out the door.

Dragging my stuff out to the pasture, I whistle for the horses to come over. Of course, they don't. "You lot would make good bear food, you know," I yell at them, garnering a dismissive knicker from them.

Eventually I get the pair out and on the road, leading them towards our next stop. There's a village we should reach by sundown, assuming we make better time than yesterday. I could almost hear grumbling from the statue spirit in my head. I tried not to think about the nightmares I'd had last night.

*It was certainly a weird night, I'll tell you that. Lila's boy had come over to play his songs for the travelers in the inn, of which there were quite a few, given the season. Good business for an innkeep like me, you see. Music, even if it was awful, at least made the drink flow a little better. My son was outside, dealing with the stable that night. Maybe three, four hours after sundown, things just starting to slow down, only one fight to deal with the entire night. Anyway, my son comes in, hollerin' for me, all "Pa, pa, it's important." Now if you know my son, you know everything's important to him, so I told him to head back out and take care of the patrons' animals like he was told. Normally that would be that, but he wouldn't leave. Finally I tell Lila to stop showing her legs off to the merchants and watch things so I can see what crisis the gods have cooked up that needs my attention.*

*I head outside, my boy dragging me out to the courtyard faster than I could walk. Outside are the two most miserable horses I've ever seen, and between them this terrible-looking woman. Broken nose, dried blood all over her face, barely clinging to one of the horses to stop from falling to the dirt. I pick her up and take her upstairs, to a vacant room, as I'm carrying her through the inn I realize she's murmuring to herself, I couldn't tell what she was saying but...anyway, Doc happened to be inside getting a drink, so she went off to grab her stuff. I grab a bucket of hot water from downstairs and start washing blood off her face and hands. Doc comes in, takes one look at the girl and tells me to get out. I know better than to argue with her, so I made sure her horses got put away. Poor things, looked like they hadn't been unsaddled in days.*

*Back downstairs I went back to work. They'd seen me carrying her*

---

*upstairs, and I guess it put a damper on things, but after an hour or so things got back to normal. At least until the next morning when another caravan rolled in...*

I wake up to someone whispering. My eyes open, I'm in a bed, in a room of some sort. Everything is made of pain, but it's warm at least. More whispering. I try to lean up to get a better look, but wince as I try, dropping my head back onto the pillow. The whispering stopped with the wince, thankfully. I manage to tilt my head a little to see where I am.

It's a small room, if I had to guess it was in an inn of some sort based on the lack of objects in the room. Just my pack in the corner, a small table with some clothes strewn across it, and a homely-looking woman leaned back in a chair sleeping. I try again to lean up, wincing again as it proves to be too much. The wincing wakes up the woman, though, and she walks over, smiling in an uncomfortable motherly way. "Just stay where you are, you're in no state to move around right now," she says gently.

"I...there were...horses?" I stammer out, finding difficulty with the words.

"They're fine," she replies, smiling. "You on the other hand, were halfway out the door when you dropped in on us. That cut on your side was infected, and your arm is fractured," I suddenly realize I can't move my right arm. "It's in a splint for now," she explains.

"Thank you," I gasp out.

"Now that you're awake, Bren wanted to talk to you about something. This is his inn." Ah, so it was an inn. Before I have a chance to say anything, the woman steps out of the room. I poke at the bundle of emotions in my head, trying to remember how I got here. It doesn't respond.

The door opens again, and a man enters, followed by the woman from before. "Glad to see you're feeling better. We were worried there for a bit. I'm Bren, my son found you outside," he says. A larger fellow, wrinkled, his beard gray as ash.

"Thanks for taking me in," I respond, "I'm...Asera."

He nods, taking a seat. "I know I shouldn't ask until you're better, but word got out you came in hurt, and the townspeople are worried about whoever did this. Now," he pauses for a minute, glancing at the woman, "A merchant caravan came in yesterday morning, from Dawn. They said

they found something on the road west of here.” I froze, feeling the blood run from my face. I tried to stammer out something, but he talked over me, “Well that answers that. Don’t worry, you did us a favor dealing with those two,” He pauses, “They didn’t, ah...the doctor has medicines if-”

“Oh, no! That wasn’t...I’m fine,” I exclaim, cutting him off. I take a breath, wincing at the pain it causes. “Did they...at least receive a proper burial? I don’t want any bad omens on me.”

“Aye, the merchants took care of it. There wasn’t anyone with you, was there?”

“No...just me.”

“Okay,” He says, standing and putting a hand on my shoulder, “A girl, especially your age, shouldn’t be traveling alone. Where are you heading to?”

“I...I was heading back home to Sapphire,” I say, “Got caught in a storm, and then...they attacked me. I’m starting to wonder if I’ll make it back in one piece,” I give a weak laugh.

“There should be another caravan passing through in a couple days. Let me talk to them, I’m sure there’ll be room for you,” Bren says.

I hesitate. What if it took over while I was around other people? After the bandits...how did I know what it might do? Inside my head, the statue emotions gives off an indignant squawk. “I appreciate the offer, but I’ll be fine.”

“Fine?” The homely woman said, breaking her silence, “You got away once, what if there’s more than two of them next time. You got lucky, don’t expect it to happen again. You’re going with that caravan, and that’s final. I won’t see a young woman like yourself dead on the side of the road because she thinks she’s a damned soldier now.”

I feel a flash of anger. Lucky? *Lucky?* I’d been possessed by a statue from a cave, and that was what she would call luck? I open my mouth, ready to give her a piece of my mind, but stop when that piece of my mind bombards me. I could almost hear it saying *she’s right. You barely made it out of there even with my help.* I shut my mouth.

By the evening I’d managed to struggle my way out of bed and into some clothes. Hobbling down the narrow stairs to the common room, I managed to get a look in a mirror in the hallway. Not great, but at least my face isn’t

---

covered in blood anymore. Nose looked like it'd take awhile to heal though. Oh well.

Inside the common room, I made my way through the crowd of people towards an empty table, plopping down with a sigh. Even the minute of walking had made me tired. I look around the room. It was easy to tell the difference between the travelers and the locals. Here it seemed to be mostly merchant's guards tonight, a handful of local-looking folk in the corner. On a small dais at the end of the room, a young man is hard at work ruining the art of music. I wait until the serving girl was done laughing at some joke a trader had tried on her, then wave at her.

"Nice to see you on your feet. I'm Lila, what can I get you?" She asks.

"Some of whatever that delicious thing I'm smelling is, thanks." I smile, sliding some coins across the table.

She comes back in a minute with a giant bowl of a wonderful-looking goat stew. It's gone in a couple minutes. Guess I was hungrier than I thought. I spend the next couple hours leaning back into my chair, relaxing and listening.

When it slows down, Bren comes over from the corner of the room where he was cooking earlier, a couple mugs in his hands. "Good stew," I comment as he sits down. A couple patrons are in the corner chatting quietly, but other than that the common room is empty.

"Thanks," he replies, sliding a mug at me. I took a sip. Strong ale. Maybe another sip. "It doesn't get easier."

"Pardon?" I asked quietly.

"People say it gets easier, taking someone's life. It doesn't."

"What makes you think it was-"

"Don't even try it," he cuts me off, "I can tell. Whoever taught you to use that sword taught you well, if I'm to believe those guards that came in yesterday, but I know the woman before me today hasn't done that before."

"I...I don't know what to say," I stammer out, taking another sip of the ale, "Have you...?"

He nods. "I was conscripted. More than I care to count...but I remember each one of them. Just conscripts like me, with the misfortune of being on the other side."

"Sorry to hear that." I respond, taking a drink, "I hope I never have to

kill someone again.”

“Aye, me too, but we both know the world is too rough to make that likely.” Bren looks into his drink, thinking, before speaking up again. “When you came in, you weren’t doing well. Talking to yourself.”

I freeze. “Talking to myself?”

“I could only catch a word here and there, normally I wouldn’t think much of it, but what I could hear...” Apparently I had an expression, because he quickly shakes his head, “I didn’t tell anyone, not even Doc. Don’t worry. None of my business, and none of anyone else’s. Just be careful out there, okay?” He finishes of his mug of all and stands. “Have a good night, Asera.”

Like that would happen now.

## Chapter 4

# Sapphire

I sigh, standing up in my stirrups to stretch my legs and give my butt some relief from the unrelenting saddle. After a couple seconds of blissful peace, I sit back down hesitantly. Horse had already tried twice to scrape me off on passing tree branches this morning, not counting the countless other attempts to be rid of me over the last three days. I wasn't about to give it another chance. I was still sore from last night, when it had decided to go on a walk as I was getting off. It took the merchant's guards five minutes to get me untangled from Horse, laughing at me the whole time. *In my time every child learned to ride as soon as they could hold the reins*, my unfortunate head companion pipes up.

*And look where that got you*, I respond. Our communication had become clearer over the last four days, much to my dismay. Thankfully, it came and went, at times going back to the relative peace and quiet of blaring raw emotion at me. Now, though, it would pop off a comment every hour or so, but that seemed to be the limit so far. Unnervingly, it hadn't developed—or discovered—its own voice yet, so all its words came across in my voice. Not pleasant.

I look ahead, up the road, breathing in the fresh mountain air. The terrain has been becoming more and more familiar, and Sapphire should be within sight any minute now. After everything that had happened, I was looking forward to things being normal for a bit. It had been nearly a month away from home. At that thought, I see a glimmer in the distance. The city! I stand in my saddles to get a better look. A smile creeps on my

face as I see the shining towers, and the gleaming city walls. If Horse's reins weren't tied to the rear of one of the wagons, I'd probably ride ahead to the city myself. As it is, I'm content to sit back and relax, at least until we get closer to the city.

Perhaps an hour later, and we're just entering the outskirts of the city, hustle and bustle as usual, even as far as we are from the city walls. The caravan turns off the road, stopping outside a large warehouse building. I carefully dismount, careful to avoid a repeat of yesterday, and untie Horse from the wagon, leading it forward to the front of the line. I approach the caravan master, a bitter, angry old woman who I was certain spent her spare time pulling the legs off of small creatures, and hand her the reins to Horse. "As promised, one horse," I say cheerfully, getting only a grumble in return. I had left the other with Bren and his people, as thanks for caring for me. It's not like I could house horses in my shop anyway, and they'd be better off in the care of people who knew what they were doing. I grab my pack from one of the wagons, wincing a little as its weight falls on my shoulders, and hobble off towards the city proper.

The outskirts were just as I remembered them, tiny wooden houses and shops crammed every which way and people bustling everywhere. There was no planning to the outer city, and the chaos was...pleasant, in a way. Not somewhere I wanted to live, certainly, but...in any case, it wasn't a very safe place to be in after dark, at least the proper city had guards to hold anarchy at bay. I get a wide berth from people as I walk through the crowd. I guess my face still looked pretty bad, but if it meant I got home sooner, that was fine by me.

As I approach the Southwest Gate, I smile at the familiarity, but my smile slips away as I get closer. More guards than usual. Did something happen? The bundle of emotions buzzes in confusion at my hesitation. I shake my head and carry on. However, as I step through the gates, one of the guards raises a hand to block me. "Sapphire is a city of peace. State your business," she says gruffly, looking down at me.

"Uh...I live here? In the East ward?" I say, confused.

"Yes, and I bet you're the Empress's daughter too. You aren't getting in with that sword on your back." the guard replies, smirking.

"No, what? My name is Asera, I'm a scribe, I-"

"Ah, I forgot scribes normally walk around with swords and broken noses," She places a hand on the longsword at her waist. "Go find yourself some vermin in the outskirts."

"But...okay, whatever." I say angrily, taking a step back. I'd just try one of the other gates, then.

I turn around, stomping away, but stop when a new voice calls out. "Asera? What in the six goddesses happened to your face?" I stop again, looking over my shoulder.

"Commander Dainyl, nice to see you. It's...a long story." I smile, nodding at the short-haired man who had appeared behind the city guards.

Dainyl puts a shoulder on the guard intent on keeping me out of the city, "It's okay, I know her. Stand down." He waves me over, and I join him, giving a little smirk to the guard as I walk past. "Step into my office," he says, gesturing towards a small door behind the gatehouse. I follow him in, my head filling with questions. He senses my confusion, "Temporary assignment, there were some issues with the wall division so I'm here for a couple months to straighten things out. I'm...not sure I can talk about it with you," He grumbles as he sits behind the desk, gesturing for me to sit in the other chair.

I shake my head, "I just spent the last...too long...sitting in a saddle. My butt needs a break," I say, smiling and looking around at his...modestly furnished...office, "I didn't expect to see you here. Good thing you were, though, I thought that lady was going to cut me down."

Dainyl shrugs. "Just doing her job. Especially with you looking the way you do! Tell me what happened. I didn't even know you were out of the city."

"Lord Dawn's head scribe fell ill, and I guess none of his others had decent enough handwriting for the important stuff, so I got offered a pile of money to go down there for a couple weeks. I...on the way back, there were a couple bandits," I shake my head, "I know I look bad, but if it's any consolation, they look worse."

He frowns, "You never should have left Sapphire. What if you didn't make it out alive. Wh-"

I cut him off, "I'm fine, and I assure you I have no intention of leaving the city again anytime soon."

“You know I have to say it, Asera.”

“I know,” I reply, opening the office door with a smile. “It was nice seeing you again. Get a tapestry or something for this room, it looks like a dreadful prison cell.” And with that, I was back out the door.

The east ward was unfortunately a bit of a walk to the other side of the city, but it was easy travel. Especially in the city proper, people were steering clear of me, and I got more than a couple strange looks from the city guardsman posted on the street corners. My damned headmate seemed uneasy by that, but I assured him it was business as usual. I couldn’t wait to get rid of this damned sword, though.

“Asera! Your nose, what happened!”

I groan. Was every interaction going to be like this? “Nice to see you too, Ninla.” I reply with a smile. “I trust the ferocious beasts weren’t a problem?” Ninla was my longtime neighbor, running the bakery next door to my shop. We had a thing going, she attempted to fatten me up on baked goods and I did any writing she needed. Most people were illiterate, but those that weren’t tended to stick to places that had prices listed. She had been kind enough to watch over my cats while I was gone.

“Oh, no, not at all,” she says, beaming. She was always happy, somehow. “I won’t keep you though, you look in dreadful need of a bath. Come see us for dinner though!” Please get out of my shop, you smell like you’ve been on the road for a week. Okay.

“Sure thing.” I reply, exiting her shop and heading over to mine. I unlock the door and step inside, breathing in the familiar smell of paper and ink. Inside, my store is just as I left it. Tiny, dimly lit at the moment. Stacks of paper piled everywhere, a pair of books open on the table in the center. A cabinet full of ink bottles and pens, with some equipment for mixing new batches of ink. Right next to it, the desk where I did most of my work, the tome I’d been working on still open to the correct page. Shelves of books all over, some bought, some sold, some to create copies of. A painting of a ship in harbor, a barter a customer had offered for work. Above the cold fireplace, a few odds and ends. A narrow staircase to upstairs, and a door to the tiny back yard I shared with Ninla. I set the sword—my sword, I guess, down next to the fireplace. It’ll make a good poker I imagine. That thought causes a wave of disappointment and cringe from the emotions.

---

*What would you have me do, become a mercenary and fight battles? I write books for a living, I think at it.*

I shake my head and head upstairs, dropping my pack off on top of my bed, kicking off my boots, and lighting a fire on the stove to warm up some water. Pagan gave me little meow from her spot by my window. Inkblot ignored me, as usual, the ass. Like I'd never been gone. I head back downstairs and light a fire down there as well, hopping in place to keep my feet off of the cold stone floor. Probably should have left the boots on.

By the time I got the contents of my pack emptied out and dealt with, there was enough hot water on the stove to draw a bath. I strip down, taking a look at myself in the shard of mirror I kept by the stove. My nose still looked like trash, and the black eye hadn't gone away yet. As for the slash on my side, whatever medicine the woman at the inn had put on had done wonders. It still hurt to the touch, but the scabbed area had definitely decreased, leaving behind a scar I desperately hoped would fade somewhat. I hop in the bath, soaking for a minute before going to town with a washrag. How could there be so much dirt after only a week? I scowl at the water already gray with gunk. Whatever, it was better than...*STOP WHATEVER ARE YOU THINKING*, I mentally scream at the bundle of thoughts. A burst of unapologetic embarrassment from the perverted little statue. I cut the bath short and hastily get dressed, blushing. *Okay, I'm stuck with you for the time being so there's going to be some rules.*

I cut into Ninla's bakery via the back door, through our shared back yard. Waving at her hard-at-work pair of employees as I pass them, I head upstairs, stomach grumbling.

"There she is," Tad, Ninla's husband, says warmly as I open the door to their small kitchen/dining area. "We are about to start without you."

"Sorry! I had...it's good being home," I reply, smiling and taking a seat at the table.

"Dear, you didn't mention she got hit by the wrong end of a club," he says to Ninla, who was over by the stove, "Just that she came in looking like some sellsword."

"No, the club got my arm, his fist got my face," I say, gesturing at my still-sore arm with a wince, "But I got a sweet sword out of it, so there's that."

“A club and a sword? What did you do, join an army?”

“I...got ambushed by some bandits, about a week ago...”

“Really? Did you-”

“Tad, stop harassing the poor girl,” Ninla yells, setting a giant pot of stew on the table and leaning down to look at me. “In all seriousness, though, if you need to talk...”

“Thanks for the offer,” I respond, “But I’ve been gone for a month. What’s been going on here at home? I was almost turned away from the city gates...”

Ninla and Tad glanced at each other, before Ninla spoke up “There was...nothing official, but I heard from one of the guards that came into the shop. Something happened at the Imperial Palace, even he wouldn’t say what. But a bunch of wrongdoers escaped out the city, even with the gates locked down. This was maybe a week and a half ago?”

“Huh,” I mutter, “Must’ve been something big if they’re still out in this much force.”

“But enough about that. Tell us about Dawn!,” Tad says, filling a bowl with stew and drowning a chunk of bread in it.

“Well, I was only there a couple weeks, but...The city’s on the coast. Everything reeks of salt, except by the docks where it reeks of dead fish. Lord Dawn has a palace, a castle really, on a hill overlooking the harbor. Gods, it was hot though. Mid-spring, and hotter than our hottest summer. Air was as thick as this stew. Every window in the city is open all day and night, to catch the breeze to cool off. They housed me in one of the castle towers while I was staying there.”

“You *stayed* in Lord Dawn’s castle?” Ninla exclaims.

“All the towers are set aside for the servants and soldiers. The nobles, they stayed below, underground actually. The ground keeps it cool, if a bit musty.”

“Did you see him? Dawn?”

“See him? Ninla, I spent most my days in his court.” I pause at her expression of wonder, “It’s not as nice as it sounds, trust me. Boring, really. Lines and lines of nobles coming from the countryside or the city wards, complaining about taxes, tariffs, crops, you name it. My job was basically to write the decrees and rulings for his seal. Plus some letter writing, all

that.”

“...Oh. Well that’s nice too,” Ninla says, a bit of disappointment in her voice. “I just thought, around all the lords and ladies...”

“What, that I’d come back a noblewoman, with lands and a title? Lady Asera, Protector of the Written Word?” I say with a laugh, “Besides dictating things for me to write, Lord Dawn spoke to me twice. Once was when I was leaving, he wished me a good journey home.”

“And the other time?”

“Er...you know, I can’t remember,” I lie, “I think it was something about one of the noblemen? Anyway, I’m glad to be home. I had to leave off this lovely text, for one of the Wizards, on the history of the Second Dynasty of Sapphire...”

The rest of the meal is smalltalk. Afterwards, I hobble downstairs, clutching my stomach. Real food after four days of cheese was certainly nice.

As I walk towards the back door, Ninla yells for me to stop. She comes barreling downstairs, clutching a letter, “Asera, I forgot to mention. Someone left this for you the other day.”

“Oh, who’s it from?” I ask.

“They didn’t say, and you know me and words...” She responds.

“Oh, well thanks for holding it. I don’t owe you anything for delivery, do I?”

“Oh, no,” she says, handing me the letter. “The sender took care of it. Have a good night now.”

“Thanks, you too.” I head out the door, taking a quick glance at the envelope as I cross the small yard. Wait. I stop, looking again at the name on the envelope. One word, one that never means good news.

Daughter.



# Chapter 5

## Summons

I'm up bright and early the next morning. My dreams were still confusing jumbles, and didn't show any signs of stopping. After a quick breakfast, I head downstairs and open the shop up, spending the next hour or so getting everything clean and tidy from my month away. After that, I sit down at my desk, resuming where I'd left off a month ago on the history tome, *The Second Dynasty: Rise of the Empire of Sapphire*.

By the 130th year of Sapphire's sovereignty, the nation had finally found its feet. They had taken a harsh land, a chill valley high in the mountains, and turned it into a thriving nation. With their new form of magic Sapphire had shown the Gods that humanity would prevail. Fertile land to farm, rich veins of ore in her countless mountains, Sapphire was fast on her way to becoming one of the great nations of the world.

But this also meant that their enemies grew. From the east, armies marched, seeking to plunder Sapphire's riches. From the west, a nation presently known as Dawn closes the border, and Sapphire is cut off, the valley now a prison.

Such began the reign of Emperor Elenos, first of the Second Dynasty. A strong leader in a time his country needed him, Elenos fought back the hordes of the east, leading soldiers into battle himself, forced open the borders of the west with his quick wit and cunning diplomacy. And thus great prosperity

flowed once more, but the people of Sapphire never forgot the nations that wronged them.

I pause my copying at grumbling from the statue. *Problem?* I ask.

*Aren't you going to open the letter?* It replies back. I glance at the corner of my desk, where it still sits. I shake my head. "I already know what it says," I reply aloud.

*And what does it say, then?*

I sigh. I missed the days when it just took over my body to murder bandits. *It always says the same thing. Hasn't changed once in the last five years.* It grumbles again in response, clearly curious. Nosity was more like it. *I don't plan on letting you live in my head forever, statue. I'm not going to waste my time telling you my life story.*

I lock the door of the shop that evening with a smile on my face. Apparently all my regulars had heard word I was back in town, and had all decided to come in today. While I was glad for the business, part of me wondered why they didn't just go find one of the five other scribes in the city. I shrug. Money was money, and my lockbox upstairs was weighing more than it had in some time, thanks to Lord Dawn and the two bandits. At that mental reminder, my eyes couldn't help but settle on the short sword, still in its sheath next to the fireplace. Between that and my face, I'd retold the story ten times. I couldn't wait for everything to heal.

I knock on the door. I turn around, peeking through the window. My eyes widen and I unlock the door. "Dainyl? What are you doing here?"

He steps in, with his guardsman armor he barely fits through the door. "All these years and I've never actually been inside, you know," he says, taking a glance around.

I smile, "For good reason, I'd imagine. How are things?"

"They've been better. Tired of that dreadful gate. But," he opens a bag I didn't notice he had been carrying, "I got this for you," he pulls out a small black jar, setting it on my table.

"What is it?" I ask, picking it up and peeking inside. The contents looked like honey but smelled like death. Didn't seem very pleasant.

"A remedy the wizards came up with. The guard buys it by the wagonload. It works best when applied to fresh wounds, but it still works on older wounds. It'll make sure that cut on your side doesn't scar, too."

I set the jar down hastily, "How did you know about that?"

He laughs, "I could tell as soon as I saw you. From the way you walk, and carry yourself, I'd say a slash wound there, the broken nose is obvious...broken right arm?"

I scowl, "Fractured, but yes. Now why are you paying all this attention to the way I walk?"

"Don't make me say it, Asera."

"Hmm..." I take another sniff of the goop, wrinkling my nose at it. "I heard what happened with the gates. Are you sure you won't get in trouble for...?"

"No, no, they're too busy with that to see one jar missing. I wasn't exaggerating when I said wagonload, you know."

"I should report you to the city watch, for stealing," I say, then reach over and give him a hug. Well, give his armor a hug, "Thank you, though."

He glances over at my desk. "Work already? How much writing do you do?"

"From before," I reply, "I got this project just before I left. Probably going to work through more than a couple nights to finish it on time."

"Pays good?"

"Oh, you have no idea. Wizards' tower commission. They settle for the best of the best, and the best of the best isn't cheap, you know."

"Well, I should get going. Night shift tonight," Dainyl says, a sad expression on his face.

"Be careful out there."

As the door closes, I let out a sigh, glancing at the jar he'd left. Truly awful-smelling stuff. I re-lock the door and head back upstairs, setting the goop by my bed. I sit down, staring out the window at the street below, watching people come and go, trying to empty my thoughts. After a few minutes, the statue pops up, *Asera?*

*What?*

*You know he likes you too, right?*

If I had something to glare at, I'd glare at it. Instead, I glare out the window. *Mind your own business.*

I hear the sound of the door opening behind me. "Welcome, how may I help--" I stop dead, staring dumbfounded at the young girl standing in the

doorway.

“Hello, Asera. Did you not get the message?” My younger sister says. She sniffs disdainfully. “For someone so good with letters, it’s a shame you don’t read them.” Elena was short, shorter than me in fact, with long brown hair and green eyes. I was the odd one out, my hair almost black, with blue eyes. The only one in the family with blue eyes.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I reply angrily, pulling her into my shop. I glance outside, nothing out of the ordinary. I slam the door shut and lean my head against it for a minute. “You should know better, Elena.”

“And that’s why I am here and not Mother. When did you become a soldier?” I spin around. She’s holding the short sword, a bemused expression on her face.

“Don’t touch that!” I snap, grabbing it from her hands and putting it back in its place. I turn again to face her, and she’s holding the unopened letter.

“Hmm. How rude,” she says dismissively, tossing it back on the table.

I take a deep breath. “Why are you here, Elena.”

“It’s about Artin, actually.” Our older brother. Elena picks up a book on the bookshelf, casually flipping through it. “He’s missing.”

I freeze. “What do you mean, missing?”

Elena sets the book down and stares at me. “Missing. We do not know where he is. He is not in the city. Did that blow to your face damage more than just your nose?”

I take a seat uneasily. “Mother and Father?” I ask.

“Father is...well, you know how he gets. Mother is devastated. The city has been combed, even the outskirts. No sign of him. Wizards can’t even get a scrying on him either. Troublesome,” she glances at me, “Troublesome indeed.”

I pause, raising an eyebrow, “Well, thank you for letting me know. In person. In my shop. Thanks.”

Elena sighs, “I didn’t want to be...*here*...either, but since my dearest older sibling doesn’t read letters, Mother sent me. She wants to speak to you.”

I laugh. “Okay, little sister. Sure. You know how she feels. Like she would ever summon me after what...after I left.”

---

“As much as I would prefer to simply be tormenting you, I’m afraid that today I am tormenting you with the truth,” she pauses, then gives a smile. Smiling like a cat would smile just before catching some poor mouse. “She said if you don’t come see her, she will come down here to see you. You know what that entails, don’t you?”

I sigh. “When?” I ask, sinking back into my chair, defeated.

“Tomorrow night. She didn’t really give me an exact time. The rear gate. You know, the one you used to slip out of in the evenings?”

“*OUT!*”



## Chapter 6

# The Return

*So why is it you don't want to visit your family?* The voice in my head asks as we-as I walk up the road. Things have slowed down for the evening, and the roads are relatively quiet. The sunset paints everything in a rich color as it begins to duck under the mountains.

*It's a long story, I reply.*

*Well, we can hear each other more now, and it seems I'm not going anywhere,* it says, a bit of snark in its "voice", which was still my voice. Which was still unpleasant to hear.

I sigh internally. *Thanks for reminding me I'm stuck with you for now...There was a fight, five years ago. Ended up with me out the door. I'd like to think it was political...*

*Political? You're not saying...*

"Oh, you just can't stop being nosy, can you." I say. A woman looks up in alarm at me as I walk past her. I ignore her and continue. *I'm...I was once, possibly, a little bit...noble?* I cringe at the feelings coming from the bundle of emotions in the back of my skull.

*You didn't...why are you...*The voice fades into a cacophony of confusion. I continue walking, heading towards the center of the city. *Lady Asera, Protector of the Written Word.*

*Not quite. Like I said, I lost all that. Wasn't cut out for it anyway.*

*How...how do I know you aren't lying to me?* it asks.

*We literally feel each other's emotions. I think you'd be able to tell.*

By this point we've reached the inner ward of the city. We pass through

a second set of gates. Without the sword I just get a nod from one of the guards on duty. Inside, the streets are wider, lined with lanterns. Large palaces set far back from the streets. Only a couple people walking. A carriage trundles past me.

*So, your brother is missing? And...?*

*And if things didn't happen the way they did, I would be next in line. I'm assuming Mother just wants to make sure everything is in order to skip me in the succession.*

*And you're okay with that?* the voice asks, confused. *You could be living in one of these palaces, instead of that tiny square you call a house? Why give it up?*

*I'm no longer interested. I was enjoying my life until you came along, just so you know. It doesn't matter, though, Artin will turn back up,* I reply, shaking my head and turning down a side street.

*And if he doesn't?*

I pause, thinking. *Well, then Elena gets the titles, and the riches, and all that.* I turn down another road, this one wider, heading further into the ward. *I don't think you follow when I say, I don't want a thing to do with them. I'm only doing this because otherwise Mother would show up on my door, and...I'd rather people not know.*

*Why would anyone know? Your little sister made it in just fine.*

*...You'll see.* I turn one last corner, coming up to a small gate--a door really--set into yet another wall, this one closed tight. A full squad of guards around it. Definitely more involved than I remembered. The gate opens as I approach. Guess someone said to just let the girl with the broken nose in. I step through, taking a deep breath. Inside is just as I remembered, the lush palace gardens, full of pristine examples of every plant in Sapphire.

A man, clad in a maroon servant's uniform, bows as I enter. "Lady Asera, good to have you back with us. The Empress has been waiting for you."

The voice still hadn't stopped talking. My attempts to drown it out were going nowhere. Anger, bewilderment, confusion all pouring through. *You gave up being heiress to the throne? To ruling Sapphire? Why? How do they even let you out of the city? Out of this palace? You live in a glorified box next to a bakery!*

*Stop. Just stop. I already told you. Plus, I'm not an heiress. I get nothing, and that's fine,* I reply as the servant leads me through the palace. Things hadn't changed a bit in here. Certainly enough for me to feel out of place. I glance down at my clothes, pointedly aware of the wear and tear they had gotten. Nothing was threadbare, but I'd had to sew several tears up in my shirt and pants, and I wasn't exactly great at sewing. And my boots could certainly use some polish. I was fairly certain I was the worst-dressed person in the building.

The servant stops at one of the countless doors, in this case one opening into one of many parlors, ushering me through it and shutting the door behind me wordlessly. Inside, chairs and tables scattered everywhere, but the brightly-lit room was empty save for me. I toss the cushions of one of the chairs onto the floor and plop down. This room was larger than my house. It was larger than my house and Ninla's combined. *One of the reasons I left.* I tell the nosy spirit, *There are five other rooms just like this one, just as useless.* I lean my head back and close my eyes, trying to ignore the growing headache.

About fifteen minutes later, I hear the door open. I look up to see Elena. She smiles at me. The "I'm a cat about to pounce on you and break your little mouse neck" smile. She sits primly at a seat across from me at the table. I smile back at her, waiting for her to speak.

She sniffs. "Is that really the best you could wear?" There it is.

"In the real world not everyone can afford a gown for every occasion," I reply sarcastically. I was rather jealous though, her dress was quite nice looking. The statue snickers. *Oh, don't you dare start right now,* I growl at it.

"You never told me what happened to your face, I realize now," she says smirking.

"Like you haven't heard, But if you must. I got jumped by some bandits on my way back from Dawn."

She sniffs. "I seem to recall one sibling in particular always got out of our training. Was it Artin?...No, I think it was you..."

I shake my head, "One of many bad ideas I'm sure you'll enjoy reminding me of."

"All I'm saying is, if you spent more time practicing with the guardsmen

and less time ogling them, maybe you would still have a nose," She smirks at my embarrassed blushing. "Subtlety was never your strength, you know. What were you doing in Dawn, anyway, I wonder?"

"You know damn well what I was doing, Elena."

"Ah, yes. Dousing our family reputation in oil and running off to find a match. Your favorite pastime."

"This is stupid," I growl, standing. "Where is she? that's why I'm here in the first place." As I finish my sentence, the door opens behind me. I sigh, try to get ahold of my nerves, and turn around. "Hello Mother."

Mother, or more properly Dara of the Highborn, Protector of the Valley, Holy Representative of the Six Gods, Guardian of Hope and Justice, Slayer of the Eastern Tribes, Empress of Sapphire and All Its Lands, May Her Name Live For All Time, ignored my greeting and brushed past me, taking a seat next to Elena.

I return to my seat, plopping down with a thump, "It's been five years, and not even a hello for your daughter?" Mother was slightly taller than Elena, but other than that, simply an older copy of her. Or the other way around, more properly.

Mother clears her throat, and says in a dry voice, "Yes. Forgive me. Hello Elena." *Well this is going well*, my statue remarks.

"I'll admit I wasn't expecting any better," I say sarcastically. "Why am I here?"

She pauses, looking me over with stern eyes. If disappointment had a taste it would taste like my mother's gaze, "You look like trash."

"Thanks, I thought I'd dress up for the occasion," I remarked. It wasn't a lie, this was my best shirt now that my actual best one was cut up and covered in dried blood. My remark earns a sniff from Elena.

"Elena told you about Artin?"

"I heard, yeah. Why am I here?"

"Tell me what happened to your nose." Mother 'asks'.

"You know, it'd save me a lot of time if we got the entire city together so I could tell everyone at once. But fine. I got attacked by bandits on my way back from Dawn."

"Ah, yes, my offspring, a clerk writing notes for Lord Dawn. I can't tell you what a proud mother I am."

“Hey! Talk down all you want, but I’ve been doing fine out there. Why. Am. I. Here?”

“You never were the polite one, were you. You are here because, with Artin gone, you are next in line to the Throne, gods help us all.”

“Okay, where’s the piece of paper. I don’t want it anyway.”

Mother raises an eyebrow. “You think you are here to renounce your claim to the throne?”

“I know, I know, should have done it five years ago. I didn’t think it would come up, to be honest. Let’s just sign it so I can go home.”

“It’s time to cut the act, child. You think Artin is just going to show up, like he got lost coming back from the tavern?” she says, a hint of irritation entering her voice. “Last week he was kidnapped. Whisked right out the city gates. Armies are searching for him as we speak. I wish, more than anything, that we will find him, I’ll pay whatever ransom I must to have my son back and the throne secure. But at the same time, you were attacked. That might be a coincidence, I pray it is, but what if it is not?”

“It was definitely a coincidence. They didn’t know who I was. They saw a young woman, traveling by herself, through the West Pass, with nothing besides a dagger for defense. Admittedly foolish of me. But if you were a bandit, could there not possibly be a better target?” I retort angrily.

She takes a deep breath, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I spend every waking moment worried that they will deliver Artin’s head in a box. If it does, and you are not *here*, then that leaves only Elena. So I am asking you, for the sake of Sapphire, end this charade. Come back home. They got one of my children. What happens if they get the other two?”

“You don’t understand now, just like you didn’t understand five years ago. Look at me, mother,” I gesture to myself, “You know I can’t sit on the throne. Give me a piece of paper and a pen, I’ll write out a renouncement right now. Remove any question should the worst happen to Artin.”

“You are not renouncing!” mother snarls, standing and jabbing a finger at me. “Even if you did, you are still my child. What happens when they kidnap you too, to get to me? Or get to Elena?” She pauses, taking a deep breath and sitting down. “You would be the worst leader this nation has ever had, no doubt. But you would ensure the dynasty remains intact. Yes, the entire empire deserves Artin or Elena. But I cannot take you off the

table, much as I wish to. We need you here. The Empire needs you here, not living some fantasy about making your own way in life.”

I stand and and turn away, feeling my throat constrict. *Asera?* Without turning, I speak, blinking back tears, “Very well...Five years ago, I asked you a question,” I take a deep breath. “Is your answer the same?”

“I don’t-”

I spin around, the tears flowing freely now. “Is your answer the same?”

Mother pauses, clearly thinking. Elena, normally giddy at things like this, was intently staring at a spot on the floor. Finally, she speaks. “I cannot change my answer.”

“Well then *my* answer is still no too.” I manage to get out, turning to the door.

I hid behind a bush, in the gardens, and cried. Statue tried to say comforting things, but I ignored it. I just sat there, weeping like an idiot. Coming here had been a mistake. I had done so well, free of them, free of all this. But it was all coming back now. The fight. Screaming. Storming out the doors. The last five years I had done so much to put this behind me, and all of it had been undone in one night.

I hear footsteps. Familiar. I look up to see Elena peering over the bushes. “Come to rub it in?” I ask, turning away from her.

“Mind if I join you?” she says. If I didn’t know better, I would have said her voice sounded concerned. I didn’t respond, so she came around the bushes anyway, sitting down next to me. “I brought you something.”

I glance over. She’s holding something, wrapped in paper. “When we were younger, I would always ask the cook for a sweetbread. He’d always say no. But you would always sneak in and grab me one. So I thought I’d return the favor.” She sets it next to my leg.

“You think a piece of bread is going to change my mind?” I ask angrily.

“Asera, I’m so sorry for what happened in there. I never...I told her you would say no, but she insisted. I tried.”

“Yeah, it would have been bad if I agreed to that. Now it’s one less person between you and the throne. Congratulations.”

She takes a deep breath, pausing for a minute, before speaking. “I don’t want the throne. Well, that’s not true. Of course I want it. But, it’s not

---

mine. I'm third in line. It's Artin's throne, after Mother...I know you don't want it, but I'm sure she'll come around, let you--"

"It's been five years and she hasn't changed her mind yet. Don't lie to me."

"You don't know how it's been, with you gone. I know we didn't always get along, especially later, but I miss you. Artin misses you."

"Well," I say, clearing my throat, "You knew where I was. Five years. I haven't moved."

"Artin is the crown prince, he couldn't...not without a squad of soldiers following him. He knew you were hiding. As for myself...Ever since Artin went missing, I've been thinking...I haven't been a very good sister to you. I know it's too late, but--" I cut her off.

"When I first left, you sent me letters," I say angrily. I didn't have to see her to know she froze in place, "Every week, a letter. I read every one. I stopped reading Mother's, because they were all the same, but yours were new every time."

"Asera, please don't--"

"Every single one was different, it was unique, every time. I still have them all, you know. In a box in my home. When I start to feel good, when I forget what this family put me through. I open that box and I read every single one."

"Asera, I know more words can't undo what I did, what I said," Elena says. I glance over at her, surprised to see tears rolling down her cheeks. "I know I don't act like it, but I hope one day you can forgive me for what I did, what we all did..." she trails off, and there is silence for a minute. For two minutes. For five minutes, before she speaks up again, her voice unsteady. "I don't care what happens with the throne. I don't care about Mother, or Father, or Artin, or the entire Empire. But...no matter what happens, can we still be sisters?"



# Chapter 7

## Silence

*Asera...I know it's not my place to ask...but what happened five years ago?* Statue asks as I walk down the road back towards the East ward, holding the carefully-wrapped sweetbread. Elena and I had spent an hour behind that hedge, catching up on each other's lives. I knew she probably had some sort of devious plan in place, but I had to admit it had been nice to go back to what it was before. Before everything.

*Asera?* Statue repeats.

*There is a very long list of things I do not intend on ever telling you. What happened five years ago is at the top of that list,* I reply.

*I'm just trying to help,* it says dejectedly. I ignore it and continue down the road. Who would have taken my brother? Sapphire had been free of war and strife for the past thirty years, besides occasional scuffles with the eastern tribes. Could those bandits have been targeting me in particular? I didn't understand. I'd done a good job distancing myself from my past, how did they find out? Lost in thought, I walk down the road, exiting the Inner Ward.

"Asera!" I hear someone shouting my name, shaking back into reality. I look up to see Dainyl, out of his armor, waving from the intersection. I wave back and run over to meet him, giving him a quick hug. We continue down the street, heading towards my house.

"You...did you see her?" He asks simply.

"Yeah," I respond, kicking at a loose rock as we walk, "Went about as well as you'd expect."

Dainyl shakes his head, "I'm sorry, Asera."

"Me too."

"So...what did she want?"

I sigh. "To drop everything and come home."

"I'm guessing by the lack of guards around you, you said no?"

"Something that like," I say bitterly. "She hasn't changed a bit. Elena, though...I don't think she's taking it well."

"Why do you say that?" he asks.

"For a brief moment I thought she had a heart. I want to believe her, but after everything..."

Dainyl is silent as we walk. Eventually, he pipes up. "Did you use that healing remedy?"

"I did," I say, smiling, "Awful stuff, but hopefully it'll work. How long should it take?"

He looks at me—or more specifically my nose, before responding. "Maybe a week?"

I laugh, "I don't think I can take another week of 'Asera, Asera, what happened to your nose?'. You have no idea."

He looks down at me, a smile on his face, "I'll be happy to see you back in one piece."

*Ugh, my statue pipes up. Just take him to bed already.*

*Excuse me?*

*This is pathetic. I led armies, and I'm stuck in some girl's head listening to—*

*Nobody made you get in my head, I respond.*

*Don't act like this isn't your fault, Asera. If you hadn't gone down into tha—*

"Oh just *shut up* already!" I yell, clutching my temples, "I don't ask about *your business*, so shut up about mine!"

My hands shoot up to my mouth, realizing what I just did. Dainyl is staring down at me, an unsure expression on his face. "I...I don't know how to respond to that," he says, a touch of sadness entering his voice.

"No! No, I didn't—" I freeze. Would he believe me? Would I believe me? "Dainyl...I didn't mean...I wasn't yelling at you."

“Oh? Who were you yelling at then?” He says, sadness mixed with anger, gesturing at the empty street around us. “Who, Asera?”

“I...I need to tell you something...but you have to believe me,” I say.

“What is it?”

“Can we...talk inside? Home is just around the corner.” I ask.

I resume walking, Dainyl following me, a frustrated expression on his face. *Asera...*

*Do. Not. Speak.* I said to it curtly, increasing my pace. Dainyl keeps pace, he looks at me as we walk. “Asera, I didn’t mean to be nosy, if-”

“It’s fine,” I reply. “I’m just...here.” We arrive at the door to my house. I unlock it and rush in. “Upstairs,” I say curtly, pointing towards the narrow stairs and heading up them. The small single room is cramped, but I didn’t want to talk downstairs. I sit down on my bed, pointing Dainyl at one of the chairs by my makeshift table.

“Asera, what’s going on?” He asks, sitting at the table while looking around. Inkblot saunters over, sniffing at his leg.

I take a deep breath. “When...before I was attacked...something else happened. There was a storm, I took shelter in a cave and waited for it to pass.” *Asera...* “I...it wasn’t natural, there was...I don’t know, some sort of temple? It was dug into the back of the cave.” *Asera, this is a bad idea.*

He shakes his head, “There’s hundreds of old temples out there, buried in the mountains. What’s your point?”

“Inside, there was...this little statue,” *Stop! You don’t know what you are doing!* I ignore its complaints and continue, “Nobody had been down there in ages, dust everywhere. I thought I’d take a look.”

Dainyl raises an eyebrow, but says nothing. I take a breath to continue, but stop when I feel the bundle of emotions stirring. Trying to grab control. *No! I have to do this!* I shout at it, trying to open my mouth to speak, but it won’t let me. I can’t even breathe.

“Asera, are you okay?”

*You do not know what you are doing. You can’t just tell people about me!* the statue yells at me, *What do you think he’s going to say?*

“Asera!” Dainyl grabs us-me-by the shoulders, shaking me slightly. “What’s happening?”

*This is not your body, statue. It isn’t your choice!* I scream, trying to

wrest back control.

*You think you can trust him? Some city guard you have a crush on?*

*You have no idea what you're talking about. I've known him for years. Let. Go. Of. My body! I'm beginning to feel lightheaded, unable to breathe, locked in place with no control. Let go, statue. That's all you are now, a statue locked in a poor girl's head.*

*I am more than a statue! More than some spirit stuck in your head! I have a say too.*

*I don't care.* At that, I feel its grip on me faltering. I manage a ragged breath. *I didn't want you in my head. I don't want you in it now. You are a curse, nothing more!* Shock and betrayal from the statue. For the longest moment, I wait, unsure. Then it lets go. I shiver and collapse into Dainyl's arms.

"Asera, are you okay?" he repeats, looking at me with concern.

"I..." I pause, waiting for the statue to attack. Nothing. "Sorry. It didn't want me to tell you. It tried to stop me."

"It? What is...you don't mean-"

"The statue, it...it's a spirit or something, I don't know. But when I touched it, it...it's inside my head now, talking to me with my own voice. Invading my dreams. I don't know what to do. When...when I was attacked, the bandits, there were two of them. I...wasn't doing well. They had me on the ground, but...it took over." I let out a sob, throwing my arms around him. "I can't stop seeing what...what I did to them."

"It's okay, Asera," he responds, "You didn't do those things, it did."

"No," I cry out, "The blood was on my hands, not its. I heard them beg, to leave them alive. Begging me for mercy." My throat seizes up.

"Asera, look at me." I blink away the tears, raising my head to look up into his deep blue eyes. "Whatever it did, that's on it. You're still the woman I know...can it...can it hear me?"

I nod. "It's...still there."

His gaze becomes determined. "Then let it hear this. Spirit, if you ever put this woman in danger, or try to harm her in any way, you will have me to answer to. In the presence of the Six Gods I swear I will end you."

It has been two days since that night. Still nothing from the damned statue. I could feel it, a little bundle of emotions wrapped up in the back

of my mind, but it did nothing. It no longer gave off feelings or emotions towards me, and certainly not words. I was happy for the peace and quiet, but worried...it was still in there.

The door to the shop opens, and I turn around to see Elena. "I didn't get the impression you particularly liked the place," I say, raising an eyebrow at her clothes. Last time she had shown up like she was, well, a noble woman who had to go talk to the commoners. Today, though, she was in...actually, other than the way she carried herself, she blended right in. Dark green pants, a plain whitish shirt, and a brown jacket. Almost looked like a real person.

She sniffs, "Don't expect me to pretend to."

"I trust you didn't bring the entire Imperial guard down the street?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "I managed to sneak out last time, but they've insisted on a compromise. Two guards, plainclothes, shadowing me. I don't speak to them, they don't speak to me. But," she gestures to her clothes, "they made me wear...this. I'm wearing the clothes of one of their daughters!" she cries out, aghast.

"That sounds awful." I reply sarcastically.

"You have no idea," she says, a crack of a smile appearing.

"Come upstairs. I have a stew going." I say, leading her up to the room. I laugh at the reaction on her face as she sees the cramped quarters.

"How...why would you do this to yourself?" she asks, "And why are you sleeping with animals?"

"Oh! That's Pagan," I say, pointing at the tabby curled up sleeping on my bed. "She's nice, but lazy. Inkblot is around here somewhere...oh, there he is!" I point a finger toward the stove, where Inkblot was glaring out from under. As I point, he meows, making a beeline for Elena's legs. She freezes, petrified, as he scrapes his side off on her legs, purring contentedly. Of course he would like my sister. "Here, have a seat. I'll fill you a bowl." I toss a loaf of bread at her, and ladle out two bowls.

"I didn't know you cooked," she said between spoonfuls of goat stew, "and this bread is good."

I smile, "It's hard to mess up stew, and the bread is from next door," I reply, "Hardly cooking."

I hear the back door open. "Asera?" Ninla calls out.

"I'm upstairs!" I yell, eyes widening. "Don't tell her," I hiss at my sister, who nods. A few seconds later, Ninla's head pops up from below. "Hey Ninla."

"You would not believe what just happened!" she says, a strange expression on her face. "First you come back from Dawn looking like a bandit, and just now I had these two men come in, trying to act like they didn't have longswords under their cloaks. What sort of neighborhood is this turning into? Oh! I'm sorry, I don't believe Asera has introduced us." She comes the rest of the way upstairs, stopping to stand over the table, a wide smile on her face.

"Oh, right, yes!" I exclaim, sinking down into my seat. "Uh...this is Ninla, she owns the bakery next door."

Elena smiles, "I'm Asera's sister, Eryn. Nice to meet you."

"I didn't even know Asera had family in the city, much less living here," Ninla says, looking at me. I dig myself deeper into the chair.

"Oh, well, I just moved here, from the east."

"I see. Well, I'll stop bothering you two. Nice to meet you, Eryn. You should come by more, this one hardly ever sates my curiosity."

## Chapter 8

# The Tower

I stare out of the window from my bed, Pagan purring contentedly against my side. Still nothing from the statue. I know it was still there, but it hadn't made a peep since that evening two nights ago. I look down at the scrap of paper in my hands. The words, unintelligible to me. But they seemed important. My dreams were still shattered messes, fragments of a different life leaking into my own. I couldn't remember what they were when I woke up, though, only that they had happened. The end result of the dreams was that I could hardly sleep, waking up abruptly in the night, unable to fall back asleep. At this point I was almost willing to visit the market for some of that tea.

Eventually, though, sleep takes hold of me, carrying me away into its unknown depths.

I climb the steps of the Tower of the Arcane, careful not to drop the tower of books in my hands. The wizards' tower was as ominous as always, a gleaming white spire jutting out of the Northern Ward. Wizards, Mages, and their helpers scurried in and out every way. More knowledge kept here than anywhere else on the continent, it was truly a spectacle.

At the top of the stairs, I enter the building. No doors, just openings to pass through. Magical barriers kept rain out and heat in-or out, should the weather call for it. The inside of the building is large and open, a combination of clever architecture and magical reinforcement allowing for a spectacularly large atrium. The ceiling is perhaps fifty feet up, and from

the center of it an opening permits a waterfall, shimmering down into a garden sunk into the floor of the tower. They did like to show off, it is true. I take a second set of stairs wrapping around the outside of the room, stopping at the third level and heading down one of the hallways. Around me, I can feel the magic shimmering, making my skin tingle. Around me, countless rooms full of wizards and mages performing the old magic and the new. Even inside, there are no doors. Wide openings in the walls reveal offices, lecture halls, even in one room a small patch of farmland. I knew barriers muffled any noise from the rooms, but it was still unsettling to see, for example, a wizard smashing giant boulders of ice into stone targets, and barely hearing a thump.

Eventually I come across the room I'm looking for. A large lecture hall, although only perhaps ten of the seats are filled, with men and women of all ages. At the front a man stands, clad in the traditional robes of a high-order wizard. I pass through the entryway, the sense of magical tingling becoming stronger for a second. The wizard's lecture pops to full volume as I enter. I set the pile of books down in an empty chair and lean against the wall, waiting for the lecture to finish.

"...have tended to be random. As you know, of the two schools of magic, wizardry, the oldest, is in various forms present in every culture across the world. However, the second school, magery, it is unique to us. No human born outside of Sapphire has manifested the spark for magery," Ultra says. He is tall and thin, in his forties, although his graying hair does its best to make him look more aged.

"Then, how does one tell if that spark is there?" One of the students, a young boy hardly older than twelve, asks.

"Well, typically you tell when they start popping spells off by mistake. Just as a hatched bird will instinctively know how to fly once it is old enough, our magic works the same way. However, at a certain age, a wizard can determine through...less experimental...methods, whether a person has the spark or not." Ultra nods as he speaks, "That age isn't exact, but in about 90 percent of cases, you can see it by age fourteen. For example, young miss Asera here," Ultra jabs his trademark wooden pointer in my general direction, "Look at her aura, sense it. Then look at mine. Spot the differences."

I blush when the entire lecture hall turns to stare at me, giving a joking glare towards Ulra. After a very-uncomfortable moment, Ulra speaks again, "Now, Cerryl, tell me what differences you saw."

The young man speaks up again. "Well...I know we all see aura in our own ways, but to me you give off a sense of...if it were a color it would be a deep blue. She comes across as...sort of a gray, but with a touch of green, barely there..."

Ulra nods. "In my case, when I say spark I mean so literally. In all of you I see a bright spark in your hearts. In Asera's, it is there, yes, but much dimmer, hardly there at all. She is what we would call arcane sensitive. Does anyone know what that means? It means she cannot use magic, but can sense it, I believe as a buzzing, yes?"

I clear my throat, "More of a tingling. Like the feeling you get when something just barely touches your arm."

"Ah, yes. People like miss Asera here are what the gods put in place to keep us in line. At casual glance she appears as the vast majority would, only the dimmest spark of magical talent in her aura, and yet she can feel our power's presence nearly as well as we can. I would advise the more nefarious of you to avoid placing a charm spell on her...That is all for now, do not forget your reading for tomorrow."

As the students filter out, I pick up the pile of books back up and follow Ulra over to his office, a small cubby on the other side of the room. "I apologize for putting you on the spot like that, but your gift is rarer than even the spark of magery. I doubt there are more than a handful like you in the city."

"It's fine. I don't know about that 'keeping us in line' business, though. Not much I can do besides feel magic happening, certainly not stop it," I reply.

"Well, they don't have to know that just yet. They're still new, they think they're the gods' gift to humankind. I'll take all the help I can get to put them in their place," he says with a smile, taking the pile of books from me and setting them on his desk. "I wasn't expecting these back for a couple more days."

"I had a couple restless nights, so I was able to get them done faster," I respond with a smile, "Five copies of each section you had marked."

“Yes, thank you. I’ll make sure the expense staff puts in a bonus for early delivery. Although I must say, with your injuries you should be getting more sleep, not less, especially recovering from an infection like you are.”

“Okay, the nose I can understand, but how did you get the infection?” I ask incredulously.

He smiles, “As you know, my specialty is medicinal wizardry. Your aura tells me all I need to know...I heard about your brother. I know you two haven’t been close, but still...I hope they find him safe and sound.”

I nod, “Myself as well. Everything else aside, you of all people should know the awkward position I’m in with him gone.”

He smiles, “That’s not all you’re here for, is it?”

“Still not subtle enough for you? I’ll have to try harder then,” I pull a piece of paper from my pocket, handing it to him. “When I was in Dawn, I saw an illustration, of these words carved on a pedestal. It didn’t provide a translation, unfortunately.”

Ulra squints and peers closer at the words, a frown spreading across his face. “It wouldn’t, this is...an old tongue. You said you found this in Dawn?”

“Yes, in one of the books in their royal library.” I lie, hoping Ulra was too engrossed with the mystery to detect it.

“Hmm, yes. A strange spot for it, I suppose, but I doubt there’s a spot this tongue wouldn’t be strange...I cannot translate it, I’m afraid I only know bits and pieces and this has none of them in it. I would offer a transliteration, but I doubt that would be much good. However. One of the mages up in the archives has a knack for this sort of thing...if you aren’t busy, there’s a mage up in the archives who has a knack for the old tongues.”

“Sure,” I reply. “I’ve got a few minutes before I need to be back at the shop.”

Ulra nods and leads me outside. We return back to the main room of the tower, heading further and further up the stairs until we are above the waterfall. I’d never been this far up in the tower, and I was surprised to feel the tingling feeling of magic get even stronger. “I wouldn’t have thought wizards and wages would want to climb this far,” I remark.

“They don’t,” Ulra responds. “The tower is built right above a leystone, a strong one at that. Until midway through the Third Dynasty we used

---

that leystone's power to protect the valley from the worst of the weather, making it hospitable to humans."

"That was...hundreds of years ago, though?" I respond questioningly.

"The amount of magical power to do that is...immense. You're feeling the residual energy. We've barred off some of the rooms entirely, in fact. The energy is so strong in them, even a common person would be able to feel it. Think about how strong that magic is. A wizard like me or a sensitive like you would be in agonizing pain." I shudder at the idea. "But, here we are." Ulra says, stopping at a landing. It opens into a surprisingly-narrow, dimly-lit hallway. Still much wider than necessary, but it seemed downright reasonable compared to the gaping cavity below. He leads me through a labyrinth of hallways, passing countless rooms full of wizards and mages reading, taking notes, sorting piles of books. *If I were a mage, or a wizard, this is where I would be*, I say to Statue, before forgetting he had fallen silent. That strikes me with a twinge of sadness, for some reason.

"Ah, here we are," Ulra says, passing through a doorway and into a small, but tall-ceilinged room, most of which is taken up by a large stone covered in mysterious carvings, which appeared to be no bigger than my thumb. A woman, older looking and in mage's robes, stands on a tall ladder peering intently at the carvings twenty feet up on the rock. "Arien, young miss Asera here has brought me a puzzler."

The woman turns around on her ladder and looks down at us, a smile on her wrinkled face. "You always do bring me good ones," she says in a gravelly tone, stepping off the ladder and landing with a thud in front of us. I raise an eyebrow, and she winks at me, "No sense wasting time, climbing down that rickety thing, kid." She grabs my piece of paper from Ulra and sets it down on a nearby table, "Hmm, yes, this does not disappoint. You, scribe girl, grab a piece of paper and write down what I say." What? How? "Your left hand is inkstained where it touches the paper. You also smell like cats. Are you ready to copy?"

"Oh, uh...one second...okay, go ahead." Arien proceeds to rattle off strange-sounding words I didn't pretend to understand. I hoped she didn't mind that I was guessing on half the spellings. She continues for about a minutes, then glances over at me. "Did you get all that?"

I nod, handing her the piece of paper as she reaches out for it. She gives

a cursory glance at my notes and nods, grabbing a book from a nearby pile, flipping to a couple seemingly-random pages and scribbling her own notes next to mine on a couple of the words. I'm not the type of person to gloat, but her handwriting was atrocious.

After about a minute, she snaps the book shut and turns to face us. "This is not just old language, but old magic. An enchantment, placed upon a leystone. It binds one's spirit to a...totem, or idol. The leystone would become a prison, to lock that spirit away until the leystone's magic is drained. Which, even on a minor stone, is thousands of years. Millions, perhaps. There is only one way out of that prison." She turns and stares at me, getting less than a foot from my face. "Scribe girl, when you found this what did it look like?"

"I...I didn't, I was in Dawn recently, and found it in their--"

"I spent ten years in that library, scribe girl. Dawn hasn't added a new book to it in twenty. Nice try."

I glance over at Ulra, who is silent, simply watching. "It...it was empty. Words written on an empty pedestal."

She nods, "Then you should consider yourself very lucky."

"Why...why is that?" I ask nervously.

"Because, if you were...the direct translation is something like 'daughter of a chieftain's blood', so certainly nobility, although I doubt minor nobles would count, these old spells are both ambiguous and fickle. But if you were such a daughter, and you broke this spell, you would effectively indicate that you had pardoned the imprisoned spirit of whatever crimes had placed it there. However, to prevent that from happening...on a whim, so to speak, they added...conditions. Made it a sacrifice, if you will."

Ulra speaks up, himself now staring at me intently as well, "And what conditions would those be?"

"Well. If the spell was in place, and if our scribe girl happened to be royal, and was stupid enough to break the spell without knowing what it meant, her soul and that of the spirit would share her body until both their deaths. They would feel each other's emotions, hear each other's thoughts, eventually they would experience each other's memories, their souls intertwining, remaining distinct, but sharing a bond more intimate and violating than any other. There is no way to undo this curse, it will last

forever, permanently bouncing about in your head...The price of mercy.”

For the first time since four nights ago, I felt the statue stir.



# Chapter 9

## Regret

“Asera.” ... “Asera, listen to me.” ...

I feel myself being pulled away, out of the room. Everything feels cloudy, my hearing muffled, vision blurry. *Why?*

*Why what?*

*Why did you let me do that?*

*Free me? I was trapped in that spell for...I don't know how long. Even if I was able to stop you from doing it, I wouldn't have.*

“Asera, I need to ask you some questions.”

*I didn't want this. I didn't know!*

*I'm sorry, Asera. But what's done is done.*

*Easy for you to say! You don't have to spend the rest of your days with a spirit trapped in your head.*

*No. Instead I spend the rest of my days being the spirit.*

“Asera, you need to talk to me.”

*What...what did you do?*

*Do?*

*To get put in that...in that prison. What crime could be so terrible to merit that punishment?*

*I...I was a general, a long time ago. We were losing our homeland. Villages I'd known since a child reduced to charred timber. So I switched tactics. Fought them from the shadows. Killed a lot of their men. We still lost the war. I led the armies, so they blamed the...blamed it on me.*

*I see.* For a brief second, my vision was filled with a flash. A battlefield. Dead soldiers everywhere. Lying in a ditch, unable to move my leg. "Asera, come back to me." Soldiers pulling me off the ground. For some reason I knew they weren't mine.

*So. We're stuck together now.*

*Yes...sorry for what I said to you.*

*Don't be. It was true. For a woman like you, I certainly am a curse.*

In the back of my mind, in the world, my body feels a growing tingling. Suddenly it starts spasming, all of my muscles going tense. I scream, reality agonizingly pulled to the forefront.

Ulra is looming above me, his outstretched hand on my chest, tendrils of smoke rising over his hand. I'm laying down...somewhere. Still in the tower?

"What was that for?" I yell at him, trying to get up. He pushes me back down.

"Asera. You need to stay with us right now." he says. "I need to ask you some things."

"Okay?"

"What is your name."

"Really?" His looks implies that he is, in fact, serious. I roll my eyes. "Asera."

"When were you born?"

"Twenty years ago, in the winter. Fourteen days after the longest night."

"What do you do for a living?"

"Besides get asked pointless questions?"

"Asera."

"Fiine. I'm a scribe, I write things down."

"Okay." Ulra grabs my arm and pulls me up into a sitting position. I see I am back in Ulra's office. Arien leans against the wall, staring at me with her arms crossed. "Now, who else knows besides us?"

"Knows?" I ask.

"About the spirit."

"Oh...I told...a friend. Dainyl. That's it."

"And you trust him not to tell anyone else?" Ulra asks. I simply nod.

“Okay. from this moment on, nobody else. Under no conditions. There are those who would use this against you.”

“Against me? I’m just a scribe.”

“Oh, cut the act. I figured it out within the first three minutes of seeing you,” Arien cuts in. “You know what your enemies—our enemies—could do if they learned about this? Because I do.”

I shake my head. “I’m renouncing my claim. I should’ve done it five years ago. I don’t deserve it.”

Arien opens her mouth to retort, but Ulra raises a hand. “Don’t, Arien. You’ll only waste your breath. As for you,” he says, “With your brother gone, you are now the biggest target in Sapphire, whether you like it or not. I remembered watching you train, when you were growing up. I’m assuming your...other half...did the fighting?”

“Yes,” I reply resentfully.

Ulra nods. “Can your spirit hear me?”

Yes. “Yes.”

“Then this advice is for it. You are now the protector of this woman, whether you like it or not. Defend her with your life, for your life is now hers. My understanding is that changing control of the body is...distracting. You must therefore also train her to fight, for when matters are too urgent for you to take over.”

*This man is quite full of himself, isn't he? Like I was just going to let you die.*

“It says okay.” I reply.

“Good. On the bright side.” Ulra’s lips crack into a smirklike smile. “I think we’ve finally found a weapons instructor you won’t flirt with.”

*I don't think this is going to work,* Statue comments. It still had an uncomfortably-similar voice to my own mental voice, but its own voice was starting to trickle in. I couldn’t wait to stop hearing myself talking to me.

*Do you have any better ideas without causing attention?* I respond.

I’m standing in the tiny back yard that myself and Ninla shared. The damned short sword is strapped to my back. Statue had apparently taken Ulra’s demands to heart, insisting I begin as soon as I closed the shop up for the evening.

*There's only so much I can tell you, at some point you'll need to spar against an actual opponent.*

*I'll just ask Dainyl, I respond, But I'd rather not make a complete fool of myself doing so. What do I do?*

*Okay. Draw your sword and get in a ready stance. Lower down. No. Lower. You're leaning too far back, your enemy could just push you over. Lower...you really aren't good at this, are you? Surely you remember anything from previous instructors?*

*My last one was rather flexible and had a cute face, I remember that much.*

*You're disgusting, you know that right?...Okay, let's try this way. Let me take over and show you the proper stance.*

*What! No!*

*Asera...if we're stuck with each other we need to be able to work together. Plus, you've proven yourself able to steal back control multiple times. Just relax and let me demonstrate.*

*I...fine. I feel Statue trying to take over, and catch myself before I try to shut him out. I exhale deeply, and pull my mental barriers back. I feel my body slowly being taken over, and while it was uncomfortable it was certainly less panic-inducing than the other times. Statue takes a breath, and adjusts our grip on the short sword.*

*Okay...like this...er, not quite. Sorry, I'm used to doing this in a body that isn't short and...well...female. But your proper stance: lower than you were earlier, not leaning back, just balanced.*

*I think I see...I feel Statue giving back control and I take it, relieved. I settle back into what I thought was the right position.*

*Almost right, but you're too tense. You need to hold yourself ready to move in an instant.*

*I am doing that! I'm perfectly relaxed.*

*I beg to differ. Here...*

*It was going to be a long evening.*

"Lady Asera visited the Tower yesterday. She was inside for several hours, then returned straight home," Ammitar, the royal spymaster, says.

The Empress nods, "And what was her business there?"

---

“She had a commission she was returning to the wizard Ulra. Though that would not explain why she was there so long.”

“The two do know each other, perhaps they were catching up? He was the one, correct?”

“That could be possible, but...” Ammitar takes a sip from his wineglass, peering across the table at the Empress, “My contact reports they went upstairs, to the tower archives. They were unable to follow, but did say Lady Asera seemed to be in great distress when they came back down.”

“Hmm...”

“There was...one other thing. Upon returning to her home in the East Ward, she almost immediately began practicing with that short sword she picked up on her travels.”

“Really? And you know Asera’s...history...with weapons training?” she asks, raising an eyebrow, “Who is she receiving instruction from?”

“That’s what makes the matter puzzling. According to the mage performing the scrying, she seemed to be...training herself. Now normally we would assume she is reading some book on combat forms, but were that the case she would not be picking up things as quickly as she should. Someone is training her, and we’re not sure how.”

“Very well. Continue to monitor, and inform me of any new developments. That will be all, Ammitar.”

“By your command, Empress.”

“Hmm. It is a bit battered, but I’d be happy to clean it up for you,” the blacksmith states, examining my short sword closely, “Where did a girl like you get a weapon like this, anyway?”

“The previous owner didn’t need in anymore,” I say with a smile, “How much to get it cleaned and sharpened?”

“Half a silver, and I’ll throw in some cleaning oil. If that’s agreeable, come back in half an hour and it should be ready.”

“Sounds like a deal,” I say, setting some coins on the table and heading out the door. Statue had insisted, saying a dull sword was as good as useless against a trained enemy. I still thought the whole business was a slight waste of time, though. Nobody knew who I was outside of the Imperial Palace, after all.

Across the street from the blacksmith, a small tavern. I go in for a bite of lunch, sitting back and listening to the rumors of the day. Close enough to half an hour. I run back across the street.

"There you are, miss," the heavy-built man says as I enter, handing over the sword. I unsheathed it, running my eyes over the now-gleaming sword. "That sword has certainly seen some history, but I did the best I could. The worst of the pitting is gone, and she'll cut like a razor now. If you've the money and time, I'd recommend having it reforged to get rid of the rest of the damage. It's old, but that's good steel underneath."

I smile and resheath it, throwing it over my head to rest on my back, "Thank you." *A new sheath? That bloodstained old thing dæs attract some attention, especially if you want to carry it in public.*

*I don't, not particularly.*

*It would probably be for the best. Someone is going to find out eventually, you know? Ask if he has any sheathes for sale,* Statue insists. Fine. "Say, you wouldn't happen to know where a girl could get a new sheath for this? I'm afraid the, uh, bloodstains won't come out."

He laughs, "I thought you were going to ask. I don't have anything here that would fit, but my sister-in-law is a leatherworker over in the Northeast Ward. If you'd like, I could send her the work, and she could deliver it to you once it's done."

"Sure. What would I owe you?"

"She charges around two silvers for something like that, depending on complexity. Payment on delivery."

"Count me in. Something simple." I give him directions to my shop and exit, heading home. I can't help but shake the feeling like I'm being watched, though.

# Chapter 10

## Bells

The people in the crowded street leap out of the way as a horse gallops down the center of the street, its rider clinging on for dear life. A man, young, too young to be a soldier, but there he was. His burnished steel breastplate shines in the late evening summer sun as he's waved into the Inner Ward by guards. He makes a beeline for the Imperial Palace, leaping off his horse at the gates.

"Your Highness, a messenger from the search party has arrived. He said it was urgent," a servant whispers into the Empress's ear.

"Send him in," she replies, rising from the throne. "I apologize, but we must continue this audience later. I'm certain the tax situation in the eastern holdings can wait until tomorrow." The assembled lords and ladies grumbled, but left the throne room. She nods to the doorman. "Whenever this messenger is ready."

Right away, the doors open, and the messenger rushes in, his helm in hand. He approaches the throne, kneeling nervously. "Your Highness, news from the western search party." He had been rushed in so fast, he still carried a sword. The Imperial Guard was clearly on edge at this, but remain back for now.

"You may rise. What news do you bring?" The Empress asks, remaining standing.

"I am..." He swallows. "I am saddened to report that we found Lord Artin's remains three days ago."

The Empress pauses. "Are you sure it was him?" she asks, trying to

keep worry from her voice.

“I was sent with the news as soon as the mages and Lord Vale confirmed it,” he says with regret.

“Pliana, have my children brought here, quickly,” One of her guards nods and rushes out the doors of the throne room. “Messenger, is there any word on who did this?”

“The search party was still where we-at the scene. I overheard Lord Vale as I was leaving, saying they had to carry on and find the culprits.”

Behind the throne, the door leading to the anteroom opens and shuts.

Elena sips her wine and takes another bite of the delicious trout the servants had brought up. It had been a quiet day, and she had decided to take dinner in her chambers, reading a book as she ate. Reading at dinner! If any more of Asera’s habits fell on her she would no doubt start dressing like a peasant and living in the East Ward. Although, as much as she hated to admit, part of her was envious of the simple life her older sister led. She yawns and blinks away some of the tiredness in her eyes. For as little actual work she had done today, it was surprising to be tired this early. She stands and walks over to a window, glancing outside. Barely sunset. Perhaps the book was just boring.

Asera had recommended it, a history discussing the eastern rebellion late in the Third Dynasty. It certainly wasn’t exciting, but it was part of her duty to know her Empire’s history if she were forced to lead it someday. She sits back at the table and takes another sip of wine, returning to the book. Strange. She squints and blinks her eyes, having trouble focusing her vision. She suppresses another yawn, shaking her head to clear it. Something wasn’t right. She glances at the dinner. Could it be?

Her legs are like lead as she stands, dragging them towards the door to grab a servant. Had someone drugged her food? At that thought, her legs give out, and she collapses to the ground, striking her head on the tile floor. Just before she goes under, she hears what sounds like bells, ringing in the distance.

I flip to the next page of the book with one hand, my other giving Pagan head scratches. We’re both curled up on the bed, catching the evening breeze as it wanders in through the open windows. I sigh, setting the

book down and rubbing a hand across my sore muscles. A couple months of practice and I was still sore in the evenings. I glance at the sword, sitting in the corner by the stairs. According to Statue, I was still “awful, just dreadful” but I’d been confident enough to start sparring with Dainyl. Which meant I was sore and also covered in welts from the wooden practice weapons. I pick the book back up, a manual of sorts on battle strategy Statue had insisted I read as soon as it had shown up on my shelves.

A minute later, I pause, feeling a familiar tingle of magic on the back of my neck. I was fairly certain some magic user had moved in nearby, because it had been happening more and more lately. I put the feeling in the back of my head and turn the page. Another tingle, and I set the book down again. Whispers from out the open window.

“...said this was it...sure?”

Curious, I lean over, taking a peek to see who was lost. Just in time to feel a painful flare of magic, and see a fireball hurling towards my face. I duck, and it flies through the window, splashing against the back wall and exploding flames all over. *Asera, get out now!* Statue screams at me. Pagan and Inkblot yowl and disappear down the stairs. I leap towards the short sword, thanking the gods that the fire didn’t land around it, and rush down the stairs.

*What’s going on?* I ask, panicked.

A loud thump from the front door of my shop, the thick door shaking. *Back door! Get to Ninla’s.* I slam open the back door and leap across the small yard. Ninla’s back door is open, her pair of employees trying to catch the evening breeze. I run in, Pagan and Inkblot flying between my feet, and slam the door shut behind me. One of the men turns around in surprise. “Barricade that door now!” I yell. “NINLA! GET DOWN HERE!” I run towards the front of the bakery, drawing my sword as I see two unsavory-looking types enter the shop. One of them points at me and shouts something. They both rush towards me, swinging swords. I duck one, parrying the other with a loud clang. I swing around at one, leaving a slash across his sword arm. The other kicks at me, striking my shin. I grunt in pain, flailing my sword at him. Somehow I get a solid hit, and he reels back, blood pouring from a slash across his face. I turn back to the first man, easily parrying his offhand attack and driving my sword into his chest. Before I have time

to think, I yank it out, pushing him away and turning my attention to the other attacker. Blood covering his eyes, he takes a blind swing at me, and I barely duck away in time, a small nick on my arm the only cost. I slash at him, striking him in the arm. I feel queasy as I feel the sword hit bone, and pull back. He reels away, crying out. *Statue, I..I can't do this.*

*I'm ready. Let me take over.* I take a breath, relaxing as I feel Statue's presence over my limbs. With fluid precision, I-Statue drives the sword into the second man's chest. We turn back around. Ninla and Tad are at the base of the stairs. Ninla has her mouth covered with both hands, and Tad looks terrified. "None of you happen to know swordsmanship, do you?" I ask, leaning down and grabbing a sword. They shake their heads, as do the two baker's assistants from the back. I toss the sword at Tad, who barely catches it. "They are not here for you, but if one of them goes through that door they will try and kill you. My shop is on fire." Statue turns my body around and walks out the front door.

Outside, perhaps ten men. One in what appeared to be wizard's robes, the rest in assorted bits of armor. *I..Statue, that's a lot of people.*

*I know,* he replies. The wizard, clearly in some leadership role, steps forward. "Lady Asera, you really are not that hard to find."

"Who are you and what do you want with me?" Statue replies, raising my sword.

"The Fourth Dynasty must end, girl. You are in our way."

Behind me, I hear Ninla shout, "Fourth Dynasty? What's he talking about, Asera?" Statue glances back. Ninla is holding the other sword unsteadily. "Asera, we're not going down with a fight," she says shakily. *Tell them to stay back, Statue.*

*We need all the help we can get, Asera.*

*No! They'll only get killed. Leave them out of this.*

*They have nowhere to escape. This is the only way.* Statue nods, "Very well, then. The Gods will remember this day," he says solemnly in my voice. We step forward, a determined stare at the mage.

"Hmm. Fine. Take care of this, I'd rather not set the city on fire," the wizard says with a scowl, stepping back. The soldiers-assassins?-rush forward with a yell. Our grip tightens on the sword, and a second later we are in battle. The clanging of steel on steel. Statue cuts through the first

attacker effortlessly, then blocks a strike towards Ninla's exposed side. The couple are barely holding their own, but it splits the enemies up. The next few minutes are filled with frantic slashing, Statue slicing through their attacks like they were nothing, finding openings in the armor worn by a handful of them. I gain a slash across one leg, meaning Statue has to fight with a limp.

Down the street, we barely hear the sound of hooves approaching. A bolt of energy arcs above our heads, striking at one of the assassins. The wizard howls in anger, throwing a fistful of fire down the street. Statue glances down the street. A squad—no, two squads of Sapphire guards galloping towards us. At their head, a combat mage in the distinctive armor of an Imperial Guard levels a staff, firing another arc of lightning towards the fireball-throwing wizard. He screams at the lightning hits his arm, turning it into a blackened mass of char. Statue takes the distraction to cut down two more of the attackers. Then, the guards are there, leaping off their horses and engaging with the remaining attackers. Soon, the fight is over, the remaining assassins kicked unconscious by the soldiers.

Statue suddenly passes control to me, and I lean against the wall, body crying out in agony. I swallow the pain and turn to see Ninla and Tad. Ninla was cradling her arm, and Tad was holding his stomach, blood leaking out from around his hands. One of the guards was already rushing over, a jar of healing remedy in his hands. "Asera...what's going on? How did you..." Ninla asks shakily.

"I...I don't know. I was just reading when a fireball landed in my upstairs." I look over at me shop, confirming my fears: smoke pours out of the open door, as well as the upstairs window. Five years of my life, up in flames. Above the crackling I hear the distant sound of bells ringing from the center of the city. *Alarm bells. It seems something is going on.*

"Why—why did that man call you Lady Asera?" she asks.

As she speaks, the mage who had led the charge walks over, removing her helm. "Lady Asera, We have to go. The streets are not safe."

I ignore her, kneeling down next to Ninla. "There's something you need to know. I'm...not who you think I am. I...I was once a member of the Imperial Family, up until five years ago now."

"What? How could you...what do you mean, 'once a member'?"

“There was a...falling out-”

“My Lady, we do not have time for this,” The mage interrupts. “We need to go, immediately.”

I pause, then nod. “Sorry for keeping it a secret. I...” I glance over at my flaming shop, “Take care of Inkblot and Pagan for me. I’ll be back soon enough.” I stand, sheathing my sword. “Very well, mage. What’s going on?”

She walks over to her horse. “We need to get you to the palace. You weren’t the only one attacked. We can’t talk here. Can you ride?” I shake my head, and she nods. “Very well, you’re with me then.” She mounts her horse and reaches a hand down to me, pulling me onto the saddle behind her. “Hold on,” she says, spurring her horse into a gallop. With a flash of fear, I throw my arms around her armored waist, embarrassment turning my cheeks red as the rest of the troops form up around us.

As we ride, she turns her head to speak to me, “Assassins got into the Imperial Palace somehow. The Empress is...” she pauses. “Lady Elena was poisoned, and is in a critical state. We’re trying our best, but she...we’re not sure.”

My head reels at the news. “I...I don’t know what you’re thinking, but I’m not part of the family anymore.”

The mage turns her head entirely, her eyes meeting mine as the squad gallops down the street. “Lady Asera, We got the news of Artin’s passing just before the attack. Unless your sister somehow pulls through, you are the last remaining member of the dynasty. Whatever happened back then needs to be put behind you, right now. Sapphire needs an Empress, not an empty throne,” she says to me, her eyes glinting with a determination I wasn’t familiar with, then turns back to face forward. Her words sunk in, and it all hit me. I’d accepted Artin was probably gone, but we had never really been close. He was six years older than me, and by the time I was old enough to remember our interactions he was already busy with being the presumptive heir. But Elena, Mother...I choked back anguish. *Asera, you need to be strong right now. There will be time to grieve later, but right now you need to lead.* Statue was right. I could feel his sadness joining mine, but underneath it was a solid bedrock of duty and determination. Hopefully I’d be able to pretend I had the same.

“What is your name, mage?” I ask.

“Pliana, of the Imperial Guard,” she replies quietly.

“Very well, Pliana. With your help we will bring justice to those that did this,” I reply, surprised at the feel of cold steel in my voice. I feel more than see her grim smile.

At full gallop we are in the courtyard of the Imperial Palace within minutes. Soldiers and Imperial Guardsmen everywhere. I slide out of the saddle, falling to the ground as I land on my wounded leg. I grit my teeth, allowing Pliana to pull me up. “Do you need that taken care of?” she asks.

I shake my head, limping towards the main doors of the palace. “No, there will be time for that later,” I growl, taking the steps up one at a time. Around me, the guardsmen form a ring two men thick. Couldn’t be too safe, I supposed. We enter into the palace, walking swiftly towards the throne room. We stop just outside of the glittering double doors of the Imperial throne room, and the ring of guards parts to allow a servant through.

“Lady Asera,” he says, kneeling and presenting an envelope. “The Empress gave orders to have this delivered to you in the event of her death. She requested you read it before ascending the throne.”

“Thank you,” I say with a nod, taking a deep breath and cracking open the purple wax seal of the Fourth Dynasty.

Asera,

If you are reading this, I’m sorry to say you’ve been forced into a situation I know you don’t want. I ask you to accept the duty Sapphire is asking of you with honor and pride.

Five years ago, I made a grave mistake, pushing you out of our lives. The anguish our family has caused you is unforgivable. And yet, through it all, you did not give in. You stood up for what you believed. You defied your mother, your Empress. You gave up everything in pursuit of a happier life. I wish I could express how sorry I am to take this from you now.

However, my sorrow is dampened with the knowledge that I could not be a prouder mother because of your actions. Our nation deserves a woman who will sacrifice everything in the name of doing the right thing.

The last time we spoke, I told you that you would be the

worst leader our nation has ever seen. I know now that I was wrong. Go forth, now, and achieve your destiny.

I fold the letter up and slip it into a pocket, wiping tears from my eyes. "Lady Asera, the hall is ready for you," a servant says, and I nod.

I glance down at myself. Patched shirt, bloodstained pants, and an old sword with a crude, leather-wrapped hilt. Looking around, the steely-eyed gaze of guards. One of them nods at me, as if to say 'You can do this'. I nod back, and step up to the doors. A pair of guards open them, and I step through.

Inside the throne room, a makeshift assembly was gathered. All the lords and ladies of the city on each side of the long room, crammed in between the massive pillars rising to a high ceiling. Guards everywhere. I walk down the middle of the aisle, trying to hide the limp from the slash on my leg. Several cloaks litter the ground in places, under one I see the distinctive color of dried blood. *This is where it happened*, I tell Statue. He sends me a reassuring pulse of emotions. I reach the end of the aisle of Highborn nobles, stopping before the large dais holding the silver-and-violet Imperial Throne. At its base, three men stand, the center one holding a silver crown. I hastily think back to years-old etiquette classes on the ceremony. Kneel. Right. I drop to both knees in front of them, holding back a wince as my leg wound twists, leaving several drops of blood on the tile floor.

"Lady Asera, of the Highborn. Why do you come before us?" The left-hand man asks in a loud ceremonial tone. If my childhood studies didn't deceive me, he was the highest ranking military officer of Sapphire, the Lord-Commander.

I clear my throat, racking my brain for the correct ceremonial answer. "I come to accept my duty to the Nation of Sapphire." Close enough.

The right-hand hand speaks next. "Lady Asera, of the Highborn. What gives you the right to this crown?" A representative of the commoners of Sapphire.

"My mother is...was Dara, of the Highborn, Empress of Sapphire. Her father was Tusos, of the Highborn, Emperor of Sapphire. By their blood in me I claim this crown."

The center one steps forward, closing the gap between myself and him.

---

High Mage, oldest practitioner of Sapphire's unique magic. "Lady Asera, of the Highborn. Do you vow to protect the valley of Sapphire, until your death?"

"I do."

"And do you vow to rule the valley of Sapphire in the name of the Six Gods, until your death?"

"I do."

"And do you vow to defend the virtues of Hope and Justice, until your death?"

"I do."

"And do any of the assembled Highborn declare protest to this appointment of the Gods?" He orates, pausing for a moment. The room was silent. "So it shall be," he says in response to the silence, leaning forward and placing the crown on my head. I wince at a burst of magical energy flowing through my body. After several seconds, it fades into a steady dull pulsing. "The arcane powers of the old and new magic shall bind your life to the Crown. May all those assembled remember the loss of Asera of the Highborn, Royal Scribe of the Eastern Ward of Sapphire." *That's a bit of a stretch*, I think to myself, "Rise now, Asera of the Highborn, Protector of the Valley, Holy Representative of the Six Gods, Guardian of Hope and Justice, Empress of Sapphire and All Its Lands..."

I slowly stand, feeling all the eyes on me. The crown lies heavy upon my head. I turn, and survey the crowd before me.

"...May her name live for all time."