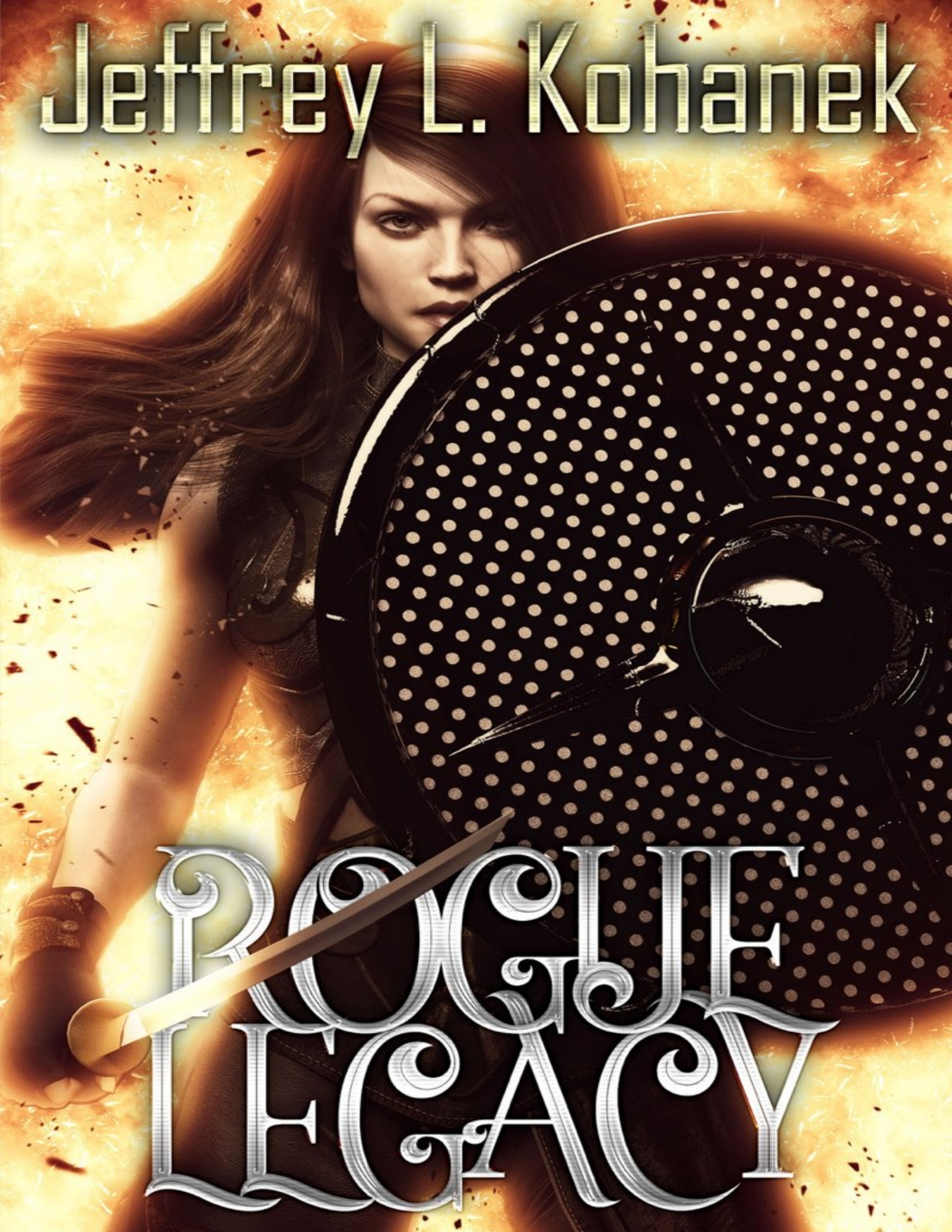
Jeffrey L. Kohanek



ROGUE LEGACY

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ORIGINS OF ISSALIA

JEFFREY L. KOHANEK

FALLBRANDT PRESS

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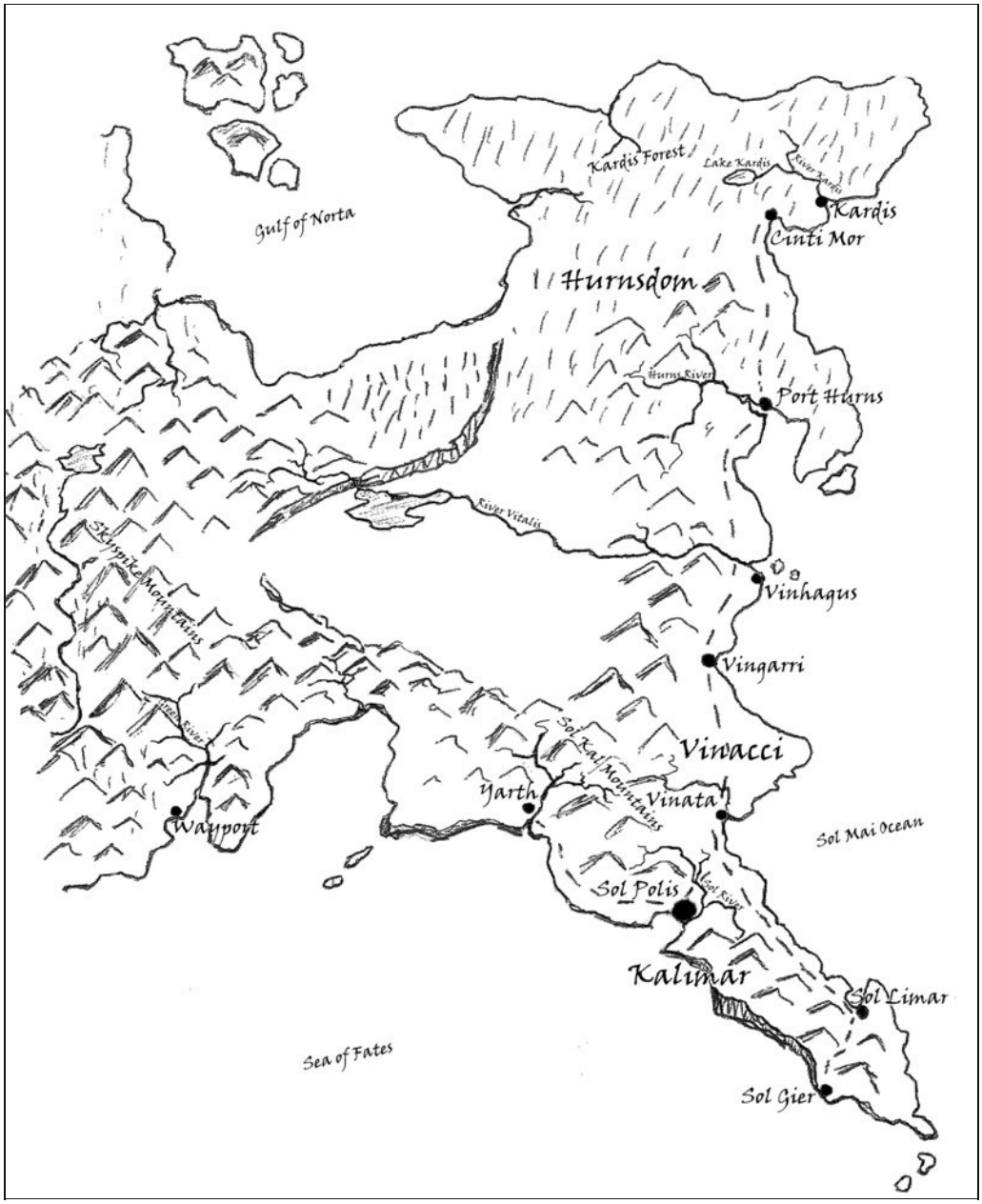
PREFACE

Rogue Legacy is a tale drawn from the lost histories of Issalia, set 400 years prior to the events that occur in *The Runes of Issalia* trilogy. Inspired by the background stories I had created for the main series, this tale written in a style reminiscent to *The Princess Bride*, a novel and movie I adore.

While I prefer that readers use *The Buried Symbol* as their entry point into Issalia, this story can be enjoyed without reading the *Runes* series first.

-*Jeffrey L. Kohanek*


Kardis Forest
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PART I

Duplicity

1

Harman eased the window open, wincing at the squeak that emerged. He poked his head out and found the alley below covered in shadows, the sky above purple – teetering between sunset and nightfall. One leg slipped through the window, his body following as he found a foothold on the vine-covered trellis. Pain shot into his finger, almost causing him to fall. The bloody fingertip found a moment of relief in his mouth as he tried to suck the pain away.

"Stupid thorns," he muttered.

"Funny. I seem to have no problem with them." Harman looked down and saw an old woman standing below, her hands on her hips. "Then again, I'm not the one who's climbing down the trellis in hope of finding trouble."

Harman sighed and climbed down, dropping the last few feet to land in a crouch.

"You're old, Grandma Jane. You're happy living a boring life."

The woman's graying eyebrows rose. "You think your life is so bad, then? In your fifteen years, you know all there is to know and you're ready to conquer the world? Have you learned nothing from the history books I gave you?"

With her arm about Harman, the old woman led him down the alley and toward the front door.

"Since my parents sent me here, I haven't done anything fun. My entire life was spent preparing for the Academy, but now that I'm to join the school, I realize that I have yet to see or do anything interesting." Harman stepped

through the door as the woman held it open for him. “Besides, I’m tired of studying history. Why do I need to learn about some dusty old king who’s long dead? I want to go out and experience the world.”

Jane scooped the glowlamp from the sconce near the door and shook it, the soft blue light flaring up to light the room. She set the lamp on the kitchen table and pulled out a chair.

“Please sit, Harman,” his grandmother beckoned. “I’ll pour us each a cup of tea.”

Harman dropped into the chair, his shoulders slumping as he sulked. When his grandmother returned to the table, she set a steaming cup before him and sat at the opposite chair.

“Believe it or not, I remember what it was like to be your age. The world is full of possibilities for you yet, a series of adventures waiting for you to find them.” Jane nodded with a bemused look on her face. “As for history, there’s a fair bit you can learn from it. You might find it less painful to discover what others have gleaned from their mistakes rather than making every mistake yourself. I’m sure you’ll make enough of them, regardless. Issal knows I did.”

“I get it.” Harman tilted his head backward, running his hands from his forehead and through his black hair. “But studying is so *boring*.”

The old woman frowned, her amber eyes meeting Harman’s. If not for the surrounding lines, one would find that their eyes mirrored one another. Harman took after his grandmother. Everyone told him so.

“Perhaps a story will help to provide perspective.” Jane took a sip of tea, grimacing. “It needs a squeeze of lemon,” she sighed. “However, they’re out of season, and we are far from the ocean.” She set the cup down. “The tale I’m about to tell you is quite old. It’s a tale of sorrow, a tale of adventure, and a tale of wonder. Despite the outlandish nature, I assure you that this is what really happened. It includes the details that history forgets – and sometimes details make all the difference.

“Let’s see…where to begin?” Jane put her finger to her chin as her mouth twisted in thought. “In the country of Vinacci, in a city called Vinhagus, there lived a girl…no. No, that’s too early.” Her brow furrowed for a moment before

her eyes lit up. “I know. Let’s start in Vingarri instead.” The old woman’s gaze shifted outward, staring toward something distant, something Harman couldn’t see.

“Picture yourself as a starfetch, soaring high above the Sol Mai Ocean, your wings stretched wide as you float on the never-ending ocean breeze. You tilt your body, wings extended as the wind carries you toward a city overlooking a sheltered bay. You circle, slowly descending toward rows of houses stacked on the hillside, strewn along a zigzagging dirt roadway that connects the castle at the top with the bustling harbor below.

“A haunting melody captures your attention as you near the rooftops, the beauty of the sorrowful tune luring you in. Downward you spiral, irresistibly drawn to the music. The enchanting tune grows louder as you near its source – the first-story window of a house nestled halfway up the cliffside.

“You flutter your orange-streaked wings and settle on the sill to find two people within. One, a middle-aged man with dark wavy hair and a bushy mustache that hides his upper lip. The other person, you discover, is the source of the mesmerizing song.

“Blurred fingers masterfully stroke lute strings that accompany the haunting lilt of her voice. With black hair and eyes like amber pools in the light of the setting sun, the girl’s face portrays the emotion of her song. Beneath a sleeveless dress of pale blue, you notice that she retains a frame more common to someone younger than her fifteen summers might suggest.

“Unable to restrain yourself, you begin to tweet along, providing harmony to the aria. Pointing your tiny beak toward the reddening sky, you lose yourself in the emotion of the song, swaying to the rhythm of the melody. Far too soon, the song reaches its conclusion, the last remnants of the final strum remaining in the air, the music refusing to accept its fate…until it is swallowed by the sound of crashing waves, far below. With the melodic spell broken, you take flight to return to your nest for the evening.”

“Very good, Lyra,” the man said as he dried his eyes. “Very good, indeed. I believe your skills are now beyond mine, leaving me with little I can teach you.”

“Thank you, Father.” Lyra responded, wiping the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand. “Does that mean I can finally play for an audience?”

Her father grunted. “The inns that might allow you to play are no place for a young lady like yourself.” He stood and held his hand toward her. “I shall seek you an audience a bit more refined. There are options between playing in a tavern and playing for Queen Iglesia.”

As she handed the lute to him, she smiled. “Really? You promise?”

Taking the lute, her father smiled in return. “Yes. I’ll find you something soon.” He lifted the instrument over his head as he slid the strap over his shoulder. “But now, I must go to the castle. The Queen has guests tonight and I’m to perform,”

Lyra stood, smoothing her skirt. “Do you know who the guests are?”

He stared at Lyra as he considered a response. “I’m not sure. Some duke or baron, I suppose.” He slid his hat into position and stepped to the door. “I expect I’ll be back late, so don’t wait up for me. Keep the door locked, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

Lyra nodded. “Goodnight, Father.”

With a final nod toward his daughter, he slipped out the door, pulled it closed, and used his key to secure the bolt.

Lyra stared at the door, listening as the key slid into the lock, clicked into place, and was withdrawn. She moved toward the open window and peeked her head out to survey the street outside. When she saw the back of her father’s green cloak heading uphill, a smile crossed her face. After closing and locking the window, she bolted to the stairwell.

Reaching the second floor, she ducked into her room and stripped down to her shift. The movement in her vanity mirror caused her to pause, turning as she held her shift tight to her stomach and examined her reflection. She frowned at the athletic figure in the mirror, one that appeared too much like a boy. A sigh slipped free. The women in Vinacci tended toward voluptuous and she envied their curves. Perhaps her body might blossom as she matured. For now, she

would use her physique to her advantage.

Lyra loosened the buckles of the sheath strapped to her thigh and set it on the bed. She shifted to the foot of her bed, bending to open her storage chest and removed a pair of tan breeches. After slipping them on, she grunted as she forced her feet into a pair of black riding boots that stopped just below the knee, covering the bottom of her breeches. A black tunic emerged from the chest, sliding over Lyra's head - the shirt covering her arms to the wrists, laces tightened past her collarbone. An old brown leather coat came next, covering the tunic and adding some bulk to her frame.

Using both hands, Lyra gathered her hair behind her head and tied a black ribbon around the tail. She dug into the chest and grabbed her wide-brimmed hat. With a couple thrusts of her fingers into the collapsed bowl, she unflattened the hat, slipped it into her head, and turned toward the mirror. With a satisfied nod, she watched the boyish image in the looking glass mimic the action.

Lyra bent and dug deep into the chest until her fingers found a leather pouch. The weight in her palm brought a satisfied grin to her face. She slid the pouch into her coat pocket and ran back downstairs, taking two steps at a time.

A click sounded when she unlocked the deadbolt. She opened the door and glanced up the street. Although her father was long gone, she remained on edge – leery that he might return for some odd reason. Fishing her key from her pocket, she locked the door and stepped off the brick stoop to inspect the house. A dark interior lay beyond the closed windows, while the weathered gray wood siding and worn shutters made the narrow building seem no different from those surrounding it. Non-descript. Boring. Perfect.

Lyra strolled down the dirt road, taking a deep breath of the salty ocean air, enjoying the smell of freedom.

Local citizens passed her as they trudged up the steep grade, returning to their homes on the hillside. Most moved with heavy steps, their faces appearing weary. She wondered if it was the result of the climb or a long day at work. Perhaps it was just a side effect of their dreary lives. A few others, like her, were heading toward the Vingarri business district, nestled in an arc that encircled the capital city's harbor.

As Lyra neared the bottom of the hill, the traffic thickened. She passed shops and street vendors who were closing for the day, many boasting last-minute deals in hope of ridding themselves of perishable inventory. A stab of panic emerged, her pulse racing when she noticed a man with a lute on his back. The scare was brief, ending when she determined that he was just a stranger with a build similar to her father. With her father safely away at the queen's castle, there was little chance she might run into him.

Continuing on, she turned at the next corner and descended the stairs the led toward the docks, the damp air thickening as it grew cooler. She emerged from a narrow, torchlit alley and approached her evening destination. As she stepped inside, the loud buzz of conversation greeted her, along with the smell of stale ale, undoubtedly spilled days or weeks earlier.

Lyra weaved her way across the busy room, knowing exactly where to find the game. A cluster of men in the corner would have been a clue if not for her previous visits to the tavern. *The Striped Dog* had become among her favorite evening haunts since she and her father moved to Vingarri.

The crowd before her erupted with a collective sigh, "*Aww*".

As men clapped each other's backs and exchanged coins, Lyra wiggled her way through them, into the heart of the action. To one side of an open circle stood a young man with wavy black hair, the look of frustration on his face. Across the circle stood a sailor – tall and sinewy with a brown goatee, a shaved head, and a ring in one ear. The sailor laughed heartily and clapped the young man on the shoulder.

"'Twas a good try, Roland. However, you have to do better than that to beat Sully at a game of Tali." The sailor lifted his tankard toward the younger man with a nod before taking a long swig.

Roland glanced at Lyra, and he gave a subtle nod when their eyes met.

Lyra stepped into the circle and said with a deep voice, "I have some coin for a match."

Sully wiped the foam from his lips as he stared down at Lyra. The sailor's gaze swept her from head to toe, his brow furrowing in the process.

"Ain't you a bit young for gambling, laddie?" Sully asked.

Lyra shrugged. “My silver is as good as anyone else’s.”

Lyra pulled a silver coin from her pocket and tossed it into the circle. The sailor’s eyes followed the coin, watching it as it settled on the dirt floor.

“This is Aryl,” Roland said. “He’s been here before, and he’s a fine player. He’s even beat me a time or two, although I find myself winning often when playing him.”

Sully’s brow shot up, his smile revealing two missing teeth. “Well, then. I guess I could humor the lad with a game.” He stared Lyra in the eye. “Ya’ sure you want to be betting silver, laddie? We can play for a copper or two.”

Lyra shrugged. “Silver is fine by me.”

“Suit yerself,” Sully said as he pulled out a coin purse, digging inside until he withdrew a silver mark, which he tossed to the floor beside Lyra’s coin.

“You have your own knucklebones, then?” Sully asked.

Lyra removed a pouch from her coat pocket, loosened the drawstring, and poured the contents into her palm. When Sully saw how the five knucklebones filled her small palm, he gave a nod.

“To show I’m a good sport, I’ll even let you go first,” the man said.

Lyra nodded. “Um. Thanks.”

As she squatted, she pocketed the empty pouch.

“No sweeps,” Sully blurted. “If a bone you didn’t pick up moves, your turn’s over.”

She glanced at the man and responded with another shrug. *Just as well*, she thought.

Lyra put one hand firmly on the dirt floor while holding the hand full of bones before her. With a small upward toss, she launched the five bones into the air and flipped her hand over, positioning the back of her hand beneath them as the bones fell. Three bones landed on the back of her hand, while a fourth bounced off to join the last on the dirt floor. She looked up at Sully, who nodded as she picked a bone off the back of her hand.

“This is my taw,” Lyra proclaimed, keeping her tone low.

Lyra set the other two bones aside, planted her left hand on the floor, and analyzed the bones resting in the dirt to memorize their position. She tossed the

taw up and scooped one of the bones before catching the taw with the same hand. After setting the bone aside, she repeated the process to capture the final bone. The surrounding crowd cheered, and the men began exchanging bets.

Gripping the taw in her left hand, Lyra tossed the other four bones. They tumbled to the floor, one bouncing sideways to settle three feet from the other three.

Sully shook his head. “Tough toss, laddie.”

Lyra sighed, not hiding her disappointment. “Twos.”

Tossing her taw upward, she quickly scooped two bones from the dirt before catching the taw. After setting those two bones aside, she tossed her taw again, higher this time. Her hand darted out to scoop one bone and then the other, three feet away. However, when she tried to catch her taw, she was too late and it hit the floor.

“Aww,” the crowd groaned in disappointment.

Sully grinned, “Nice try. Now, it’s my turn.”

Lyra collected her knucklebones and stood back as Sully jockeyed, catching three bones on the back of his hand.

“My taw,” he held up one of the bones.

After the sailor completed the first round, collecting a single bone at a time, the other sailors around him cheered in encouragement.

“Twos,” Sully announced before he tossed four bones and received a tight grouping of two pairs resting near each other.

Sully tossed his taw up and scooped a pair of bones before catching the taw. With the last set of bones within inches of each other, Lyra knew she was about to lose. As she expected, Sully easily gathered the bones and caught the taw for a successful turn. The crowd cheered.

Grinning, Sully scooped up the two silvers, pocketed them and stood. “Keep practicing, laddie,” he said. “You’re quick, so there’s hope for you, yet.”

The three sailors surrounding the man patted him on the back, congratulating him as he finished his ale. Lyra did her best to appear dejected as she stared toward the circle in the dirt. While coins were exchanging hands, Lyra reached into her pocket and withdrew her coin purse. After emptying the contents into

her palm, she gripped the last coin she possessed, holding it up to catch notice.

“I have one more coin to play.” She tossed the coin to the ground. “I want a rematch.”

Everyone grew quiet. All eyes stared at the gold coin reflecting the torchlight. Someone whistled as Sully rubbed the scruff covering his square chin.

“How did a young lad like yourself happen upon a gold piece?”

Lyra defiantly stared into the man’s eyes before shrugging. “You don’t have to play me if you’re afraid.”

Sully’s expression darkened, his lips flattening into a line. He grabbed the coin purse tied to his belt and began digging through it. After a moment, he removed a gold coin and tossed it into the circle.

“Fine,” he said. “Let’s play. I won, so I go first.”

The man knelt and held his knucklebones before him.

“No sweeping, remember.” Lyra said, his frown returning before he nodded in response.

Sully tossed the bones up, his hand shifting beneath them as they tumbled. Only one of five landed on the ground, the remainder lay captured on the back of his hand. A murmur ran through the crowd, and another round of bets exchanged hands.

Sully picked one as he declared, “Here’s my taw.”

He tossed the taw in the air, scooped the last bone off the floor, and caught the taw.

“Twos.”

Sully held the taw in one hand and tossed the other four. They fell into a close grouping again, making for another easy turn of collecting two bones with each throw.

“Threes,” the sailor said before tossing the four bones into the air.

Three bones landed in a clump while the fourth bounced two feet away. Sully tossed his taw upward, scooped up the cluster of three bones, and caught the taw. He followed by effortlessly collecting the last bone with his next toss.

“Fours,” Sully said with a grin.

Lyra glanced about, appearing nervous as the sailor gauged her reaction.

The man tossed the four bones and they landed to settle in a circle about a foot in diameter. Sully took a deep breath and tossed his taw up, higher than prior turns. He scooped one, two, three, but missed the fourth bone before snatching the taw just inches from the floor.

"Ooo," the crowd responded.

Judging by their reactions, Lyra knew they believed Sully had the game won.

Sully stood, not attempting to restrain his grin. "I made it to *fours*, with three collected cleanly. You'll have to step up your game if you plan to win, laddie."

Lyra pursed her lips, her eyes narrowing as she stared at the man. *He's cocksure of himself*, she thought. *Getting knocked down a peg might do him a favor*.

She squatted and tossed five bones in the air, her eyes tracking each as her hand shifted rapidly beneath them as they fell. The crowd released another "*Ooo"* when none hit the ground.

"I go straight to twos." She picked one of the bones from her hand and held it up. "Here's my taw."

Sully frowned, and he gave a brief nod. With four bones still on the back of her hand, Lyra tossed them into the air. When they settled in the dirt, the bones rested in two nestled pairs. She grabbed her taw with her right hand, tossed it into the air, and scooped up two bones before catching the taw. With the tight grouping, she handily repeated the process for the last two bones.

"Threes," Lyra tossed four bones to the floor.

The grouping was not as tight as the last, which was fine since she needed to avoid bumping the bone she wasn't trying to capture. Lyra tossed her taw a bit higher, scooped up three bones, and caught the taw in the same hand. Gathering the final bone was as simple as breathing.

"Fours," her gaze flicked toward Sully to find his expression had darkened.

Lyra tossed the four bones to the floor, but two of them collided, launching both away from the others in opposite directions.

Sully laughed. "You'd better say a prayer to Yanetta. You'll be needing a fair bit of her luck for that toss."

Lyra ignored the sailor as she stared at the bones, noting the location of each.

Leaning forward, she placed her left palm on the ground and pressed her lips together in determination. The surrounding crowd fell still, each man's gaze focused on the bones.

Her taw flew toward the ceiling, far higher than earlier throws. Lyra scooped the two tightly nestled bones before she stretched toward the third. After quickly grabbing the bone, she pivoted her body around her left hand, spinning and stretching to grab the fourth bone. Her eyes flicked up to locate the falling taw, and her hand flashed out to snatch it from the air, just inches from the floor. With her fist squeezed tight, she closed her eyes in a moment of relief.

Lyra stood and opened her palm, holding it out to reveal the five bones resting within. The stunned crowd erupted with cheers and exclamations of disbelief. Surrounding men patted Lyra on the shoulders as she slipped the bones into her pocket. She bent to claim her winnings, the metal coins feeling cool in her grip. As she stood, a hand flashed out and grabbed her wrist, causing her to wince at the man's tight grip.

"There's no way I'm letting you leave with my gold, you little runt." Sully threatened.

Lyra's lips pressed together as she stared up at the man, his bloodshot eyes growing wide. Sully released his grip on her wrist and eased himself backward, his eyes flicking down toward the dagger pressed against his groin.

"Careful, now," Lyra said. "You don't want to lose anything important, Sully."

"You wouldn't dare," he replied.

"Just let him go, Sully." Roland said, stepping between Lyra and the sailor. "The boy won fairly. It was quite the show and required more than a bit of luck, but it was still a fair win."

"Let's keep our heads straight here, Sully," another sailor said, placing his hand on Sully's shoulder.

Sully frowned and glanced about at a crowd consisting mainly of Vingarri locals. With only three fellow sailors behind him, it wouldn't be a fair fight even if she weren't threatening him with a knife.

"Fine," Sully glared at Lyra. "I best not be seeing you again, boy. If I do,

you’ll not walk away so happy.”

Sully backed away from her knife and slid into the crowd with the other sailors close behind. The moment they were gone, hands clapped her shoulders and patted her head as the bystanders offered words of thanks and congratulations.

Lyra opened her pouch and dumped the two gold coins and bones inside before slipping it into her pocket.

As the crowd dispersed, Roland put an arm about her. “Good show, Lyra. You got him for a full gold piece after only one game.”

“Thanks, Roland,” Lyra gave him a weak smile.

Roland walked her toward the bar. “Not to mention, I made two silvers betting against you the first round and another four betting for you on the second.” He stopped at the bar and slammed two coppers down. “I’ll buy you a drink. Is it apple cider again, or can I convince you to try something a bit stronger?”

2

With a furtive glance down the dark street, Lyra inserted her key into the lock. The deadbolt clicked open, and she pocketed the key while turning the knob. Dim starlight bled into the open doorway, rapidly giving way to shadow – dark and forbidding. Her fingers fumbled about until she found the reed, gripping it before closing and locking the door.

Lyra shuffled toward the fireplace with her free hand held before her as she sought the fire iron that waited on the stone hearth. Her fingers found the handle, lifting it and sticking it into the black maw of the dormant fire. She poked and stirred the coals, blowing into it until an orange glow appeared. When she pressed the tip of the reed against the brightest coals, it began to smolder. Lyra blew long, slow breaths, using them to bring the coals to life until the wick caught fire, its orange light flickering within the arched opening.

Biting her lip, Lyra stepped from the fireplace and navigated to the table, her eyes never leaving the dancing flame. She held the burning reed to a candle that sat upon the table, the flame licking the wick for a moment before it, too, flared to life. After extinguishing the reed, she placed it on the shelf beside the door.

A tug loosened the drawstring on her coin purse and she poured the contents into her palm. The two gold coins and five silver marks shimmered in the candlelight and brought a smile to her face. While she had been able to tease the sailor into betting gold, the remainder of the night had yielded only a few silvers. Still, it was a fair amount of wealth for someone her age.

After replacing the coins in the purse, she headed to the stairwell. Her surroundings grew darker when she turned the corner at the landing. As she reached the top of the stairs, she heard a noise.

Lyra froze, her ears straining as she held her breath. Another noise arose from downstairs, one she recognized as the sound of the deadbolt, followed by the door opening. Her heart pounded, her eyes flicking back and forth, as she listened. Her father had arrived home earlier than normal...unless it was someone else.

The door closed, but rather than hearing the lock again, she heard it burst open.

“What?” her father exclaimed amid the scuffle of boots on the wood floor. “What are you doing here?”

“We’ve come for our payment, Tascalli.” A rough voice replied.

More scuffling sounded from below, chairs hitting the floor.

“Please, Rainer. You need to tell Berrilon that I…I can’t do it,” her father’s voice sound strained. “I can’t betray my Queen.”

“Tsk, Tsk.” The rough voice replied. “After everything we’ve done for you, now you go back on your word.”

The unmistakable sound of a fist hitting a body followed.

“Oof,” her father groaned.

“You were basically begging for coin, playing your piece of junk lute in seedy taverns.” The sound of a slap echoed in the room. “Berrilon and *The Hand* gave you a real instrument.” Another slap. “They took you from those lowlife taprooms and placed you in the palace, playing for Queen Iglesia.” A third slap rang out, followed by sobbing. “You and your whelp would still be renting a hole above the fishery in Vinhagus if not for us. Rather than thanking us for your position, your house, your new life, you throw it in our face by refusing to honor our deal?”

“No, please,” her father sobbed. “I’ll give you gold. I’ll give you anything.”

“Listen, you weak-willed snake. You made a promise, a promise to Berrilon and to *The Hand*.” Two thumps of fists hitting flesh preceded a whimper. “We don’t want your gold. We want you to keep your word.”

The sound of a blade sliding from its sheath caused Lyra's eyes to widen. She stepped from her room and crept down the stairwell. Peeking around the wall at the landing, she saw two men holding her father against a wall. One of the men had a knife held to her father's throat.

"Last chance, Tascalli," the man with the knife said between clenched teeth.

Frightened and concerned, Lyra felt helpless as she stared at her father. His eyes flicked about the room, seeking salvation. When her father's gaze shifted toward the stairwell, it locked onto Lyra. Tears tracked down her face as his expression shifted from terror…to realization…to resolve.

Her father turned toward his attacker. "You can take my life, but that will get you nothing," he said calmly. "Perhaps I can assist *The Hand* in another way, but my honor still exists, and I'll not be a party to treason."

The man with the knife frowned and stepped back. His frown became a grimace, and he thrust the knife into her father's midsection. The other man released his grip on her father as the man named Rainer yanked the knife free and used it to gash her father's neck. Dark red blood spurted from the wound, his hand going to his throat as he slid down the wall and fell to the floor.

"No!" Lyra screamed, descending a few steps before she realized what she had done.

Both men turned toward her, and she got her first good look at them. One stood a bit over six feet tall, his bulky frame capped by a head of curly, dark Vinacci hair. The one her father had called Rainer was a bit shorter, with brown hair and a trimmed goatee in the style of Kalimar royalty. However, it was his eyes that she would always remember – steel gray and piercing. The man's intense gaze sent a chill down her spine.

"Get her!"

Lyra scrambled up the stairs, ran to the end of the hall, and pulled the door to her father's room closed. She then slipped into her own room and hid behind her open door. The rumble of footsteps grew louder as the men ascended the stairs, ran past her room, and ripped the door to her father's room open.

"Look out the window," Rainer demanded as he tore the room apart.

Lyra slipped out her bedroom door and crept down the stairs, watching the

dark doorway to her father's room as she made her descent. When she reached the bottom, Lyra found her father on the floor, his head tilted to the side, his empty gaze staring into space. She bit her lip as tears clouded her vision. The realization of his loss caused an involuntary whimper.

The thumping of rapid footsteps came from upstairs. She scrambled backward and bumped into the table. The candle tipped on its side, rolled to the table's edge, and fell to the floor. Loud footsteps ran down the stairs, causing Lyra to panic. She bolted toward the door as the candle settled below the curtain that framed the front window.

A shout came from behind her. "The girl saw me. Don't let her get away."

Lyra leapt into the street and ran downhill before darting into a gap between neighboring houses. She crept down the narrow corridor, toward the steep hillside behind the houses, pausing in the deep shadows when she heard the two men run past. There she remained, her heart racing as she held back sobs of sorrow.

Lyra wiped her eyes again, unable to stop the tears that continued to emerge. She lay on a second story rooftop, one turn of the zigzagging hillside road above where her house was located. The scene below appeared surreal as angry orange flames emitted thick black smoke.

Men shouted in the night as they handed buckets of water to the next in line. As each bucket reached the big man at the end, he would launch the water toward the house next door to Lyra's. Realizing that her house was lost, they focused on preventing the fire from spreading to neighboring homes. The logical side of Lyra understood, but she found herself hating them for not saving her home, for not saving her father.

Flames illuminated the area, enabling her to spot the two men who had chased her as they walked past again, searching the area as they passed the bucket line. Rather than doubling back as they had before, the men continued uphill, and eventually passed below Lyra's perch. A mixture of fear and hatred

stirred within her as they walked past. She imagined leaping from the rooftop with her knife in hand, landing on one man before stabbing the other. When her reverie broke, the two men had disappeared into the darkness.

Lyra looked down at her burning home again and felt a hollowness inside. Her father was dead. Her home was gone. Two men in town were searching for her, intending to send her to La-Mordai in the halls of death, where her father now waited.

She had never felt so lost and alone.

3

Lyra knocked again, slightly louder this time. She glanced both directions, her eyes searching the darkness, her body shaking as she waited for a response. A light appeared, the dull orange glow flickering in the window beside the door. The lock clicked, and she rushed in as the door swung open, startling Roland as he stepped aside.

"Lyra," he blinked. "Why are you here in the middle of the night?" She turned toward him and his expression softened. "Are you alright?"

She stared at the open door. "Please close the door."

Roland nodded, closing the door. After the deadbolt clicked shut, she spoke.

"Something happened…My father…" She took a calming breath and closed her eyes, fighting to keep the tears at bay. "He's dead."

"What?" Roland put his hand on her shoulder. "What happened?"

Lyra opened her eyes and glanced about his one-room apartment until her gaze settled on the door. "It was two men. They attacked him and then they chased me. I got away, but he's dead. There was also a fire…" She took a calming breath. "The house burnt down. Everything's gone. I came to you because I don't know what else to do, where to go." The tears returned.

Roland stepped closer, his arms wrapping about her. Her head rested against his shoulder as she sobbed. After a minute, he released her.

"You can stay here tonight," he said. "Take the bed, and I'll sleep in the chair."

With his hand on her back, he guided her to the bed. Stuck in between shock and sorrow, Lyra somehow found herself lying on the bed as he pulled a blanket over her shaking body.

Roland grabbed another blanket from the foot of the bed. “You get some sleep, and we’ll figure out a plan in the morning.”

He snuffed the candle and shuffled to the chair, making noise as he settled in. Emotionally and physically exhausted, Lyra closed her eyes and drifted to sleep.

A noise woke Lyra, and her eyes flickered open to the sound of metal sliding in and out of the lock. She sat up, her heart thumping loudly as she stared toward the door. Slipping out of bed, she tapped Roland on the arm, barely visible in the darkness.

“What?” he said, sitting upright.

“Shh,” she hushed him. “I think someone’s trying to break in.”

Roland turned toward the door, clearly hearing the same noise. He turned toward her. “Be ready to climb out the back window.”

Nodding, she turned to the window above the bed. After flipping the latch open, she put one leg through the opening. The other leg followed, and she lowered herself until her forearms rested on the sill and her legs dangled a story above the back alley.

Roland stepped over to the door and rested one hand against it. “Who’s there?”

The noise stopped, everything falling quiet. Suddenly, the door blasted open, knocking Roland backwards until he stumbled into the chair. Lyra gasped, seeing the shadows of two men in the doorway.

“There’s nothing here to steal,” Roland blurted. Lyra watched Roland’s silhouette as he rose to his feet with a fire iron in his hand, held up and ready to strike. “Go find an easier target who is worth your time.”

“Where is she?” It was the voice of the gray-eyed man. “We know you’re friends with her.”

They found me…but they haven't noticed me yet. Lyra lowered herself until she was hanging with her arms extended. Glancing down, she found the alley too dark to determine what lay below her, what she might hit if she let go.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Roland said. "Leave now and we can forget this ever happened."

"Wrong answer."

The sounds of a scuffle came through the window, followed by Roland's voice crying out in pain. A sob snuck out as Lyra imagined Roland dying because of her. She didn't know what to do.

"Check the window," the gray-eyed man said.

Lyra panicked and let go. The fall was not far, but the footing was uneven and she twisted her ankle at impact. A sharp pain shot up her leg, resulting in an unintended yelp.

A nervous glance toward the window revealed the big man looking down at her.

"There she is," he shouted. "She jumped into the alley."

Lyra stood to run, wincing when she put weight on her ankle. She took two steps and glanced up to find the man gone. Turning, she limped the other direction, taking only a few strides before realizing she wasn't going to make it far on a bad ankle. She bumped her knee on an empty crate, one she couldn't even see in the dark alley. Rather than continue to run, she fell to her hands and knees and squirmed into the crate. Something with clawed feet ran across her hand, requiring her to use every ounce of restraint not to scream as she yanked her hand back and wrapped her arms about her shins, squeezing her knees to her chest.

To Lyra, the sound of her rapid breaths were a ruckus, announcing where she was hiding. The sound of footsteps arose, growing louder as the men ran through the alley.

"She ran this way," one man said as the footsteps continued past before fading into the distance.

Even after the men were gone, Lyra remained in the crate, alone, afraid, and unsure of what to do next.

4

Lyra's shoulder and hip were sore from the repeated bouncing of the wagon bed. The air beneath the canvas sheet covering her was thick, stuffy, and smelled of dirt. Sunlight leaked through tiny holes torn in the tarp, shedding light on the pile of potatoes beside her, wobbling and rolling about with each bump. It felt frustrating not to know which direction the wagon was headed. She ached to pull the canvas aside so she could see and try to determine where she was. Yet, she somehow resisted.

She reflected on her situation, telling herself she had no choice. Those men were after her. Hiding at Roland's apartment hadn't worked. He was the one person she knew she could count on to help. Now, he was dead. If she wanted to live, she had to leave Vingarri – leave her old life behind. The wagon hit a pothole, the impact driving an unintentional grunt from her lungs.

When the wagon began to slow, anxiety began to swirl within her. *Did the driver hear me?* The wagon stopped and she heard the man shuffle about. Blinding sunlight suddenly appeared as a man ripped the canvas back, causing Lyra to squint at the driver.

"I thought so," the man said. "A stowaway."

She sat up and faced him, finding a middle-aged man of average height and build, with brown hair and a matching beard. The man lifted his wide-brimmed hat and wiped his brow with a sleeve.

"You're lucky we aren't at sea. You don't want to know what sailors do with

stowaways.”

Lyra’s eyes narrowed, but she remained silent. Despite his sharp tone, she thought he had kind eyes.

“Hmph,” the man grunted. “Go on, climb out of my wagon.”

Without a word, Lyra climbed over the side of the wagon bed, wincing as she put weight on her bad ankle.

“Something wrong with your leg?” the man asked.

Lyra shrugged.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

Lyra shrugged again.

He stared at her for a moment with his brow furrowed. His features then relaxed and he sighed. “Fine. You can ride with me to Vinata. After that, you’re on your own.”

Lyra glared at the man. “Thank you, but only if you’re offering a ride and nothing else.”

“What? Yeah, of course.” He sounded offended, making Lyra feel slightly relieved. The man gestured toward the front of the wagon. “It can’t be comfortable bouncing in the wagon bed, so go ahead and climb on the seat.”

The man followed her, but she swatted his hand aside when he tried to help her into the seat. He grunted again, shaking his head as he circled around his oxen and climbed on the seat.

“Get!”

He snapped the reins, and the two oxen kicked into motion, pulling the small wagon down the forest-lined road. He glanced toward her, frowning.

“My name is Vardis. I didn’t get your name.”

A small smile was her only response. While she appreciated the ride, she couldn’t bring herself to trust the man…or anyone else.

The snap of a branch woke Lyra, her eyes wide and heart racing. Peeking over the sidewall of the wagon bed, Lyra peered into the dark woods. Startled, she

jumped back when Vardis' head appeared in front of her as he crawled from beneath the wagon. The man shifted toward the fire pit and used a stick to stir the coals, which provided enough light to give shape to the surrounding area.

"I'm armed," Vardis shouted. "Move along and find an easier target."

He stopped with his back to the pit, the silhouette of a crossbow in his hands clearly visible.

A rustle in the trees drew her attention. She pushed her blanket aside and inched toward the back of the wagon, carefully lifting her leg as she climbed over the edge.

"Throw down your weapon, and we won't hurt you." A man shouted from the forest. "We just want your gold…and some food."

Vardis lifted his crossbow. "Take one more step and I'll shoot."

The *twang* of a bow sounded from the woods, followed by a *thump* as an arrow struck Vardis. The man stumbled backward, almost falling into the hot coals. He wavered, the arrow sticking from his stomach as he fell to his knees.

The rustle in the trees became a rumble as two men stormed into the campsite. A *thud* echoed in the night as one man twisted and collapsed with a crossbow bolt in his chest.

The other man swung a club and smashed Vardis in the face, launching him backward into the coals. As the man's clothing caught fire, the added light shone upon the bandit who hit him, revealing wild eyes as he held his club high and ready to deliver another blow. Lyra backed away from the wagon as the bandit panted with a snarl engraved in his bearded face. The man turned from Vardis, who was clearly dead, and ran to help his companion.

With his attention on the other man, Lyra turned and snuck down the dark trail that led to the road, wincing with each step on her sore ankle. After crossing the road, she crept into the dark forest beyond, making as little noise as possible.

She circled behind a thick tree and sat down, resting her back against the trunk. With her arms wrapped about her knees, Lyra wept in silence until exhaustion took her.

Lyra stumbled from the woods and onto the trail. She looked both directions, finding tall grass covering the ground between ruts worn away by wagon wheels. Glancing to the sky, she found the sun well past its midpoint. Her stomach growled, an unwelcome reminder of the hunger she felt, leaving her wishing she had eaten more the night before. Vardis had been generous; sharing his meal with her while she remained silent. Lyra found herself feeling guilty for not thanking the man. Too late for that now.

After a moment of thought, she decided to head downhill, hoping it might lead to a river or creek. Her thirst far outweighed her hunger, leaving her longing for a drink of cool water.

Having walked on her ankle all day, it didn't bother her much any longer. The ankle was swollen, but it had gone numb to the pain hours earlier.

The road turned and the slope grew steeper, leading Lyra into a valley among the foothills. Through the gap in the trees, Lyra spotted a clearing at the valley floor, only a mile or two away. She paused when she noticed movement within the open space – people among a herd of cattle. Hope flared bright within her. If there were people, there must be water. With renewed energy, she resumed her downhill trek.

Her parched mouth sang in joy as Lyra feverishly scooped cold water from the creek, not caring that much of it ran down her chin and soaked the front of her tunic. With closed eyes, she relished the refreshing moment after a day of nothing to drink. She opened them and glanced at her surroundings, dark and shadowy in the failing light.

The sound of distant laughing reached her, rising above the chatter preceding it. Music emerged from the din, rising above all else except the rhythmic clapping to the beat. Lyra stood and listened to the energetic tune. Something stirred within her – a feeling other than the dark sorrow and cold fear that had gripped her for the past two days.

She climbed up the bank to the road and made her way toward the camp.

When the light of a fire appeared between the thick trees that lined the road, she crept through the woods, toward the beacon of light like a ship seeking refuge from a storm.

The open space beyond the wood came into view, and Lyra counted two dozen wagons arranged in a circle around the fire pit. The wagons were strange, unlike any she had seen before. Each had tall walls with windows, a door, and a domed roof – a tiny house with four wheels. The wagons varied in color, some red, others green, yet others blue. None of the wagons had oxen or workhorses attached and no such animals were within view.

Perhaps fifty people occupied the open space around the fire, dressed in brightly colored clothing. A group of them played instruments including drums, a flute, a tambourine, and a stringed instrument that she had never before seen. Before the group was a woman in a sleeveless dress, singing with a smile on her face as she clapped to the music. All around the campsite, people danced and laughed as they sang along with the merry tune. Unlike the men Lyra knew from Vingarri, these men had hair as long and wild as the women.

Lyra stopped watching the people when she spotted a side of beef on a spit over the fire. The wind switched directions, and she caught a taste of the savory scent, causing her mouth to water.

Without moving, she watched in anticipation, waiting for her opportunity.

Urged by an empty stomach, Lyra forced herself forward. With the dull glow of smoldering coals to guide her through the darkness, she crept from her post in the trees and snuck into the camp, which had been quiet for half an hour.

Sneaking past the first row of wagons, she stopped mid-step when a loud snore from the nearest wagon startled her. The snore repeated twice more by the time she resumed her journey toward the remains of the side of beef, still on the spit above the simmering coals.

Hearing a growl, she froze, carefully turning toward the sound. A dog with long brown, gray, and white hair lay beneath a wagon, rising to its feet as the

growl continued.

“That’s a good boy,” Lyra said in a soothing voice.

The growling stopped, the dog cocking its head to the side.

“Your technique needs some work,” a man’s voice said.

Lyra turned toward the voice and found a young man leaning against a wagon, his legs crossed at the ankles and arms crossed before his chest.

“Patience, my dear,” the man said as he stepped toward her. “You should have waited longer, really allowed those within camp to slip into a deep sleep. Another hour at least.”

Lyra frowned at the man, her eyes narrowing as he approached. He had long black hair and a handsome tanned face. Her gaze locked with his dark eyes, thinking he was perhaps five years her elder. His tunic was a bright yellow, contrasting his blue breeches and tall black leather boots.

“You move well enough. I almost didn’t hear you.” His eyes flicked toward the dog. “Ranja almost didn’t hear you either.” He nodded. “I can teach you.”

Lyra’s brow furrowed. “You want to teach me to steal? You just caught me trying to steal from you.”

The man shrugged. “Look where you’re heading. You’re after our meat. If you wanted anything more, you would have waited longer, headed toward a wagon, and would have been holding a weapon.”

Lyra glanced toward the remains of beef, her mouth watering again as she stared at it.

The man laughed. “I knew it. Go on and eat. You must be hungry.”

Not bothering to respond, Lyra headed toward the spit and began pulling chunks of beef from it, finding it still warm, the outside dry and chewy while the inside was tender and moist. As the chunks of meat gathered in her mouth, the salty juice made her mouth water even while she chewed. Her gaze shifted to the man, finding him on one knee as he petted the dog. She continued watching him as she worked on the chewy meat.

Despite her reluctance to trust anyone, she found the man’s kind eyes and easy manner compelling. He reminded her of Roland, which left her longing for home.

“What’s your name?” She popped another chunk of beef into her mouth and chewed.

The man smiled. “I’m Gar, and you would be…”

Lyra paused her chewing, thinking for a moment. “Tali. My name’s Tali.”

Gar’s brow lifted. “Tali? Like the game played with knucklebones?”

Lyra shrugged. “Yeah. So what?”

Gar stood, holding his hands up. “No offense meant. Tali is a pretty name and suits a pretty girl like you.”

By instinct, Lyra’s hand went to the knife strapped to her thigh. “If you try anything, you’ll regret it.”

Gar held his hands higher. “You’ve got me wrong. I’m just being friendly.” He chuckled. “You have some fight in you.” He nodded, lowering his hands. “That’s good. I can work with that.”

Lyra let her hand drop and stepped away from the spit, her hunger seemingly satisfied. “I haven’t seen wagons like this before. Who are you people?”

Gar nodded. “Exactly right.”

Lyra frowned. “What does that mean?”

“People. We are a people. We are the free, the wanderers, and the kingdomless. We follow the Path of the Butterfly, flitting from meadow to meadow as the weather takes us.” His arms spread open as he slowly spun in a circle. “We have no homes and pay no taxes. We work for nobody, and we fight no wars.” He smiled, nodding toward her. “We are the Tantarri.”

5

Opening her eyes, Lyra lifted her head to examine her surroundings, lit by the sliver of morning light that bled through a window near her head. The motion of her moving caused the hammock she lay in to swing.

The ceiling hovered inches above her head, and a girl, of perhaps seven summers, lay in the hammock beside her. Lyra carefully rolled off the hammock – her feet finding the empty bed that lay beneath – and she climbed down.

Another window graced the wall of the interior, revealing pots and pans hanging from the ceiling near the walls, dangling above shelves stacked with crates, buckets of produce, and other items.

Lyra rubbed sleep from her eyes, smoothed back her long dark hair, and turned the knob on the door. The bright light of the morning sun made her squint as she climbed down into the long grass, bent at the root from the people, wagons, and animals that had trampled it into submission.

She found the fire pit alive again, the flames licking pans set upon a metal grate. Eggs, slices of beef, and potatoes cooked on the pans, the scent delighting her nose and forcing her stomach to rumble.

“Good morning, Tali,” an old woman said with a nod.

“Do I know you?” Lyra asked.

“No, my dear,” the woman laughed. “But Gar told us to expect you.”

Lyra nodded and scanned the area, only finding other women, most far younger than the one who greeted her.

“Where is Gar?” she asked.

The woman pointed toward the open meadow, beyond the wagons. “He and the other men are out gathering the herd. We must prepare to leave.”

Lyra nodded, choosing not to ask further questions.

“Please sit, my dear,” the woman patted a spot on the log beside her. “It hurts my neck to look up at you like this.”

Despite herself, Lyra found herself smiling as she sat beside the old woman.

“My name is Numi,” the woman said. “I’m pleased to meet you, Tali.”

Experiencing a twinge of guilt for using another name, Lyra nodded to the woman. “I’m pleased to meet you, too, Numi.”

A girl just a few years older than Lyra handed her a plate. Another girl trailed behind her, holding a pan filled with cooked eggs, some of which she slid onto Lyra’s plate. Two others swept past and Lyra found herself with a plate full of eggs, cooked beef strips, and a chunk of warm bread. Finally, a far younger girl brought her a cup filled with water.

As Lyra ate her breakfast, she asked the old woman a question.

“If you are leaving, where do you go?”

The old woman squinted toward the distant sky. “We go where Mother Sun sends us – south to evade the cold breath of Father Winter.”

Lyra nodded, thinking the old woman’s perception a bit odd.

Numi stood, grunting as she put her hand to her lower back. The woman turned and headed toward a blue wagon waiting nearby, pausing as she turned and waved for Lyra to follow.

“Come along, now,” Numi said. “We need to get you in a proper dress. We can’t have you looking like a boy.”

A deep voice interrupted, “This must be Gar’s stray.”

Lyra turned and found a man approaching. He stood a head taller than Lyra and was at least twice her age, judging by the lines that marked his tanned face and the white that peppered his black hair.

Numi gave the man a long nod. “Yes, Eddrick. This is Tali.” Numi turned to Lyra. “This is Eddrick, the leader of the Tantarri.”

The man’s dark eyes focused on Lyra, looking her over. “Welcome to the

Tantarri, Tali. I hope you'll not be trouble."

Lyra shook her head. "No, sir. I'm just happy to have a bed and food."

"We were just about to get her a dress."

Eddrick nodded. "Good. Proper clothing will help her fit in. Beyond that, I guess we shall see how things go."

Numi bowed to the man and took Lyra by the arm, pulling her along.

Gar's wagon, and those trailing it, rolled down the dirt road, moving only as fast as the herd of cattle before them. Two dogs ran about the cattle, barking and cajoling them, keeping them hemmed in whenever the trees opened to a neighboring meadow.

Lyra glanced to her side, eyeing Gar and Dari. The latter, Lyra discovered, was the far younger sister of the tanned man who sat at her side. Gar turned toward her and smiled. She found herself unable to resist replying in kind, affected by the young man's friendly manner.

"So, Tali," Gar said, redirecting his gaze toward the pair of lumbering oxen pulling the heavy wagon. "I'm curious. Do you know how to play the game you're named after?"

"I do," Lyra replied, unsure of where the conversation was headed.

"Are you any good at it?"

Lyra stared at the man, unsure of how she should respond. His expression of a raised brow over a half-smile caused her pride to flare.

"Let's play tonight and you'll find out."

A grin spread across his handsome face. "Very well."

Lyra eyed the knucklebones, imagining every possible approach to collecting them. Although the bones had fallen poorly, she believed in her skill and had faith that Yanetta watched over her. She hadn't had much luck of late, but things

fell differently when she played Tali. Knucklebones was the one area where the goddess and Lyra were forever in sync. She hiked the skirt of her dress up, frowning at the discomfort and wishing she wore her breeches rather than the dark blue dress and small slippers Numi had given her.

Focusing on the scattered bones, she tossed her taw high into the air, the orange light of the nearby fire reflecting off the bleached bone as it spun. Lyra stretched for the first bone, scooping it and the second in rapid succession before pivoting around her off hand to scoop the last two and then complete the circle in time to snatch her taw just before it hit the ground. The surrounding Tantarri stirred in surprise, with *"oos"* and *"ahs"* echoing in the clearing. Lyra stood and dusted her hand against her skirt, holding the other hand toward Gar. The man's slack-jawed face reflected his awe as he stared at the five bones in her palm.

Lyra smiled. "I believe you owe me a lock of hair."

Gar's expression evolved to one of mirth and he began to clap, others joining in.

"Good show, Tali," Gar grinned as he lifted a knife blade to his long hair and began to saw at it. "It will take time for my hair to grow back, but it was worth it to witness your skill. I have yet to meet anyone as well named as you."

A tug on her skirt drew Lyra's attention to find a young girl looking up at her with wide eyes. "Will you show me how to play, Tali? I want to be like you when I'm older."

"Sure, Dari. We can start tomorrow."

Dari's face lit up "Oh, boy!"

The girl turned and ran toward a cluster of Tantarri children.

"Here's your winnings." Gar held the lock of hair toward her, placing it in her hand. "What are you going to do with it, anyway?"

"I haven't decided yet."

Lyra stared at the lock of hair in her palm, finding herself oddly at ease with the strange people who had taken her in as one of their own.

Clapping again arose as music began to play – wonderful music that lifted her spirits and begged her to dance.

Men began to approach women, extending their hands and giving bows as

they made their requests. Without fail, the women would nod and join the men to dance around the fire, their colorful dresses flowing with the beat of the music as they danced and twirled.

Gar stood and bowed before Lyra, his arm extended as his head bent low. His eyes met hers and he flashed a white-toothed grin that perfectly balanced his swarthy complexion.

“Will you dance with me, Tali?”

She stared at his hand for a moment before taking it in hers and allowing him to draw her forward.

He spun her, dipped her, and passed her to another man. That man spun her about and returned her to Gar. She gazed into his eyes and saw pure joy reflected within. He spun her again, and she laughed, her spirits buoyed by the music. Back and forth, round and round she danced, feeling free and alive as she forgot the dark specter of her recent past.

The night wore on, and Lyra danced until her sore ankle forced her to stop. Even then, she sat on a log beside a wagon and watched the others dance while she clapped to the beat. Hours after sunset, the Tantarri began to fade into the darkness as they retreated to their wagons. When less than a dozen Tantarri remained, the musicians stopped playing and began to bid their companions a good night.

Lyra finally gave in to her curiosity and desire, emboldening her to stop one of them.

“Excuse me, Hentar.” She tapped a musician on the shoulder, hoping she remembered his name correctly. “May I try playing…what do you call it?”

“This is a guitar. You’ll find it much like a lute, but larger.” Hentar held it toward her. “Do you play?”

Without a word, Lyra accepted the instrument and cradled it, her fingers sliding along the frets as she imagined the notes. Testing it, she strummed it a few times and listened to the sound. Like a smith’s puzzle sliding into place, the difference between her lute and this instrument instantly became crystal clear.

Intently watching the placement of her fingers on the frets to get them right, she found the strumming as familiar as the sun. When she began to play, the

sweet sound seeped into her soul and extracted a piece of the sorrow she had buried deep inside herself. Unable to restrain herself, Lyra gave into the moment and began to sing. Her voice emerged full and clear as it hit every note, reverberating with emotion.

Lyra's hands quickly memorized the spacing of the frets, her fingers dancing along the strings with unmatched dexterity as she increased the tempo of the song, driving toward its climactic and emotional completion. Suddenly, it was finished, and her fingers strummed the final chords. Her hand dropped to her side, her head lowered with her eyes closed and tears trickling down her cheeks.

A vast silence filled the campsite, only interrupted by the occasional crackling of the fire. Then a clap sounded, followed by another, followed by many more. Lyra opened her eyes to find herself surrounded. The entire Tantarri clan had emerged from their wagons, every one of them staring at her, many with tears in their eyes.

Gar emerged from the crowd and bowed his head to her. "You bless us with your gift, Tali." His head rose, his gaze meeting hers. "Your voice and skill compel powerful emotions, something few musicians can hope to achieve." He flashed his handsome smile, shaking his head in wonder as tears glistened in his eyes.

"Such sorrow for one so young," Numi said, patting Lyra on the back.

The woman turned toward her wagon, as did the others, seeking their beds for the night. Lyra handed the guitar to the musician.

Hentar bowed deeply after accepting it. "I would like to thank you for gracing us with your gift."

Lyra shared a small smile with the man before he turned toward his wagon. With the area cleared, Lyra found herself alone with Gar, beside the dying fire.

"You truly amaze me, Tali," he said. "You could be one of us, you know. The Tantarri are among the most cunning thieves and most talented musicians in the world. With your quickness and dexterity, I could mold you into one of the best thieves of all time." He grinned. "And your voice, it might make the Spirit of the Nature, herself, weep."

Gar knelt on one knee and stared up at Lyra. "Please allow me to teach you,

Tali. I believe that is why fate brought you to us.”

6

While Gar and his sister prepared the wagon for their stay at the new campsite, Lyra grabbed two empty buckets and headed toward the darkening woods. Careful not to catch her dress on a patch of thorn-stemmed flowers growing among the ferns, she eased her way down the hillside toward the gurgling brook. Reaching the bottom, Lyra squatted and dipped a bucket into the water.

Hearing a noise behind her, she turned to find two Tantarri girls in mid-descent - Eddrick's daughter, Flori, wearing a red dress, her friend, Midurri, in yellow. Both girls were in their later teens, with long dark hair and curves that Lyra envied.

With one bucket filled, Lyra hefted it and set it among the rocks at the water's edge. She glanced up as the two girls settled beside her.

"Hello, Tali," the girl in the red dress said.

"Hello, Flori."

Still squatting, Lyra glanced up at Midurri as she moved to stand downstream from her.

Flori placed her hands on her hips. "I believe we have a misunderstanding that needs to be addressed."

Lyra frowned and stood, her full height falling a few inches shorter than Flori.

"And what would that be?"

“I’m talking about Gar.” Flori glanced uphill, toward camp. When her gaze returned toward Lyra, a fire shone within Flori’s eyes. “I see him with you, teaching you our craft. However, he’s mine, and you need to stay away from him.”

Lyra’s eyes narrowed. “Interesting. I wasn’t aware you owned him. Did you purchase him at the market? If so, I do hope you got him at a fair price.”

Flori stepped closer, her lip in a snarl. “You think you’re clever. You better watch your mouth, or you might find yourself searching for a few teeth.”

“I don’t know what your problem is, but Gar has a mind and will of his own.” Lyra poked Flori in the chest with her finger. “He would be with you if you’re the one he wants. However, I believe he’s too intelligent and has better taste than that.”

“Why you…”

Flori’s hands thrust out toward Lyra with the intent to shove her into the brook. Lyra slid sideways and twisted. Flori missed and her momentum caused her to stumble into the water. Unable to catch her balance, she went in face-first, splashing Lyra and Midurri in the process.

Midurri grabbed Lyra’s arm, attempting to pull her into the water. Lyra thrust her foot into Midurri’s midriff. The girl doubled over with an *oof* and released her grip. Her arms waved in a circle as she attempted to maintain her balance but fell backward into the stream. The massive splash from her back flop drenched Flori again just as she had risen to her feet in the waist-deep water.

Lyra stared in surprise at the two wet Tantarri girls as they turned toward her, wild anger apparent on their faces. Quickly bending to scoop up the full bucket along with the one she had yet to fill, Lyra scrambled up the hillside.

“I’ll get you for this, Tali!” Flori shouted as she tried to climb out of the water. “You better watch your back.”

Lyra crested the hill, emerged from the wood, and walked past the circle of rocks that would be their new fire pit. Gar finished setting blocks beneath the wheels of his wagon and stood to greet her. His gaze slid down Lyra’s dress, dotted with wet patterns created from the other two girls’ splashes.

“What happened to you?”

Lyra glanced back toward the hillside. “Oh, I just stumbled across some pests.”

Gar appeared confused, but shrugged. “Thank you for getting us fresh water. We have a bit of time before dinner, so why don’t you and I sit down and pick a few locks?”

Lyra smiled. “I thought you’d never ask.”

“Do as we practiced. Don’t rush yourself, focus on stealth,” Gar whispered.

“I feel guilty stealing from this man. He’s only a farmer.”

Gar handed her a burlap sack, empty and wound into a tight roll.

“Just fill this with apples. Nothing else. He has thousands of them after the fall harvest,” he whispered. “We only take people’s excess. You do it right, and they’ll be completely unaware that anything is missing or that you were ever even there. The last thing we want is for them to alert local authorities and try to chase us down.”

Lyra took the sack with a nod, unsure if Gar saw her response within the shadowy woods. With a calming breath, she stepped from the shadows and into the starlit field surrounding the farmer’s home.

She scurried through the long grass to the back of the outbuilding, resting her back against it as she listened for movement.

The evening breeze rustled the grass near her. Distant crickets chirped from somewhere within the forest. Lyra’s heart pounded with adrenaline as her pulse thumped in her ear. Beyond these three elements, she heard nothing.

A glance toward the woods where Gar waited revealed only dark shadows. After another slow breath, she peeked around the corner toward the farmhouse and found no activity.

Sliding around the corner, Lyra approached the door and discovered a padlock securing the hasp. She drew the dagger strapped to her leg, along with one of the two needles she had stuffed into her sheath. With a silent prayer to Yanetta that Gar was correct about the farmer’s lock having only a single

tumbler, she slid the needle into the keyhole and began to search for the trigger. Clinking and scraping sounds of metal on metal came from the lock, making Lyra cringe at each motion of the needle until it hit a metal object within the lock. Lyra twisted it and applied pressure until it clicked.

Her gaze drifted toward the house, listening and watching for any movement. Not finding any sign of alarm, she slid her blade into the lock and turned it until the lock body released from the padlock loop. She carefully slid it down and lifted the lock from the hasp plate. After inserting her knife and needle back into the sheath, Lyra set the padlock on the ground and pushed the door open.

The dark interior smelled like dirt, damp and musky. She eased herself inside, her hands groping in front of her as she blindly moved forward. When her foot kicked something small, she bent and felt the cool smooth shape of an apple in her palm. After removing the sack she had tucked under her tunic, she unrolled it and dropped the apple inside, briefly wondering if Gar would accept her returning with a single apple. It wouldn't help to feed the clan, but it'd prove she had successfully stolen *something*.

With her arms extended before her, one hand holding the sack and the other empty, she again moved forward. Her fingers collided with a wooden object she soon realized was a crate, stacked atop another crate. She shuffled sideways and found another stack of crates. Beyond that, open air until she lowered her hands and discovered an open crate filled with apples. Quietly, she scooped apples into the sack until it was almost too full to cinch at the top.

Turning to leave, the starlight beyond the doorway beckoned her toward it until she emerged from the dark confines of the storage building. After carefully pulling the door closed, she darted around the corner and crossed the field with her prized sack of fruit.

Lyra slowed as she entered the shadowed woods. Gar's voice came from her right.

"Over here."

Lyra ducked beneath hanging branches and found Gar on the other side of the tree.

"Got 'em," Lyra whispered. "An entire bag full."

Her heart was racing, but she found herself unable to stop grinning. She felt energized from the thrill of her little heist. Gar accepted the bag, taking it with both hands.

"Good job," he whispered. "You made sure to relock the door, right?"

Lyra froze, the grin sliding off her face.

"Oh no. I'll be right back."

Over the next month, the Tantarri methodically matriculated south, stopping for days or weeks at a time, depending on the grass available for the cattle to feed on. At some point, they passed beyond the unmarked border of Vinacci and entered Kalimar.

Each morning and evening, Gar would spend time teaching Lyra the arts of thievery – ranging from the subtleties of picking someone's pocket, to the knack of picking a lock, to the stealthy nature of burglary. Blessed with a lithe build, natural quickness, and almost supernatural dexterity, Lyra found herself an apt pupil and discovered a passion besides those of music and knucklebones.

Eventually, they happened upon an expansive rolling field with long grass stretching for miles to the west and south. Rather than staying for days or even a week, Lyra discovered that the Tantarri planned to remain in the area for months, as they had done every winter for countless years.

Without the burden of travel looming, Gar increased the hours spent with Lyra to hone her skills. Two weeks after arriving at the winter fields, he declared her ready for her first burglary of an occupied home.

Shortly after breakfast, the two of them took a stroll out into the fields, far beyond where the herd feasted on the long grass. They walked for more than an hour before they spotted the first dwelling.

"Look there," Gar pointed toward the tree line at the north edge of the field. "That house must surely hold great wealth."

Lyra spotted the peaked roof of a house, poking up from beyond a tall brick wall and she nodded, agreeing that the house likely had items of wealth hidden

behind such a barrier.

“Let’s get a closer look,” she suggested.

The two of them turned toward the tree line and melted into the woods, circling until they were able to approach the house from the opposite side.

Now able to get a closer look, Lyra found the home surrounded by a wall built of stones held together with hardened clay, standing perhaps ten feet in height. Other than the heavy wooden gate at the front, there appeared to be no way into the yard. While it represented a slight challenge, Lyra was positive that she could scale the wall and get inside. Gar tapped her shoulder and waved, indicating that they should leave. As they walked back to their campsite, Lyra assembled her plan.

The breeze rustled the leaves above as Lyra listened from the shadowed forest. She forced herself to maintain patience: listening, watching, and waiting. A glance toward the clear night sky allowed her to note the position of the stars as Gar had instructed. It appeared to be past midnight, making it highly unlikely for anyone inside to be awake.

Her lips flattened into a line of determination, followed by a nod to herself. Emerging from the shadows, she crept toward the wall, happy to be wearing her breeches rather than the loose skirts of her dress.

Reaching up, her hands ran across the cool stones until she found ridges that provided sufficient grip. Careful to move quietly, she pulled herself up, her toes gaining purchase on the slight protrusions of rock. With one hand extended upward, she gripped the top edge and pulled until she was able to flip her leg over and straddle the wall. She lay there with her chest pressed against the ledge as she surveyed the interior.

Although it contained only a single house in the middle and a storage building at the back, the yard inside was bigger than it appeared, large enough for six such houses. There was no movement within – not in the open space, nor in the windows of the house at the center.

Lyra slipped over the wall until she was hanging by her fingertips, her toes dangling three feet above the ground. She let go and landed softly in the long grass.

As she crept toward the quiet house, her eyes flicked about for signs of movement. She sidled along the wall and found the front entrance open, her brow furrowing at the discovery, not trusting her luck.

With a quick peek around the doorframe, she pulled her head back and considered what her eyes remembered. A small courtyard waited inside, open to the sky. Brick walls and a single door at the far end surrounded the stone tiled floor. Lyra took a breath and stepped through the doorway. She crept quietly, taking light steps as she headed toward the door.

The tiles cracked and lurched downward, dropping her a few inches. Lyra froze in fear and prepared to jump when the floor gave way. Twisting, she tried to grab ahold of the stones, but they crumbled in her grip. Dust filled the darkness as she hit the bottom, the darkness consuming her.

Barking. Lyra heard the sound of a dog barking. That sound tugged at her, drawing her from the darkness. She opened her eyes and blinked as a blur of white dots coalesced into the starry night sky. A dark shadow emerged from the periphery.

“Oh, stop your barking, Gilo.”

It was a young man’s voice.

Lyra noticed the silhouette of a dog at the edge of the opening above her. The dog barked again.

“Stop your barking! It might have been helpful before, back when I was sleeping. It doesn’t help much when you bark after we already caught the intruder.”

She shifted her focus and found a silhouette of a man standing above her, at the edge of a pit whose walls stood as tall as the walls outside the house. With an effort, she rose to her elbows and the world began to spin. Nausea settled in as

she sat upright and touched the back of her head. The pain of her contact caused her to wince. When she removed her hand, she found a dark wet smudge on her palm.

A light appeared, dim and blue, coming from the hand of the person above.

“Hmm,” the young man’s voice said. “It appears we caught a girl, Gilo. I’ve always wanted one. Thought about it for years, and now here one falls right into my lap. I guess I owe Issal a prayer or two for such a gift.”

The dog responded with a single bark followed by a low howl, his reply to the man.

“Exactly,” the man responded.

Lyra tried to stand, wincing and staggering as she put weight on her ankle. *Not again, s*he thought. The world tilted and spun, her dinner threatening to eject from her stomach.

“I think she’s hurt, Gilo,” the man said to the dog. “Should we help her or leave her there?”

The dog barked again.

“Hmm, you’re right. She *did* try to rob us.”

“Is this some sort of cruel torture?” Lyra asked. “If so, just kill me now, because that would be better than listening to you babble on as if I’m not here.”

“Ooo. The girl has spirit, too.” The man lowered the light and knelt at the edge of the pit. His tone changing, becoming more serious. “I’m sorry my dear, but you’re not in a position for bargaining at the moment. I certainly did not invite you into my home. Yet, here you are, caught in the trap I set for burglars like you – a trap to catch those who seek to take what is not theirs.”

Lyra frowned, unsure of how to respond.

“However, I might be persuaded to show mercy if you can offer something of value,” he said.

Lyra’s frown deepened. “What do you want of me?”

He laughed. “Nothing but your word.”

“My word?”

“Yes. I will get you out of the pit, and I will even heal your wounds, if you give me your word that you will remain here for three months as my assistant.”

“Your assistant? Assistant for what?”

He stood and began circling the pit. “I can’t say exactly. Just know that I am conducting research.” His arms spread out in an open embrace toward the stars. “I plan to change the world, make it a better place.” He stopped walking and lowered his arms. “However, doing everything myself is too time consuming, and my progress has been unsatisfactory – for myself and for *The Hand*.”

Lyra gasped, remembering that the man who killed her father had mentioned *The Hand*. Perhaps she could learn something if she stayed with this man. Perhaps she could avenge her father’s death.

“Fine,” she said, not sounding pleased about his offer. “I give you my word that I’ll stay here and help you for three months. However, you need to let me tell my family where I am. They are close by, so it will take merely a few hours.”

A long moment of silence followed and Lyra grew nervous that he might rethink his offer. The man tossed the glowing object into the pit, the orb bouncing and settling near her feet. A rope followed and a hard knot in the rope struck Lyra on its way down. She winced in pain, her palm going to her forehead.

“Sorry about that. Grab ahold, and I’ll pull you up.”

Lyra did as he said, bracing her good foot against the wall while he heaved and grunted, pulling her up in jerks and fits. As she crested the edge, she pulled herself forward on her stomach until she lay on the stone tiled floor. A long tongue slurped across her face, forcing her to sputter and push the dog’s head away.

“Gilo likes you. I’ll take that as a positive sign.” A hand rested on her forehead, still sore from the rope. “Now, hold still and expect a chill.” He laughed. “I rhyme all the time.” He laughed again. “I’m a poet, and I don’t know it.”

Lyra tried to get a look at his face, but found it too shadowed. His laughter faded and all fell quiet. From nowhere, a frigid chill racked her body, causing her back to arch and making her hair stand on end. The air in her lungs abandoned her and left her gasping. She rolled on her side in an attempt to reclaim it. Her stomach growled, feeling as if she had gone a day without food.

“There you go.” He stood upright. “You’re good as new, just as promised. My name is Cal. Welcome to Mystic Manor. And your name would be…”

Rising to her elbows, her eyes narrowed as she stared up at his shadowed face. “I’m…Tali.”

He nodded. “Tali. Like the game. Beautiful name. Ha! I did it again.” He laughed. “Now that I did as I said, I hope you will keep your promise.”

Cal turned and crossed the courtyard as Lyra sat up and realized she was no longer dizzy. She felt the back of her head and found the lump gone, the wet spot now dry. Curious, she rotated her ankle and felt no pain.

“You did it. You healed me,” she said in wonder. “How did you do that?”

He stopped before the door with his hand on the knob. “Oh. I forgot to tell you. I can do magic.”

Opening the door, he stepped inside while holding it open for his dog.

“Now, come inside, and I’ll show you to your room. You should get some rest, Tali. Tomorrow will be a busy day.”

7

Sunlight streaming through the open curtain forced Lyra to squint as she opened her eyes. Rolling over, she took a deep breath as she appreciated the luxurious comfort of the oversized bed. While she had her own bed before the fire consumed her home, it had been much smaller and harder than this one.

Lyra tossed the covers aside and flipped her legs off the edge, her feet nuzzling into the soft slippers Cal had provided. They were too big for her but still did the job. Standing, she discovered her clothing gone, leaving only the thin shift she now wore and the gray robe hanging from a hook on the wall. She grabbed the robe and wrapped it about herself before opening the door.

The hallway outside stood empty. She took a few tentative steps and found three other rooms empty as well, with a note pinned to the partially closed door of the fourth room.

Good morning, Tali.

Your clothes smelled like you had slept in them for a month, so I gave them a wash and hung them out to dry. I assume your body has similar issues, so I filled the tub and set two pots of hot water beside it. Be sure to use the leather gloves when filling the tub or I'll be forced to heal your hands, and I'd rather not since I have more pressing things to do. Once you are clean and dry, come out and retrieve your clothing from the line. Don't soak too long because you have a long

walk into the city today.

Regards,

Cal

Lyra finished reading the note and pushed the door fully open to reveal a copper tub in the center of the room. Closing the door behind her, she approached the tub, finding it half filled with water. Upon a stone table rested two black kettles, each marked with odd symbols painted in yellow. Steam rose from the kettles, and Lyra cocked her head in thought. *They're still hot. He must have just put them here.*

With a shrug, Lyra slipped the leather gloves on and poured the water from one of the kettles into the tub. The water only felt warm so she added half of the second kettle before the temperature was to her liking. She grabbed the bar of soap that waited near the kettles and stepped into the tub, not removing her shift until she was in the water.

Nearly a half-hour had passed by the time she had her shift scrubbed and wrung out, her body cleaned, and her hair washed. Lyra climbed out of the tub, shivering as she ran to the towel hanging from a nearby hook. She wrapped it about her and dried off before swapping the towel for the robe and grabbing her clean, but wet, shift. Turning toward the mirror, Lyra grabbed the brush resting beside it and began to tame her black hair, twisted and matted from months of abuse. When she was done, she gave a satisfied nod to the image in the mirror and exited the room.

Lyra passed through the hallway and emerged into an expansive kitchen with pots and pans dangling from the ceiling over a large brick oven. Shelves and cabinets surrounded the room, many of them empty and dusty. Beyond a rectangular table and four chairs, was an open entrance to the neighboring room.

Circling the table, Lyra discovered a sitting room with a sofa, two chairs, and a small table arranged in an arc around a dormant fireplace. Again, not finding anyone in the room, Lyra pressed onward and passed through the door that led outside.

The courtyard she had discovered the night before was also empty other than a gaping hole. She walked to the edge and stared down, finding it three strides wide, four strides deep, and nearly twice the length. The debris revealed a broken wooden beam structure and an impressive amount of shattered stone blocks. She circled around the hole and passed through the open doorway into the yard.

Her breeches and tunic rippled in the morning breeze as they dangled from a rope strung from the building to the outer wall. When she rubbed the fabric of her breeches between her finger and thumb, she found them already dry. She freed the clothing from the wooden pins holding them captive and turned toward the house, noticing Cal far across the yard.

The young man sat on a stool while Gilo lay beside him, sprawled on his side as he basked in the morning sunlight. Cal's eyes were closed, his brow furrowed in concentration as he held a fist-sized rock in his hands. He had smooth, pale skin, a strong nose, and scruffy brown hair. Lyra frowned, wishing she could see his eyes. He wasn't unattractive, but he certainly lacked the swarthy good looks that Gar possessed.

Thinking of Gar reminded Lyra that she needed to talk to him, needed to let him know she was safe. After heading back inside, she retreated to her room to change.

Cleaned and dressed, she exited the room and walked down the hallway. As she entered the kitchen, she found Cal waiting. The laces of his tunic were loose, exposing the pale skin of his neck and upper chest. Standing a half-head taller than Lyra, he was of average height. He had a lean build, not overly thin, nor obviously muscular.

"I assume you're hungry." He smiled.

Lyra shrugged. "Yeah."

His grin widened, his blue eyes lighting up.

"Good. Because we need food." He held his hand out toward her as a slip of paper dangled from his fingers. "I made a list."

Lyra stared at his extended arm for a moment before reacting. She reached out and snatched the paper, glancing at it to find a list of groceries and other

miscellaneous items.

“What am I to do with this?”

He smiled again and Lyra found herself thinking he had an engaging smile.

“The city is nearby, beyond the rise to the west.” He pointed toward the front door. “It should only take you an hour to walk there.”

“Before I do that, I need to go tell my family that I’m going to stay here for a while.” She glanced at the note again, shaking her head as she chuckled. “How am I going to carry all this stuff anyway?”

He flashed another grin. “I have that covered.”

Turning about, Cal crossed the kitchen and reached toward the ceiling. His fingers grabbed a strap hanging from an oversized canvas sack that appeared to be stuck in the corner. Lyra’s brow furrowed he pulled the bag down and gathered it in his arms, as if he were collecting lost breaths.

Cal crossed the room with the pack in his arms. “Take this, but be sure to keep a tight grip on it.” He held it toward her and she accepted it in curiosity. “Until the pack is loaded, it will float away if you let it.”

As he released his grip, Lyra found herself scrambling to draw the pack in as it pulled toward the ceiling. The effect felt like an invisible fishing line were reeling it upward. She gathered it in and wrapped her arms about it, blinking in awe as it pulled upward, attempting to lift her off the ground.

“There you go.” He nodded. “With the floating pack, you should have no trouble carrying the items on the list.”

“But…how is it floating? How does it work?”

“I already told you,” He smiled. “I can do magic.”

Lyra crested the rise, getting her first view of what lay to the west. She stopped at the top, holding her hand up to shade her eyes from the mid-day sun.

A long field stretched before her, filled with tall grass bounded by a forest to the north and far to the south. Miles to the west, the white walls of a city rose above the fields, with squat cylindrical towers jutting above them. Beyond the

city, the Sea of Fates stretched across the horizon, its blue waters rippling and shimmering in the hazy mist that hovered over the bay.

Turning around to get a view of what lay behind her, she found fields stretching into the distance, encircled by trees. Squinting, she could just make out the walls of Mystic Manor nestled along the tree line. Her gaze shifted beyond, and she spotted a herd of cattle many miles to the east, which reminded her of Gar and their conversation, just hours earlier.

"If you never returned to him, what of it? He doesn't know where you are, who you are," Gar protested.

"I promised, Gar. I cannot…" She shook her head as she recalled her father just before his murder, remembering what his broken promise had rendered, the last promise he would ever make.

Lyra doubted Cal would kill her, but it would be wrong to break her vow. Besides, she wanted more information about The Hand. She owed her father that much.

"I'll not break my promise. He held up his end of the bargain, and I will do the same."

Gar stepped closer and wrapped his arms about her. Lyra found her heart racing as she gazed into his dark eyes. He pressed up against her, the warmth of his body making her breath quicken.

"You're special, Tali," Gar whispered. "I want you to stay."

Their lips met, and Lyra's eyes widened, flicking side-to-side before drifting closed. His lips were soft, dynamically opposed to his firm body. She somehow swam her way through the pleasure of the kiss until she found the surface and was able to push him away. He looked at her with confusion on his face as she reclaimed her breath.

"I'm…only fifteen summers, Gar. I'm…too young for you."

"Nonsense." Gar shook his head. "I'll not deny a five-year gap seems significant now, but when I'm thirty summers and you're twenty-five, you will think it as natural as rain."

Lyra gazed into his dark eyes, the brown pools that consumed her very soul. It took everything she had to resist him, to turn and open the door to the wagon.

She stepped outside and pulled her floating pack through before turning back to face him.

"I must do this, Gar. Once my promise is fulfilled, I will return." Lyra nodded to herself. "We can resume this conversation at that time."

When she turned to leave, he followed, closing the door behind him.

"We Tantarri leave this place in three months, heading north for the summer." His voice took on a pleading quality. "Please, Tali. Please return to us before we are gone."

Lyra stopped and stared down at her boots, finding them dusty from the dry gravel of the campsite.

"I'll be finished with my commitment in three months. I will join you then."

The pain of the bittersweet farewell returned. Lyra closed her eyes and found herself sighing as she refocused on the present.

She turned back to face west and began walking downhill, toward the city.

Lost in her own thoughts – thoughts mostly of Gar and her time with the Tantarri – the distance to the city closed without notice. She looked up to find the white walls suddenly looming over her.

Lyra stared at her surroundings in wonder as she passed through the open gates of Sol Polis, each step of her boots clicking on the stone-paved streets, busy with foot traffic. Men in black cloaks strode past Lyra while women in various dress colors purchased bread, meat, and produce from bakers, butchers, and farmers' carts. Clay-tiled roofs capped the pale buildings along the thoroughfare that lead toward the heart of the city. Lyra slowed as she approached a white building that towered over the narrow street, finding herself enthralled and almost losing grip of the floating pack. In awe, she stared at the gilded carvings beside the stained-glass window above the entrance. The engraved message within the alabaster plaque beside the double-doors read *Temple of Issal, Established in 1102*.

A passer-by collided with Lyra, knocking her forward and breaking her from her reverie.

"Watch where you're going," Lyra snapped.

The man stopped, his brow furrowed as his gaze swept over her. "A girl?" He

appeared aghast. “Why are you dressed like a boy?”

As he turned and continued down the street, Lyra frowned and pulled Cal’s list from the side pocket of the floating pack. She read the first item again and continued down the street. Upon reaching the next corner, the view opened to a massive square occupied by a castle surrounded by pale brick walls.

Three squat towers hovered above the walls, while a fourth appeared in mid-construction. A structure of wooden poles and platforms encircled the tower, with men stationed at the top of the scaffolding. Distant pulleys squeaked as ropes hauled heavy stone blocks to the top, where men disconnected the blocks before securing them to the wall in a bed of mortar. Lyra watched the stonemasons for a few minutes before breaking from her trance. Recalling the list of errands Cal had assigned to her, she set off to find a tailor.

The sun was well into the western sky by the time Lyra reached the gate to Mystic Manor. She pushed the gate open and closed it, securing it in place by dropping the thick wooden bar into the brackets along the door. Turning about to find the yard empty, she walked to the courtyard and circled around the pit before entering the house.

A bark sounded, and Cal popped his head around the corner as Gilo came running toward Lyra. The dog slowed when he neared her, his tail wagging eagerly as she scratched behind his ears.

Cal eyed her, his gaze sweeping the length of her body. “You’re back. The dress looks nice on you, too.”

Glancing down at herself, she eyed the dark red dress she bought while in Sol Polis. With it only requiring a few modifications, the tailor had it ready by the time she had completed her other errands.

“Thank you.” Lyra swung the full pack around, it weighing a fraction of what it should, considering the contents. “The mason said he would have a team here in the morning to repair the pit. I also got everything you requested, but it will take a while for the two of us to eat this much food. How do you expect to

keep it fresh that long?”

Cal accepted the pack and spun about, speaking over his shoulder as she followed him into the kitchen. “Don’t worry, it will keep just fine.”

After setting the pack on the table, Cal pulled two carafes of milk from the stuffed pack and held them toward Lyra.

“Open the coldbox door and start loading it up as I hand things to you.”

Lyra glanced toward the cabinet Cal had indicated. It appeared large enough for her to fit inside, and it had odd symbols carved into the door.

Her brow furrowed. “Um, you plan to store a side of beef in a cabinet uncooked? It will go bad in a day.”

He chuckled. “Just open the cabinet. You’ll see.”

Shrugging, Lyra grabbed the handle and snatched her hand back, looking down at her fingers. She bit her lip and reached for the handle again, the metal feeling ice cold. As the door opened, frosty air seeped out, sinking toward the floor. Curious, she put her hand inside and touched one of the shelves, finding it cold.

“How…how is this possible?”

He laughed. “I keep telling you. I can do magic.”

8

Using a pair of metal tongs, Lyra picked the sizzling beef strips off the cast iron stovetop and dropped them on the plate held in her other hand. She set the plate down and used her gloved hand to pull the oven door open, the wonderful scent of baked bread wafting out. Reaching in, she used the tongs to remove a hot loaf of bread before closing the door.

Discarding the leather gloves, she set the plate of meat and loaf of bread on the table, joining the bowl of fresh vegetables already waiting there.

With another glance toward the oven and stovetop, Lyra found herself surprised at how quickly she had grown accustomed to something that seemed unbelievable just days prior. She still didn't understand Cal's magic, but the fact that the stove and oven were always hot made life incredibly convenient.

The sound of whining carried through an open window, followed by barking. Lyra sighed.

"Has that dog gotten himself locked outside again?"

She emerged from the kitchen and crossed the sitting room. Opening the door, Lyra noted the newly installed stone tiles where the pit had been. It felt odd to cross them, since the fall she had endured remained fresh in her mind. However, that area was solid after being filled-in and paved over. Cal claimed that he no longer had need for it, since he possessed a new trick for would-be intruders.

When Lyra emerged from the courtyard, she found Gilo at the gate, sniffing

and pacing.

“What is it, boy?” she asked as she drew near.

The dog grew more excited, panting and dancing in anticipation. A whine came from just beyond the gate. Lyra’s brow arched as she raised the bar that locked the gate, easing it open to discover the source of Gilo’s excitement.

A medium-sized dog darted past her and ran toward the house with Gilo in pursuit.

“Wait!” she shouted as she locked the gate.

She ran into the courtyard and found both dogs sniffing each other, moving in circles as they sought each other’s tail end.

Upon further examination, the dog appeared underfed, her spine and rib bones showing prominently. With short tan hair and droopy ears, the newcomer was a contrast to Gilo’s pointed ears and dark brindle coat.

Apparently finished smelling Gilo, the other dog ran toward Lyra and rubbed against her legs, apparently seeking Lyra for protection. Lyra squatted to pet the new dog and received a series of rapid licks on her chin and cheek.

“Oh, you’re a sweetie.” Lyra crooned, scratching the new dog behind the ears.

As she pet the stray, Lyra considered her own life and the similar nature between her and the new canine – both homeless, skinny, and forlorn. She felt an instant connection.

Standing upright, she walked to the door, opened it, and waited as Gilo and the other dog ran inside.

“Let’s get you two some dinner. Cal should be home soon.”

The front door opened and Lyra craned her neck around the wall between the kitchen and sitting room as Cal stepped into the house. Gilo heard the door as well and scrambled to greet his owner while the stray trailed close behind. Lyra finished drying the plate and set it atop the stack of clean plates resting on the open shelf. She walked into the sitting room to find Cal frowning at the new dog

while he pet Gilo.

“Who’s this?”

“I named her Striah. I found her whining at the gate,” Lyra said with a shrug. “She seemed lost and hungry, so I brought her in and fed her. Gilo appears to like her, too.’

Lyra bit her lip as she waited for Cal to respond, fearing what he might say.

Cal sighed, “Fine.”

He set his pack on the small table near the door and plopped down on the sofa. The stray immediately jumped up beside him and climbed into his lap.

Lyra laughed. “She’s a bit large for your lap, but she appears to like you.”

Cal gave a sad smile and shook his head. “I’m glad somebody does.”

“Why do you say that?”

He sighed again. “I met with Ministry leaders to present my discoveries, but they’re not satisfied. They demand that I push forward and ignore my concerns. I can hold them back for a bit, but I know where things are headed, and I’m just not ready yet.”

Lyra arranged her skirt and sat in the chair across from Cal. Gilo settled at her feet, leaning against her shins as she absently pet him.

“After working here for almost two weeks, I still know little of what you do. You call me your assistant, but all I do is run errands, clean, and cook.” She paused. “By the way, you missed dinner. What’s left is in the kitchen, wrapped in a towel.”

“I’m not hungry. And regarding your other question, I agree. You deserve to know something of what I do.” He looked at Striah, petting her while the dog’s eyes drifted open and closed at the pleasure of his attention. “I’m a member of the Ministry of Issal. They brought me here from Sol Gier and put me up in this house as a quiet place to conduct research, research on magic. The manor is quiet enough for me to do my work, yet is close enough to Sol Polis that I can visit them at any time to report my progress.”

“What is this Ministry of…what did you call it?”

“If you don’t know about the Ministry of Issal, you must not be Kalimarian.”

Lyra shook her head, hesitating a moment before replying, “I’m from

Vinacci."

Cal nodded. "You still hold to the old gods then. If *The Hand* has its way, that will soon change, and you will follow Issal instead."

Lyra's heart quickened with anticipation as the conversation turned in the direction she desired. "You've mentioned *The Hand* before. What is it?"

"*The Hand* is really more of a *who*. It is a shortened version for *The Hand of Issal*, a sect within the Ministry. There are other sects, each having their own views of how to best enlighten the people about Issal's teachings. *The Hand* recruited me from Sol Gier when they learned about my discoveries – about the unique abilities I developed using Issal's magic. I agreed to come because I believe magic can be used to make people's lives better."

"So, this magic of yours…you're some kind of witch, then?"

He laughed. "There's no such thing as a witch. Witchcraft is a label created by ignorance and fear. My abilities come from Issal. Some of those who follow him can do magic. There are two types to his magic though: one magic is connected to life, and it includes abilities such as healing. The other magic is related to change and can be used in powerful, and sometimes practical, ways. The coldbox, the oven, and the floating pack are all examples of this magic."

Lyra nodded slowly. "You also said that each sect has its own views. What are the views of *The Hand*?"

"Like me, they believe that as people come to understand the things we can achieve using Issal's magic, they will recognize him as the one true god. Unlike the Ministry, the old gods don't have followers who can perform magical feats like we do. That's why they funded my research and is why they continue to push me to work faster."

Frowning in thought, Lyra sat back in her chair. The man named Rainer had mentioned *The Hand*. After her father refused to betray the Queen of Vinacci, the man killed him. If *The Hand* believed that magic was the way to convince people to follow Issal, why force her father to betray Queen Iglesia? Something was still missing. Lyra hoped that the answers would become clear before her time with Cal was finished.

9

Soothing heat enveloped Lyra's body as she lay in the tub with only her head and shoulders above the water. A sliver of morning sun streamed through a crack in the curtain, accompanied by the pleasant tweeting of a starfetch from somewhere nearby. Lyra found herself completely at ease, feeling safe and content. For the first time in months, she felt like herself. Inspired by the small bird outside, she began to sing, her voice reverberating within the barren confines of the bathing room. With her eyes closed, she gave herself to the song, allowing the emotional expression to consume the sorrow she had buried deep inside.

As her song ended, she held the last note for an undetermined amount of time, slowly feeding it until she had no remaining air to give. Remnants of the chord still flitted about the room as she opened her eyes and sat up.

A gasp escaped her lips when she saw Cal standing in the open doorway. Her hands went to her chest to cover herself as she sank back into the water.

"What are you doing in here? Get out!"

He shook his head, his face reflecting awe. "You have no idea what you have done. I…I can't thank you enough for what you've given me."

"What?" She dug the bar of soap from the water and whipped it at him. "Go away, you letch!"

The soap hit him in the head. "Ouch." His hand rubbed his forehead. "I'm… I'm sorry."

He ducked out the door, leaving her behind.

Lyra grabbed her towel, climbed from the tub, and dried off. She dressed herself and exited the bathing room while she was still brushing her hair. When she entered the kitchen, she found Cal bent over the table, busily drawing symbols on a sheet of paper.

Frowning, she waited for him to look up at her, for him to apologize for violating her privacy. He appeared oblivious, completely focused on the figures he was tracing. With her patience expired, she broke the silence.

“Well…don’t you have anything to say for yourself?”

He looked up at her, blinking in confusion. “Oh. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean… I…just found your singing so lovely, like another kind of magic. It drew me in against my will.” He leaned back. “When I saw you singing, the magic materialized right before my eyes. Never before have I seen anything so beautiful.”

Lyra’s face grew flush, her heart racing as her emotions teetered between the embarrassment of the moment and the flattery of the compliment.

Cal stood, appearing passionate. “You showed me something, Lyra, something I’ve been seeking for a long time, but I didn’t know it until I saw it.”

Lyra swallowed hard as she stared into his intense blue eyes. She stepped toward him, unable to do otherwise. Likewise, Cal stepped closer and lifted his hand toward her. Lyra blinked in surprise when he shook the sheet of paper in front of her face.

“Emotions! Your singing enabled me to visualize emotions!” He pointed at the symbols on the paper, as excited as a five-year-old with a captured firefly. “Before, I had only been able to read physical effects. But now, I can do it! I can see emotions!”

Lyra’s brow furrowed. “What are you talking about?”

His finger pounded on the paper again. “These symbols. They’re emotions! This changes everything!”

The passion-driven heat within Lyra began to stir. “Are you talking about your stupid magic again?”

He nodded, and the stirring heat within her flashed to an angry boil that

erupted into shouting.

“What’s wrong with you? Why can’t you act normal?”

Lyra thrust her hands into his chest, knocking him into his chair as she turned and stormed down the hall. She caught a brief glimpse of the perplexed expression on his face before the door to her room slammed shut.

10

Cal finished tracing the symbol before setting the brush on the bench, leaving small white splotches where the paint from the brush splattered.

He eyed the symbol and nodded. “I need you to hold him and do your best to comfort him.”

Lyra glanced at Gilo and noticed his tail folded between his legs, the whites of his eyes showing.

“That’s just paint, right? It won’t hurt him?”

Cal shook his head. “No. Of course not. The paint should wear off in a few days. However, I’m hoping the effect will last far longer.”

“The effect of what, exactly?”

He shrugged. “The magic, of course.”

Lyra rolled her eyes. “Of course. It’s *always* the magic.”

Rather than respond, he just grinned.

Releasing a sigh, she shook her head and knelt beside Gilo. The dog turned her direction, forcing her to tilt her head back to avoid his long tongue. She wrapped her arms about the dog and began to pet him, crooning softly to ease his anxiety.

Cal closed his eyes and breathed in, his breaths growing more rapid. His eyes flashed open, and Lyra started when she saw red sparks leaping within them. A crimson glow arose from within the symbol painted on the dog’s back. Cal bent and put his hand on Gilo, his eyes appearing normal again before he closed

them.

Gilo stiffened and yelped. The yelping grew more intense, sounding like the dog was in immense pain. Lyra felt Gilo's chest expanding, and she feared that he might explode. In fits and spurts, the dog grew taller, yelping the entire time. She fell backward to the ground and stared in a mixture of horror and wonder as the dog's size expanded. Cal kept his eyes closed the entire time, his hand never leaving the dog. The dogs growth slowed, and his yelping quieted to a whimper.

As suddenly as it began, the dog stopped growing and fell silent other than panting.

Lyra was stunned as she attempted to rationalize what she had witnessed. Moments ago, the top of Gilo's head barely came to her waist. Now, the dog stood nearly as tall as Cal and easily weighed four hundred pounds.

Her focus shifted to Cal, who had a pained look on his face.

"Sorry, boy," Cal whispered as he pet his dog. "They're pushing me for results, and I had to start somewhere. When they meet you, I expect they will be suitably impressed."

Lyra released a sigh of relief when Cal finally exited the shop. The crowd who had gathered around her and Gilo made her feel self-conscious, even though their focus remained on the giant dog.

"All done here," Cal said as he walked past her.

Gilo followed Cal with Lyra squeezing the rope and praying to Yanetta that he would not decide to bolt. Thus far, the dog appeared oblivious to the disturbance he had caused since arriving in Sol Polis.

When they reached the open square at the city center, Cal stopped and stared into the afternoon sky.

"What is it?" Lyra asked.

"The planet. We can see it during daylight now."

Lyra's gaze followed where he pointed and found a milky globe hovering in the hazy blue heavens. She squinted at the object, white with gray swirls. A

puffy white cloud drifted past, obscuring it from view.

“A planet? I don’t recall any planet being that close. I thought they looked like stars.”

Cal nodded. “They all did until this one appeared a few months back.”

“What does it mean? Are we in danger?”

He shrugged. “I have no idea. Come on. We have more pressing issues.”

He led her toward the Citadel. The two guards stationed at the gate drew their weapons and stepped back but did nothing to stop Cal when he walked past and entered the complex with Lyra and Gilo close behind.

Within the walls, Lyra found an expansive plaza occupied by well-trimmed shrubs and bronze statues that gleamed in the morning sun. Cal ignored it all and walked toward the massive building at the center, leading them up a set of stairs that divided massive alabaster columns supporting the stone arches above the entrance.

Cal led them through an open doorway and past another set of guards. With fear in their eyes, the two men drew weapons and backed away as Gilo and Lyra passed them. The building interior contained a massive hall with a running fountain in the center, and the sound of the bubbling water echoed in the open space.

Without pause, Cal crossed the hall as Lyra looked about in wonder, drinking in the architecture and the tapestries adorning the walls between each wooden door. As Cal approached the far end of the room, one of the two guards posted at the double doors held his palm out to stop him. The man had short-cropped dark hair and a trimmed goatee, appearing the senior of the two guards. Even as the man spoke, his nervous eyes remained on Gilo.

“You can’t interrupt them right now, sir.”

Cal frowned at Gilo. “I think they’re going to want to see this.”

The guard’s gaze moved from Cal to Gilo and back again. “Well…they are in the middle of a discussion. You’re going to have to wait.”

Cal glared at the man, shedding his normal friendly demeanor. “I will see them. Now.”

Although the man facing him stood a half-head taller and out-weighed Cal

by a hundred pounds, his eyes reflected fear. He glanced at the other guard, who continued staring at Gilo. Finding no support from his companion, the guard turned back to Cal.

“Well…please give me a moment, sir.”

The man slipped inside the doorway, and Cal turned to wink at Lyra, the hint of a smile showing.

The guard returned and held the door open as he waved them inside.

Although Lyra had never seen Queen Iglesia’s throne room in Vingarri, she had listened in rapt attention when father described it to her. The room she now entered was similar to the image she had formed in her mind.

Colored light streamed through the stained-glass windows that surrounded the room, illuminating an open space with high arches supporting a ceiling four stories above. Rows and rows of benches lined both sides of the room, split by a long stretch of red carpet down the center aisle.

Cal led them down the carpeted path, straight toward the half-circle of thirteen thrones that stood atop the dais at the head of the room. Men occupied each throne, some appearing angry, while others leaned forward in curiosity. Mutters of surprise spread throughout the group as they stared at Gilo.

Stopping just a few feet before the dais, Cal nodded to the young man who stood beside him. The man wore a black cloak and had long dark hair tied in a tail behind his head. He appeared to match Cal in age, but displayed a stern demeanor, in contrast to Cal’s relaxed manner.

Cal nodded toward the man, “Hello, Elias.”

The man grimaced. “Hello, Cal.”

Lyra settled just behind Cal. She gave the rope a hard tug and Gilo stopped and sat beside her, his head even with hers. Elias shifted his gaze from Cal to Lyra, his eyes widening when he spotted Gilo. The man took a step backward as he bit his lip. Lyra’s gaze flicked to Cal and found him watching Elias with a smile on his face.

“Thank you, Elias,” Cal said with a nod.

Elias’ brow furrowed. “Thank you? For what?”

Cal laughed, “You’ll see.”

“I assume your rude interruption relates to the oversized dog you brought with you.”

Cal turned toward the man who occupied the center throne, a man with graying black hair, a short beard, and intense eyes. Like Elias, he appeared quite austere. Like Elias, he wore a black cloak. Unlike Elias, he was far older than Cal.

“Yes, Archon. I have new discoveries to share, findings I believe the Council will find quite compelling.”

“Very well.” The archon nodded. “Please present your discoveries so we may finish our discussion with Grand Master Firellus.”

Cal glanced toward Elias as he bowed before the dais. “As suggested by certain members of the Council, I have accelerated my work. I’m here to show you that,” Cal held his arm toward Gilo, who was watching every move. “The results are quite astounding.”

“Three days ago, I *Infused* my dog with an augmentation that enlarged him to twice his height and four times his former mass.” Cal nodded. “Yes, I said three days ago. I expect the effect to be permanent.”

The men on the thrones exchanged glances, many of them nodding as Cal continued speaking.

“I used the same technique I described with my last report, a technique I then taught to Elias, as you requested.”

Elias frowned, but remained silent.

The Archon tilted his head, examining the dog. “The dog appears…normal. That is, except for its massive size.”

Cal turned toward Gilo and nodded. “Yes, thus far. However, I highly suggest we give it more time. In addition, I require additional test subjects to ensure the results are consistent.”

Another man from among the thrones spoke. “We tire of your conservative approach. The Council appreciates the work you do, but you continually express caution and create excuses to move slowly.” The man leaned forward, squeezing his hand into a fist held before his pinched face. “The iron is hot. It is time for action. We cannot sit back and allow this opportunity to pass.”

“Your position is well known, Victor,” the Archon said. “However, the decision is up to Council vote, not individual opinion.”

An uncomfortable silence fell upon the room as Victor glared at the Archon. Cal spoke again, interrupting the moment.

“I have another discovery to reveal, one that equals or surpasses the first.”

The Archon nodded. “Go on.”

Cal smiled. “I am now able to read emotions.”

The men looked to one another, appearing confused as the Archon spoke again.

“What do you mean?”

“I discovered something new, another method of augmentation. Allow me to demonstrate…”

Without waiting for a response, Cal pulled a piece of paper from his pocket and unfolded it. He knelt, setting the paper on the floor as he feverishly sketched a symbol with a piece of coal. While he traced the rune, Elias stepped closer and watched intently.

After pocketing the coal, Cal closed his eyes and began breathing deep breaths, growing increasingly more rapid. He opened his eyes and red sparks danced within them as he stared at the paper. With the paper held up, it was easy to see the symbol he had drawn, glowing bright red and pulsing before fading.

An intense sense of terror came over Lyra as she stared at the symbol, so intense that she was unable to move. Locked in that state, she prayed for death, for anything that might take the fear away. The world was a place of unspeakable horror, and death was her only escape.

Cal lowered the paper and covered it with his cloak. The fear vanished, and Lyra found herself gasping for air, realizing she had been too scared to breathe. The other men in the room were gasping as well, many with tears in their eyes. Lyra noticed that Elias’ pants were wet in the crotch and down one leg.

“Sorry about that.” Cal grinned. “Especially for you, Elias.”

“What…was that?” the Archon demanded.

“As I explained, I can now read emotions, which offers a new array of possible methods to use our magic. What you just experienced was fear.

Conjured fear.” Cal shrugged. “It is but one example of many. This particular one was made possible courtesy of Elias, from the fear he exuded when he first saw my dog.”

Cal stepped backward and scratched Gilo behind the ears, unable to avoid the dog’s giant tongue when it lashed out and swept across his cheek. As he sputtered and wiped his face with his sleeve, Cal turned toward the dais, toward the man seated in the center throne.

“Very good,” the Archon nodded. “Very good, indeed.” He turned toward Elias. “What say you, Master Firellus? Can you foresee how the Ministry might benefit from this revelation?”

Elias glared at Cal, his expression softening, the anger on his face replaced by a smirk. “I can indeed, Sir.”

The Archon sat back in his chair, smiling with fingers tented before his mouth as he addressed Cal.

“You appear to be progressing quite well. Please press forward and find what more you can discover. We will soon take action.”

11

"Come on," Lyra crooned. "It's okay."

The scruffy stray pulled on the rope, clawing and scrambling backward across the newly installed courtyard tiles, attempting to tow Lyra as well. Some of the dogs she had gathered were easier than others. This one fell into the latter camp. After a brief struggle, Lyra sighed and peered across the yard to confirm the gate was latched shut.

"Fine. You win."

She pulled herself toward the dog, working her hands down the length of the leash and loosening the knot before sliding the loop off the dog's head. As soon as he was free, the dog darted across the yard, slowing to sniff here and there. Another dog lying in the shade at the far end of the yard sat up, taking notice. The massive dog climbed to his feet as three others did the same, all four running toward the newcomer. Dwarfed in size by the approaching magic-infused dogs, the new stray scurried away and ran past Lyra, into the courtyard and up to the closed door. He danced about, shifting this way and that, frantic to enter the safety of the building.

"Sure," Lyra grumbled as she scrambled to open the door. "Now, you want to come in."

The moment the door opened, the dog shot inside and Lyra followed, turning to find the four pursuing dogs barreling into the courtyard, the narrow doorway forcing them to enter in single file. She hurriedly closed the door before Balbo's

huge nose squeezed into the gap.

Lyra turned to find the new stray backed into a corner, the whites of his eyes showing as Gilo and Striah loomed over him. Gilo's brindle coat had darkened and was now completely black. Likewise, Striah's coat was growing darker, likely a side effect of the magic.

The two massive dogs nudged the normal-sized dog with their noses as they tried to sniff him, pushing the poor thing around the room as if he weighed nothing. Lyra frowned when she noticed the wet spot beneath the new dog. With a sigh, she headed toward the kitchen to get a rag.

As she entered the kitchen, Cal emerged from the hallway.

"You're back from the city," he noted.

"You're amazing," she replied. "Did you use magic to determine that?"

Cal chuckled. "Not this time." His attention shifted to the dogs in the neighboring room. "You found another one."

Lyra dunked the rag into a cool bucket of water and began to wring it out. "Yes. I almost had two of them, but one got away. This one is skittish and was hard enough to leash on his own."

She crossed into the other room and pushed Gilo aside, barely able to move the dog. "Go on, Gilo. Give him some space." She swatted Striah to get her attention. "You too. Leave him be."

The two oversized dogs retreated as she bent to clean the urine. The small dog panted nervously, his eyes bulging as they followed the departing dogs.

Cal walked past and sat on the couch. "If you can get a few more for me, I think we'll have a meaningful sample size. Twelve would be ideal, but ten dogs will do."

Lyra finished cleaning the floor and gave the dog a friendly pat. "Skittle. I think I'll call him Skittle."

Cal didn't say anything. He didn't seem to care what they were called and allowed Lyra to name all except Gilo.

Lyra stood and turned toward Cal. "It's been two months now. You agreed I could leave after three. You'll still honor that, right?"

"What?" Cal asked, his mind clearly elsewhere. "Um…Yes. Of course. One

more month, and you're free to leave."

At that moment, Striah climbed on the sofa and lay down with her upper body on Cal's lap.

"Oof!" Cal coughed and gasped for air under the weight of the massive dog.

Lyra burst out laughing at the sight of a dog larger than Cal attempting to sit on his lap. Somehow, amidst the laughter, Lyra was able to squeeze out a sentence.

"She still thinks she's a lapdog."

Rather than help Cal, Lyra laughed harder when he tried to escape Striah's oversized tongue. Pinned against the sofa, he could do little to prevent the dog from affectionately slobbering across his entire face.

Lyra opened the gate as quietly as possible and peered inside for signs of movement. Finding nothing between her and the courtyard but long grass, she opened the gate fully and stepped inside, careful not to snag her overloaded floating pack on the gate latch. She pushed the door shut and the latch clicked. The sound made her wince, and she turned toward the canines who slept in the shade cast by the shed.

Numerous heads rose up to turn her way. With a yelp, she ran as ten massive dogs scrambled to their feet and hurried to follow.

Lyra darted into the courtyard and slowed as she reached the door. She opened it and jumped through, pulling it behind her as the dogs came flooding into the courtyard.

A loud thump sounded as the weight of a dog hit the door. Dogs barked beyond the wooden barrier, some snarling as they fought each other. Lyra rested her head against the door and closed her eyes until the ruckus outside grew quiet.

"Did you get everything?"

She turned to find Cal leaning against the kitchen entry with his arms and legs crossed.

Lyra nodded. "Yes. Some for us, but most is for them."

“They’re big dogs and they eat a lot. “ Cal grinned. “It takes a big dog to weigh a ton.”

“What?”

He shrugged, still smiling. “It’s just something my father used to say. I always thought it was funny.”

Lyra shook her head and slid one arm from the pack, followed by the other. “Well, with the way they eat, it looks like I’ll have to travel to the city two or three times a week now.” She handed the pack to Cal. “I also picked up your item from the artisan on Meldy Street. I put it near the top, wrapped in the black cloth.”

His face lit up. “Wonderful.”

Cal carried the pack to the table, set it down, and began pulling items out. He removed the item wrapped in black cloth, easing it from the loaded pack. His eyes flicked toward Lyra and he bit his lip. Finally, he nodded and began to unravel the cloth.

As the material unwound from his prize, it began to take shape. About two feet long and wider at one end than the other, Lyra found the shape vaguely familiar. As he revealed the object, she found herself enthralled, eager to discover what Cal had purchased. When the cloth fell away, Lyra gasped.

Cal held it before him, grinning as he inspected the work of art. He pulled it to his chest and gave it a strum, the silky chords ringing about the room. Both Gilo and Striah lifted their heads, their ears perking up at the sound.

Extending his arms toward Lyra, Cal nodded.

“Here, Tali. This is for you.”

Lyra stared at the beautifully crafted instrument, torn between eagerness and hesitancy. “What? What is this for?”

He shrugged. “Your voice is so compelling; it deserves something beautiful to accompany it.” He looked down at the lute. “I found the most renowned instrument maker in Sol Polis and paid a handsome price for this beauty.”

He held the lute toward Lyra. She eyed it for a moment as emotion stirred within. Tentatively, she reached for it, gripping it with care as she brought it to her chest. The red tinted wood was polished, and the body of the lute was

slightly bigger than her father's, yet crafted by a far superior artisan. With fifteen strings set in eight courses, the design was immediately familiar to Lyra. One hand slid up the neck, while the other gave the strings one even strum. Lyra frowned and picked at the middle strings until she found the one that was out of tune. She continued to pluck at the string, twisting the tuning knob, until the note sounded exactly right. Taking a deep breath to clear her mind, she began to play.

With closed eyes, Lyra's fingers danced across the frets while the other hand stroked the strings. The full body of the sound sang to Lyra's soul, lifting her spirits like a bird on an updraft, soaring ever higher. She gave herself to the music and added her voice in a wordless aria. How long she played, she couldn't tell, for she was lost to the music.

When she strummed the last note and opened her eyes, she found Cal staring at her, the wet tracks of tears glistening on his cheeks. Lyra lowered the lute and looked down at it, struggling to keep her emotions in check.

"Thank you, Cal." She bit her lip, trying to keep her tears at bay. "I'll cherish it always."

"What?" Cal shook his head and wiped his eyes. "Oh. Sorry, but I need it back."

"But…but I thought you gave it to me."

"Don't worry. The lute is yours to keep. I just need it for a bit. I need to add a little magic, magic to match your voice."

Lyra reluctantly held the lute out. He accepted it and turned to retreat to his room, leaving Lyra by herself with the massive sack of food.

While the pack of dogs ate the sections of beef in the shade of the shed, Lyra crossed the yard to the well and turned the crank, the magic-infused winch rotating effortlessly as a full bucket of water rose to the top. She unhooked the bucket and emptied it into a nearby trough. After rehooking the bucket, she lowered it until it sank below the water and then again hoisted the full bucket to the top. This time, she poured a bit of water into a shallow pail and used the

water and a bar of soap to scrub her hands. She dumped the remaining water into the trough as two dogs loped over to drink. With the dogs fed and their water refilled, she passed through the courtyard and into the house to check on dinner.

As she entered the kitchen, her stomach grumbled when the scent of baking bread greeted her. She slipped a pair of leather gloves on and opened the perpetually hot oven, removing the bread before setting it on the table. The strips of lean beef she tossed onto the iron stovetop quickly began to sizzle. While they cooked, she glanced toward Cal's door and frowned in thought. Over an hour had passed since he had disappeared with the lute.

Crossing the room to open the coldbox, she removed a carafe of milk and a bowl of butter. After setting them on the table, she used a pair of tongs to rotate the beef strips. A minute later, she grabbed them with the tongs and set the beef strips on a plate. She opened the oven, grabbed the two sizzling potatoes, and set them on the plate with the beef as Cal's door opened. He emerged with the lute in hand, appearing worn.

"Are you okay?"

He entered the kitchen and nodded. "I'm just a bit exhausted."

Her brow furrowed. "What were you doing in there?"

Cal shrugged. "Magic things." He held the lute toward her. "Here's the lute, all finished. However, you need to be careful where and when you play it."

She accepted the lute, her eyes flicking from the instrument to Cal. "Why do you say that?"

A grin spread across his face. "Because this lute is now a magical instrument."

Lyra held it up and examined the back of the lute, finding three instances of the same symbol etched into the drum. "Does it have to do with these runes?" He nodded. "What will happen?"

"Others will feel the way I feel when I hear you play. I'm afraid it might do more than that, but I can't be sure until you try it." His focus shifted, the energy in his voice returning as he stared at the table. "It looks like dinner is ready. It smells wonderful, too."

Cal rubbed his hands together as he passed Lyra on his way to the table. Lyra

bit her lip and stared at the lute in her hands, unsure if she ever dare play it.

12

A scream pulled Lyra from her dream, and her eyes flashed open. She sat up, her heart racing.

Fumbling in the darkness, her fingers danced along the top of her nightstand until she found the cloth and pulled it aside. The glowing rock Cal had given her lit the room, the soft blue nimbus giving shape to her surroundings and chasing the shadows into the corners.

Another scream disturbed the silence and sent chills down her spine. Lyra slipped out of bed and gripped the doorknob. When she eased it open, she held the stone above her head and found the corridor empty, the doors open except the one to Cal's room.

She crept down the corridor and peeked into the kitchen, finding it exactly as it was when she had gone to bed. Cal's voice came from behind her in a series of unintelligible shouts. Lyra retreated to his room and put her hand on the doorknob. With trepidation, she pushed the door open.

Cal lay in his bed, alone in the room. He jerked and moaned, shifting his covers. Lyra approached his bedside and found his face damp with sweat, his breathing in gasps and fits. She put her hand on his shoulder and shook him.

His eyes shot open, and he bolted upright, gasping for air. The look on his face sent another chill down Lyra's spine.

"It's alright, Cal. It was just a dream."

He turned toward her, his eyes meeting hers. "No." He shook his head. "Not

a dream. This was something more.”

Cal tossed his covers aside and climbed out of bed wearing only his smallclothes. He grabbed his trousers from a hook on the wall and began to dress. Having never seen him with his shirt off, Lyra found herself distracted by the ripples of his lean torso. She became aware of her own body, feeling self-conscious in her thin shift, and she turned around to return to her own room.

“I had a vision, Tali.” The tone of Cal’s voice stopped her mid-step. “A powerful vision of the future.”

She spun about to face him. “Like a…a prophecy?”

He nodded before slipping his tunic over his head. “Unlike any I’ve experienced before.”

“You’ve had them before?”

“Yes. However, they’re usually only about me, something small and about my own near future – like the one I had about you just before you tried to rob me.”

“You had one about me?”

Cal ignored the question, and he opened the top drawer of his desk. After removing his journal, a bottle of ink, and a pen, he walked toward Lyra, grabbed the glowing rock from her hand, and slipped past her into the hallway.

She followed him to the kitchen, where he sat at the table with the glowing rock resting beside his journal. He flipped through the pages until he found the first blank page, tore the blank sheet out, and began writing.

“What is this about, Cal?” The screams that woke her flashed through her mind. “Is something bad going to happen?”

He stopped and stared at the paper for a moment before nodding. “You’re right. You deserve to know. It affects you, too.”

Lyra slid into a chair opposite from him, her attention fixed on his intense eyes.

“Something is coming, something I wasn’t quite able to discern in my vision. Whatever it was, it will be massive and terrible. They are going to use magic as a weapon, a weapon of the worst type. This magic will target people’s fear, rendering them powerless to fight it. More importantly, I must try and stop

them.”

Lyra considered his cryptic words. “What are you going to do?”

Cal took a breath, releasing a long and deliberate exhale. “I must create a weapon to combat theirs.” He focused on the paper before him, the single sentence written on it now dry. “And, if this vision is true, we’ll also need a way to ferret out the lies. The truth cannot remain hidden or things might grow worse.”

“You keep saying *they*. Who are you referring to?”

Cal rubbed his eyes and sighed, seeming reluctant to respond. “I’m not sure, but I’m afraid that this vision is about *The Hand*. I’m afraid they are twisting my discoveries into something I never considered.” His voice fell to a whisper. “Something horrible.”

Lyra carried the bucket of meat and bones across the courtyard and out into the yard. She turned the corner and spotted the dogs resting in the shade of the outbuilding. A number of them saw her and stood, their tails wagging eagerly as she approached. Every dog now had black hair, even the white one Lyra had brought to the manor just two weeks earlier.

“Who wants breakfast?” she asked, causing the others to stir. The dogs clustered around her, sniffing and rubbing against her. Slowly upending the bucket, she dumped the contents out as she walked, leaving a trail of cooked beef, still on the bone. Once the bucket was empty, she glanced back at the dogs as she headed toward the house.

She paused and frowned. A quick count revealed eight dogs present, with Gilo and Striah both missing. Her focus shifted to the outbuilding where the dogs slept. She approached the single-room structure, its door standing open. As Lyra reached the doorway, the heavy scent of canine odor wafted from inside. Blinking, she waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark confines.

“Gilo? Striah? Are you in here?”

A growl rumbled from behind the door, the sound giving Lyra pause. Biting

her lip, she leaned forward to peek around the door and found two sets of red eyes glowing from within the shadows. The growls grew louder and Lyra backed out the door and across the yard, not taking her eyes off the doorway until her back struck the manor wall. Lifting the skirt of her dress, she drew the dagger strapped to her thigh.

Lyra held still for a moment with the dagger pointed toward the dark doorway, but nothing emerged from the building. After glancing toward the other dogs, busily gnawing on the beef leg bones, she bolted around the house, darted across the courtyard, opened the door, and slammed it behind her. Panting, she leaned against the door and closed her eyes.

“What’s wrong with you? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Lyra opened her eyes, facing Cal as he stood beside the kitchen table, his fingers resting on his open journal.

“Something’s wrong with Gilo and Striah.” Lyra shivered again. “It almost seems like demons are inside them.”

“Don’t be silly,” Cal scoffed. “Demons don’t exist. Whatever it is, there must be a good explanation. Where are they?”

“They’re in the shed. I fed the others, but neither of them came out to eat. When I went in to find them, they growled at me and…their eyes…” She shivered.

Cal nodded. “I’ll go check on them. You stay here.”

As Cal left the building, Lyra sat at the table and set her knife beside the journal. Finding herself worried about Cal, she turned toward the door. Although he was able to use magic, she didn’t know how it might protect him. Her gaze returned to the table and the open journal, noticing a sketch depicting a rising sun and three symbols. Notes beside two of the symbols read *Press to release hidden panel*.

Wondering what the image and notes meant, she turned the page and found a drawing of a sword. The weapon had odd lines on the blade and a note that read *Moving air makes it sing when swung*. Another note pointed to a spot near the hilt and said *etch rune here*.

The door burst open and slammed closed with Cal leaning against it as Lyra

had. His eyes met hers and he spoke between his gasps for air.

“Something is wrong with those dogs.”

Lyra grunted. “I’m glad you noticed. What do we do?”

Cal shrugged. “I have no idea.”

“What if this happens to the others?” Lyra asked.

Cal nodded. “My fears, exactly.”

13

A woman passed by, carrying a loaf of bread and a wrapped cut of meat. Lyra watched the woman until she turned at the next corner and disappeared. The street fell quiet, as if most of the people were still sleeping despite it being mid-afternoon. An old woman walked past, Lyra's eyes following her as she passed a young man heading in the opposite direction. The young man's eyes met Lyra's and a smile formed on his face. He altered his direction slightly and approached her, his gaze focused on her body rather than her face.

"My, my. What's a fine young lass doing all alone on a street corner in Sol Polis?"

He stood a full head taller than she did and had a thick frame. While he was not unattractive, his gaze set Lyra on edge.

"I'm minding my own business," she waved him off. "You should move along and do the same."

He put a hand on her shoulder and forced her back a step, the lute strapped to her back colliding with the brick wall.

"Since I like what I see, I think I'll make you my business." His gaze flicked down toward her chest. "I have a few coppers to spare and can make it worth your while."

"Coppers?" She arched her brow, but kept a straight face as she considered how to access the knife hidden beneath her skirts. *I miss my breeches.*

His gaze ran down the length of her dress again and he shrugged. “Fine. I’ll pay a silver. But it better be good.”

“I’ll do one better.”

Lyra and the young man turned toward the voice to find Cal standing beside them.

“I’ll pay with this stone.” Cal held out his palm, revealing a small stone with a symbol drawn on it. Red sparks flickered within Cal’s eyes, dimming as the symbol on the stone flared with crimson light.

“What?” the tall stranger said as the glow receded. “How…”

The stone tumbled from Cal’s outstretched hand and landed on the other man’s foot. The stranger’s eyes grew wide, his mouth doing the same although no sound came out. The man gasped as he tried to catch his breath. His body shook and a look of horror emerged when he looked down at his foot.

Lyra’s gaze followed his, and she discovered that the stone had flattened the man’s boot, creating a concave indentation where the rock lay. The man struggled to move, but his foot remained in place as if it were nailed to the ground.

“I’m sorry.” Cal patted the man on the shoulder. “Clumsy me. I’m all butterfingers sometimes.”

Cal gently gripped Lyra’s elbow. “Come along, Tali. We’ve an appointment to keep at the Citadel.”

Looking back at the man, Lyra found tears streaking down his cheeks as he tried to work his foot free.

Cal stopped a few strides away and turned back toward the man. “Kind sir, if you don’t mind me saying, you appear to be in a bit of pain. I suggest you visit the nearest temple to request a healer.”

He then turned and headed toward the heart of the city.

Lyra caught up to Cal, glancing at him as they walked side-by-side. “Why’d you do that?”

“You appeared uncomfortable with the way he had you cornered. I’m familiar with men like that, men who have little respect for the rights of women.” He shrugged. “I wanted to help.”

Lyra was about to state that she could take care of herself when Cal interrupted.

“I have no time for men who treat women like they are objects.”

Lyra’s response never left her lips. Considering his words, she again found herself surprised.

After a moment, she asked, “What did you do to him anyway?”

Cal grinned. “A small bit of magic. It should wear off in about an hour, and he’ll be free to go on his way, but the man’s foot will be a mess until he gets it healed.”

“You mentioned a healer. Is that like a Medicus?”

“Remember when you fell into my pit and I healed you?”

Lyra nodded, recalling the embarrassing and painful moment with clarity.

“There are others within the Ministry who perform that type of magic. He’ll likely find such a man at the nearest temple. Even after he’s healed, I hope he has learned a lesson.”

They reached the corner and the narrow street opened to reveal the Citadel. Cal led them to the gate and addressed the guard stationed there.

“I must meet with the Council about an urgent matter.”

The guard nodded and stepped aside to allow Cal and Lyra to enter. They crossed the empty plaza as Cal led them up the stairs and inside.

Without pausing, Cal led Lyra directly toward the same room they had visited last time, not seeing another soul other than the single guard who stood outside the door. The armored man stepped in their path, and Cal gave the man an even glare. The guard’s eyes shifted down and away, unwilling to meet Cal’s gaze as he stepped aside. With a grunt, Cal walked past and thrust the door open. Lyra found herself grinning as she followed him inside.

Unlike last time, there was nobody in the room other than the men seated on the thirteen thrones. The man who was speaking stopped abruptly and turned toward Cal. The other twelve men did the same.

“What is the meaning of this interruption?” one of the men demanded.

Before Cal could respond, the man named Victor spoke. “You better have something meaningful to report.”

Cal nodded to Victor as he stopped before the dais. “Yes. I believe you will find my latest discovery quite meaningful.”

The Archon leaned forward and tented his fingers before his lips. Without a word, he nodded toward Cal.

“When I last stood before the council, it was with a dog by my side. That dog was the first of ten test subjects, each receiving a permanent augmentation of increased size.”

Cal turned toward Lyra, his intense eyes meeting hers. She gave him a slight nod, which he returned before turning toward the dais.

“For days, the test subjects exhibited no side effects. However, after two weeks passed, the first dogs began to change. Their coats began to grow darker, their hair soon becoming black. Within days, the others began to exhibit similar transformations.”

“Their hair turned black?” Victor blurted, leaning forward in his chair. “Why are you bothering us with such a pointless issue?”

Cal frowned and stared at Victor. The man appeared to wilt under Cal’s glare, recoiling into his throne, his eyes flicking about the room, seeking a place to hide. The archon saved him.

“Please continue.”

Cal gave a brief nod and resumed. “Unfortunately, the dogs’ hair turning black was not the only side effect. Two days ago, we found the first two dogs hiding inside our shed, unwilling to venture into the sunlight. Their eyes had changed…”

As Cal recited his tale, the image of Gilo’s glowing red eyes appeared within Lyra’s mind, triggering memories of the previous evening.

A thump had startled Lyra, waking her. She sat up and stared at the covered window, hearing a clicking and scraping sound coming from it. Quietly sliding out of bed, she gripped the corner of her drapes and pulled them aside. Snarls and angry barking made her scream and jump backward. She scrambled over her

bed and stared at the window, at glowing red eyes glaring at her. A paw thumped against the glass and Lyra drew in a gasp. Leaning forward with her arm extended, she grabbed the sheath hanging from her bedpost and drew her dagger. The paw thumped against the window again, and the glass shattered, scattering shards across the room.

The beastly dog snarled and barked again, its booming voice making Lyra jump with a start. The door beside her burst open and a bright white light filled the room. The beast at her window squinted and yelped as it backed away. Cal nodded to Lyra as he held the light above his head.

“Are you okay?”

She nodded, still holding her knife toward the window, her heart racing.

Cal then climbed over her bed and held the light through the window. Beyond him, the giant black dogs milled about the yard, seeking a refuge from the light. Moments later, they were gone, and Cal turned toward Lyra with a worried frown.

“This has gone too far. I must destroy them before someone gets hurt or killed.”

“Why did they run? How did you know?”

“Since Gilo and Striah’s eyes changed, they’ve been hiding in the shed. Today, the others began to do the same. I believe the sunlight hurts them.” Cal held the bright light toward Lyra. “This is the closest thing to sunlight I have.”

Unable to look directly at the bright light, Lyra’s gaze shifted toward the floor, and she noticed bloody footprints among the glass.

“Your feet, Cal.”

He looked down and nodded. “Right. I should get them cleaned up.”

She followed him and his crimson footprints to the bathing room. After helping him remove the glass and wash the cuts, she cut strips of cloth to use as bandages.

As she began to apply the first bandage, she paused. “Why don’t you heal yourself? You know. Like you healed me when I fell into the pit.”

Cal shook his head. “It doesn’t work like that. I can heal others, but I can’t heal myself. We have to go to the city tomorrow and inform the Council about

what happened here. While I'm there, I'll stop by the temple and visit a healer. It'll be a painful trip until then."

Lyra nodded as she finished bandaging his foot. She moved on to the other foot and he spoke again.

"I needed to head to the city anyway. I need to visit the smith, the carpenter, and the gilder to check on their progress. I fear we have little time left before *it* happens."

Lyra shook her head, clearing it to focus on the present, on the story Cal was reciting.

"…and when we woke the next morning, the gate was destroyed and the dogs were missing. All of them. I would track them down and destroy them if I knew how. As it stands, I fear that I've unleashed a pack of monsters that will threaten the safety of innocent people. I just pray to Issal that nobody dies because of me."

The Council members stared at him in silent response.

"Given the dire nature of my message, I implore you to refrain from conducting permanent augmentations on living beings." Cal held his hands out, palms facing up. "These friendly dogs changed as a result of the energy trapped within them. It appears that the augmentation made them hostile – drove them insane. We must proceed with caution to determine if there is a safer means."

After another silent moment, the Archon replied. "We will take your words under advisement. However, this requires further discussion. We must weigh the potential value of permanent augmentations against the risk you have outlined."

14

Cal held the door open for Lyra, glancing back one last time before slamming it shut. The guard stationed beside the door jumped at the sound, his eyes wide. Cal ignored the man and grabbed Lyra's arm as he led her across the hall.

"Arrogant idiots," he grumbled.

"They aren't going to listen to your warning, are they?"

He shook his head, clearly appearing unhappy. "They're hiding something. This has to do with my vision. I know it."

Opening the door, he led her outside and across the quiet courtyard.

"Where is everybody?"

Cal stopped and looked at her. "What did you say?"

"Where are all the people? Last time we were here, this place was busy. I'm not just talking about the Citadel. The streets are quiet too."

She stared into his eyes as he stared into space.

After a moment, he slowly nodded. "You're right. People missing is part of whatever it is."

He led her across the courtyard, around the main building and toward one of the completed towers. Lyra glanced up at the cylindrical building as Cal approached the door, the sensation leaving her a bit dizzy.

"What are we doing here?"

"We're paying someone a visit." He paused before the door. "Remember our

earlier discussion about you playing?”

Lyra put her hand on the strap of her lute and nodded.

“Good.” He smiled. “I’m looking forward to hearing your magical voice again.”

His knock on the door echoed within the tower, the large building sounding hollow. After a moment, Lyra heard shuffling within, and the door opened to reveal a familiar face wearing a grimace.

“Hello, Elias,” Cal said in a pleasant voice. “I’m here to share something new with you. May we come in?”

Elias stared at Cal in consideration. Lyra could almost hear the man’s mind working as he weighed the request. Finally, he nodded and stepped aside with the door held open. Cal stepped past him with Lyra following close behind.

The interior revealed a singular room with a rounded stairwell hugging one wall. Desks, tables, and chairs occupied a space that was otherwise empty. Elias closed the door and crossed the room before leading them up the stairs.

Upon reaching the next level, Lyra found a similar stairwell rising to floors above. Rather than continue upward, Elias turned into what appeared to be a large kitchen. Sections of shelving filled with food lined the walls at each side of the room, split by an arched fireplace and a brick oven. Two long tables waited at the center of the room, each table lined with benches big enough to seat six people.

Elias crossed the room to the stove, donned leather gloves, and removed a hot kettle. He turned toward Cal and Lyra.

“Would you care for some tea?”

“Yes. Thank you,” Cal replied.

“Um. None for me,” Lyra mumbled.

Elias shrugged and poured some of the hot brew into two small cups with handles. He replaced the kettle, removed the gloves, and brought the cups to one of the tables.

“Please. Have a seat.” Elias nodded, setting down the steaming cups before settling on a bench.

Cal sat opposite from Elias while Lyra remained standing at the far end of

the long table.

“I just informed the Council of dire news.”

“Oh?” Elias asked, sipping his tea.

“My dogs have exhibited side effects from their augmentations. It appears that *Infusion* causes living beings to go mad, to become monsters.”

Elias’s eyes narrowed, the cup in the young man’s hand trembling slightly before he scoffed. “You’re joking.”

Cal shook his head. “This no joke, nor is it a lie. The dogs tried to kill us last night. If I hadn’t determined that light is painful to their transformed eyes, one or both of us,” he nodded toward Lyra, “might be dead.”

Cal set his cup down. “Unfortunately, the dogs broke my gate and escaped. The deaths of others will likely soon be on my hands because of them.”

During this exchange, Elias increasingly grew more pale, until it appeared he might be ill.

“But…” Elias stammered. “We’ve seen only positive results with *Infusion*. Other than a permanent augmentation being a fraction as effective as a temporary augmentation, the results have been steady and reliable.”

“What you speak is true for inanimate objects, not for living, breathing beings.” Cal shook his head. “Perhaps our life force, the very thing that makes infusing living things easier, also opens the door for the captive *Chaos* to break free, which drives them mad.”

Elias remained quiet for a long moment before nodding. “I must think on this, consider the best path to take.” He appeared worried. “Do you have any ideas on how this might be cured? Do you know a safer approach?”

Cal shrugged. “I wish. At this point, I feel I must reconsider the entire effort. Perhaps there is a better way; perhaps it is best left alone.” He shook his head. “I just don’t know.”

Lyra shifted her feet, discomforted by Elias’ obvious distress at the information Cal shared.

“Elias, I don’t believe you’ve been properly introduced to my assistant.” Cal held his hand toward Lyra. “Tali, meet Grand Master Arcanist, Elias Firellus. Elias, meet Tali.”

Lyra's brow raised. Grand Master Arcanist sounded like a high title, yet the man appeared no older than Cal. Lyra gave a small curtsy while Elias responded with a nod. The troubled expression remained on his face throughout the exchange.

"Tali happens to play the lute and has a wonderful voice." Cal turned toward Lyra. "Tali, would you please play a little tune to help lift our spirits?"

Lyra nodded and her stomach fluttered as she pulled the lute strap over her head. Wiping the sweat from her palm on the side of her dress, she took a breath to calm her nerves. She wasn't nervous about performing. That was easy. It was the magic that scared her.

A strum of the strings confirmed that they were still in tune, and a subsequent glance toward Cal caused her to notice him removing something from his pocket. He didn't do anything with the item other than grip it within his closed fist. Lyra glanced down at the lute, placed her fingers on the frets, and began to play.

The song was even and flowing, neither sad nor a song that might be used for a dance. However, the music felt more compelling, the sound more expansive than anytime she had played before. Perhaps it was an effect of the round chamber. Perhaps it was something more. As she played, she found Cal staring at her. Their eyes met, and when he nodded, she began to sing.

What troubles you so? What is it you hide?
Open up your heart and in me, confide.
The truth of The Hand, share now with me,
For the truth, it shall set your guilt free.

Lyra stopped singing, but instead spoke to Elias as she continued to play.

"Your troubles weigh on you, Elias. Please, express them and let us share your burden."

Elias nodded, his eyes staring into the distance, seeing something Lyra could not.

"It's the augmentations we've been performing. So many. So, so many."

Cal spoke. "Who, Elias? What augmentations?"

"We Arcanists. The army we are building for *The Hand*. An army of giants.

Giants to be feared.”

Cal leaned forward “How many, Elias?”

Elias shrugged. “Over five-hundred, perhaps six-hundred. I lose count. The others are about the same.”

“Others?”

Elias nodded. “Yes. The eight of us.”

Cal’s eyes widened. “You *each* have performed augmentations on six hundred men?”

Elias nodded again.

“But how. You’d be exhausted after just one. Six hundred men would take many months.”

Elias shook his head. “We did this to ourselves first.”

The man pulled the front of his tunic down, revealing two runes etched into the skin of his pale chest.

Cal gasped. “Issal, spare us. Elias, what have you done?”

15

Shouts echoed outside the open window. Lyra finished drying the pot and set it on the shelf before tossing the damp towel atop the kitchen table. As she emerged from the courtyard, she found Cal unlocking the rebuilt gate.

The gate swung open to reveal two men standing beside a wagon. Lyra approached, curious. Visitors at the manor had proven to be a rarity. In three months, Grayson and his son had been the only others to appear within the compound – once when they filled and repaired the pit in the courtyard, and again when they came to repair the broken gate and Lyra's broken window.

"Hello," a tall, rough-looking man said. "Name is Derrel." He thumbed toward the other man, who was younger and a bit leaner. "And this is Zeke. We've got sump'in in the wagon to deliver. We think this is the place."

"That's it, then?" Cal asked, nodding toward the cloth-covered object that filled the wagon bed.

"I guess. We picked 'er up at the shop as ordered." The man turned toward the wagon and rubbed the stubble on his weathered face. "The artisan was quite particular 'bout how we loaded it, too. I don't know how something so heavy can be breakable, but the man forced us to swear we'd treat it with care. Even had to stack blankets between it and the wagon bed."

Derrel shook his head while his companion circled to the back of the wagon.

Excitement shone within Cal's eyes as he rubbed his hands together. "Alright, then. Let's get it unloaded and into the house."

Derrel nodded, and he helped his companion remove the wagon's rear panel. Zeke climbed into the wagon bed to grab one end of the object, while Derrel grabbed ahold of the other end. With a grunt, the men lifted the massive item and hauled it out of the wagon. Lyra retreated from the entrance to allow them room as Cal held the gate open. The men passed by and carried their delivery into the courtyard with Cal following close behind.

The men entered the courtyard and stopped. Derrel eyed the door to the house, then the object, before shaking his head.

"Ain't gonna fit," he mumbled.

"You're right," Cal agreed. "Just set it down here, and I'll figure something out."

The man shrugged and set the edge of the object on the stone tiles before Zeke tipped it until it stood upright. Derrel placed one hand at the small of his back, arching it as he groaned.

"Is that it?" Cal asked. "Wasn't there another item?"

"Oh, yeah," Zeke said. "I'll grab it."

The man passed through the open gate and returned to the wagon. He lifted the wagon seat and dug underneath to remove another cloth-covered object, long and narrow in shape. As the man returned, Lyra stared at the cloth, attempting to discern what was wrapped inside.

Zeke handed the item to Cal, who accepted it with a grin.

"Well, if you have nothing else for us," Derrel said. "We had best be on our way."

"Oh, right!" Cal dug into his pocket and fished out two gold coins. Hunger shone within the men's eyes at the sight of gold, their grins widening as Cal set one coin into each of their palms.

"The man said that you paid well," Derrel said. "Thank you, sir."

The two men exited the courtyard and headed toward the gate with Derrel patting Zeke on the back. Lyra followed them and closed the gate before securing it with the bar. She returned to the courtyard to find Cal unwrapping the cloth from the object he held in his hands.

The gray sheet fell away to reveal a hilt poking from a black leather-bound

scabbard. Cal gripped the hilt and slid the sword free, emitting the unmistakable sound of a blade being drawn. With a metal blade polished to a mirror-like finish, the honed edges gleamed in the afternoon sunlight. Lyra recognized the louvres stamped within the blade from the sketch Cal had created nearly a month earlier. Between the louvres and the hilt, she noticed a symbol was carved into the blade.

“Do you even know how to use a sword?”

“What?” Cal blinked, appearing surprised to find her there. “Um…no. However, the sword is not for me. This is for…I don’t know *who* it’s for. I guess we’ll see.”

Lyra chuckled. “Why am I not surprised?” She gestured toward the large object beside them, standing just a half-head taller than Cal. “Are you going to show me what’s under the blanket? Or is that another one of your secrets?”

Cal grinned. “Oh, it’s a secret alright. But not from you.” He nodded. “Go ahead and remove the blanket. Let’s have a look at it.”

Stirred by curiosity, Lyra found a loose corner of cloth and began to unwind it. A gold-gilded chair arm appeared, the ornate swirls carved within it sparkling brightly. A red seat back and cushion emerged as she continued to unwind the cloth, each with an odd symbol sewn upon it. She circled around the back and found herself in awe as the blanket fell to reveal the throne beneath.

The wooden panel on back of the throne included a mural, carved to depict three runes gracing the sky above a rising sun. She noticed that the rune in the center matched the symbols sewn upon the seatback and cushion.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Indeed.” Cal nodded. “It will also be quiet powerful when I’m finished with it. In the future, its secrets might be just enough to prevent ruin. I can’t be sure. That relates to another vision and visions are only possible futures. I don’t always know which will come to fruition. But I do know that this sword and that throne will play critical roles if we hope to avoid a dark fate.”

Lyra stared at Cal, unsure of how to respond. Just when her sense of him became clear, and she thought she understood him, he would do or say something that bewildered her. She had never met anyone like him. Kind. Smart.

Compassionate. Yet, odd. So very odd.

She took a deep breath, preparing herself. “Cal.”

He blinked, his mind returning from some distant place that only he could see.

“Yes?”

“I’ve been here for three months. I believe I’ve held up my end of our bargain.”

He nodded. “You’re right. You’ve done your part, and now I’ll do mine.” He slid the sword into the scabbard. “Why don’t you go and pack up your things? We can eat a quick dinner and I’ll walk you to…where will you go?”

She shrugged. Returning to the Tantarri now seemed unnatural, but she had no other ideas. “Before I came here, I was with…a family. They’re camped at the eastern edge of fields.”

Cal nodded. “That’s only a few miles away. I’ll see you safely there, and then we can part ways.”

He turned, opened the door, and disappeared into the house. As the door closed, the reality of her leaving suddenly became apparent. After months of looking forward to being free from her promise, Lyra now found herself unsure of what she wanted.

16

Before leaving the manor, Lyra had donned the tunic and breeches she wore when they first met. She found her manner subdued, her mood somber. Cal made numerous attempts at conversation during the hour-long journey, but Lyra's responses had been half-hearted and those conversations had died quickly.

They crested a rise with the setting sun to their backs, its orange light giving an amber tint to the long dry grass that pervaded the fields. Lyra spotted the Tantarri camp at the edge of the wood and realized one of the wagons was on fire, spouting black smoke as people dumped buckets of water upon it.

Alarmed, she broke into a run. Down the slope, through the thigh-high grass she sprinted toward the burning wagon. Women in their bright colored dresses had formed a line, passing buckets of water from the creek that ran at the edge of the wood. As she neared the camp, she found Flori kneeling beside a prone form. Running past the bucket line, Lyra slowed as she reached the other girl.

Flori looked up with tears streaking down her face, her hands holding Eddrick's limp hand. The man had a nasty gash in his neck and dark wetness stained the shoulder of his red tunic.

"He's dead. They killed him and took the others," Flori sobbed. "My father's dead, and Gar is gone. My life is in ruins."

Lyra put her hand on Flori's shoulder. "Who did this, Flori? Where's Gar?"

"Soldiers. Soldiers with a circular emblem on their shields. They killed him." A slobbering burst of sobs emerged, leaving her gasping and heaving.

“Flori. I need you to tell me where Gar is. Where are the other men?”

“He’s gone. They’re all gone.” Numi said from her seat on a nearby log. “The soldiers shackled them and took them away. They set a wagon on fire as a warning to prevent us from following.” The woman shook her head, her face sorrowful. “I never thought I’d witness the day…our leader murdered…our men stolen away. The clan is broken.”

Cal stepped closer, wearing a grim expression. “The emblem you mentioned. Does it look like this?”

He pulled his black cloak from his pack and showed them the symbol sewn on the collar.

Numi nodded. “Yeah. That’s the one.”

His lips press together in a thin line. “It’s the Ministry. They took them. I’m afraid I know why, too.”

Lyra turned back toward Numi. “Which way did they go?”

The old woman pointed southeast, toward a road that lay a half-mile from their camp.

Recalling the pain of watching her own father die, Lyra gave Flori’s shoulder a soft squeeze but had no words to offer as the girl sobbed over the man in her arms.

Turning about, Lyra walked toward the road, in the direction Numi had pointed. Cal caught up to her.

“Where are you going?”

“I need to do something. I have to try.” Lyra didn’t know what to do, but she remained resolute in her decision. “Those men have nobody else. The Tantarri herd cattle for a living and dance for fun. They’re not soldiers. Without help, those men are doomed. Without the men to help these women, life will be hard, perhaps worse than that.” She shook her head. “These people need each other.”

“Well, you’re not doing it alone,” Cal replied. “I’m coming with you. This is my fault. Perhaps not by intention, but surely by deed.”

Lyra wondered what he meant. The man was frustratingly cryptic at times, but she didn’t care. She was happy to have him and his magic to help because they would likely need a miracle.

“How many do you think?” Lyra whispered.

“I think twenty, perhaps twenty-five soldiers.”

Lyra nodded, unsure if Cal could see her response from the shadows.

In the flickering light of the campfire, she spotted four tents beyond the captive men who were sleeping on the ground. There were perhaps twenty-five Tantarri men in total, but they lacked weapons meant for combat. Even if they outnumbered the soldiers, the element of surprise combined with their inability to fight back made them easy to capture. Killing one of them and threatening their women had likely dissolved any attempt at resistance.

Lyra counted a dozen soldiers moving about the camp, watching the captives while the other soldiers slept.

“Will the lute work like it worked with Elias?” she asked.

“I don’t see why not. If you can coax them to sleep, we could just walk the captives out of camp and nobody will get killed.”

Pressing her lips together as she collected her resolve, she slid the lute off her back and emerged from the woods. As she approached, a soldier with a bow became alarmed.

“Who’s out there?”

“I’m just a traveling minstrel,” Lyra called out as she continued toward the man. “I’m heading south to the capital and am seeking a safe place to sleep.”

As the flickering firelight reached her, the man lowered his bow.

“You’re just a girl.”

Lyra’s shackles rose. “Well, I might be a girl, but I can play.”

A soldier with a sword at his hip stepped beside the man with the bow.

“Off with you. Just move along.”

Lyra noticed some of the captives behind soldiers sitting upright as other armed men circled to her side of the fire.

“You’ll leave a girl out here all alone, with bears and monsters out roaming the night?”

The second man chuckled. Others behind him echoed the laugh.

“Monsters…”

“I’ll play a quick song, and you’ll see.” Lyra strummed her lute.

The man said something, but Lyra ignored him and began to play. Beginning with a lively riff to catch their attention, she then slowed the tempo.

“The road behind is sad at your passing

The road ahead awaits your coming

The day is long, leaves you weary and lacking

Your body craves rest, hear it humming

Sleeeeeep, sleeeeep, lie down and sleeeeep

Give in to weariness and go to sleeeeeep.”

As she continued to play, the men began to lie down, some yawning, others curling up on their sides. A minute later, the music stopped, and only the sound of the crackling fire remained. Every man within the camp appeared to be asleep, many snoring.

A rustle emerged from behind her. She turned to find Cal walking into the firelight.

“Good job,” he whispered. “I do love to hear you play.”

“Thanks,” Lyra shouldered her lute. “Now let’s get the Tantarri men out of here before anyone wakes.”

They weaved their way past the sleeping soldiers and to the captives sleeping near the fire. Lyra discovered the men’s wrists shackled, a chain running between the shackles, binding them together into a line. She pulled her knife from the sheath, along with one of her needles and began to pick the locks of Gar’s shackles. As one clicked open, he stirred. Lyra put her hand over his mouth and his eyes shot open, his expression softening when he saw her.

She put a finger to her lips and he nodded before she removed her hand. After freeing his other wrist, she carefully set his shackles aside. Drawing the other needle from her sheath, she handed it to Gar, who nodded and moved to the next man in the chain.

Some of the men woke as their shackles were unlocked, while others slept more soundly. With half of them freed, Lyra moved on to one who was sleeping with his wrists beneath him. When she tried to move his arm, he jerked and

shouted in surprise.

“Shhh,” she hushed him.

She looked around to see if anyone had heard the commotion. A soldier sat upright, his face showing alarm when he saw her.

“Enemies in the camp! To arms!” The man grabbed his spear and scrambled to his feet.

The camp instantly came alive and men woke, including those inside the tents. Some of the freed Tantarri bolted, with one dropping face-first with an arrow in his back.

The soldier who had alerted the camp advanced toward Lyra, holding his spear ready. Lyra stumbled backward with her knife before her, stopping when she felt the heat of the fire against her back. Suddenly, Cal was behind the man. He grabbed the soldier by the shoulder and leg and lifted the man above his head, as if he weighed nothing. Cal tossed the soldier and the man slammed into three other soldiers as they emerged from one of the tents.

Lyra watched in awe as Cal leapt over her, over the fire, and landed beyond the furthest tent. He grabbed a stunned bowman by the arm and swung him around with the soldier’s legs parallel to the ground as he twirled about and smashed into the tent. The man screamed as he collided with the men inside, the sound of bones breaking coming from within.

Cal leapt over the tent and landed beside the remaining captives, now on their feet and appearing confused. He grabbed the chain that bound them together and snapped it in two as if it were thread. He then looked at Lyra and shouted.

“Run!”

Everyone bolted, running into the woods as more shouts and screams echoed in the night. Lyra and the dark shadows of the freed men ran through the woods – ran for their lives.

Gar squatted beside Lyra and placed his hand on her shoulder as he whispered,

“Why are we stopping? We should leave before those men show up.”

“I can’t leave him, Gar,” she whispered back. “You and the others are free because of Cal. What if he’s in trouble? What if he needs our help?”

She heard Cal’s voice, “Tali.”

Rising above the brush, Lyra peered from the dark woods and found a single form stumbling down the road.

“Over here,” she said in a hushed voice.

Cal angled toward her and stumbled to his knees before tipping sideways.

Alarmed, Lyra ran out from her hiding spot. Gar and three others emerged to follow her.

Cal lay on his back at the edge of the road, holding his side. Despite the dim starlight, Lyra noticed the dark splotch on his tunic when she knelt beside him.

“You’re hurt,” she said with concern.

“One of them got lucky. Cut me bad before I could stop him.” He held his hand up and stared at his blood-soaked palm. “The strength from my augmentation will wear off soon. When it does, I’ll go fast.” His hand reached up and touched her face, tracing a smear of blood on her cheek. “I’m glad I found you. I wanted to see you before I die.”

The other fugitives gathered around them as Gar knelt on the other side of Cal.

“This is your friend? The one who helped you free us?” Gar’s eyes met hers.

“Yes.” She nodded, looking back down at Cal. “You’re not going to die. We’ll bring you back to the camp and you’ll be fine.”

He coughed, which turned into a moan. “No. I’m in a bad way…dying. Goodbye, Tali. We had something special. We almost made it work. Be sure to get my gifts to the king.”

Lyra frowned. “King? What are you talking about?”

A man she didn’t know knelt beside her. “Here. Let me heal you.”

The man gripped the hand Cal held against his wound. Cal’s body spasmed and his back arched. He shook violently and gasped for air, his body visibly relaxing. As his breathing slowed, he sat upright.

“Thanks. That was a near thing.”

“What?” Lyra turned to the man beside her. “Who are you?”

“My name is Elden, Elden Duratti.”

Cal grunted, “You’re the man from the temple. You healed my feet.”

Elden nodded. “Yes. I was the last healer left in Sol Polis. When the others volunteered to join the Ministry’s secret mission, I chose to remain behind. I prefer…a more peaceful approach. The soldiers who captured these men were the last group to leave Sol Polis. They stopped by the temple on their way out and the next thing I knew, I was shackled, and they were dragging me out of town.” Elden put his hand on Cal’s shoulder. “Thanks for freeing me…for freeing us. After that, healing you was the least I could do.”

“Issal was truly looking out for me to have an Ecclesiast among the captives.” Cal gripped Elden’s shoulder, his eyes reflecting gratitude. His stomach made an audible growl, sounding ferocious in the quiet night. “Now, do you by chance have any food? I’m starving.”

17

The last vestiges of twilight gave way to dawn as the sun edged over the ocean at the horizon, miles to the east. Lyra squinted at the light as the last wagon lurched into motion. Gar sat on the driver's seat with the reins in his hands. Elden sat beside him – where Lyra would have sat if things were different.

Gar looked toward her, meeting her gaze. The disappointment on his face was evident, reminding Lyra of their last conversation.

"I'm sorry, Gar." She bit her lip. "I have to stay. Something big, something bad, is coming. Cal needs my help." Lyra's gaze shifted toward her hands, held in his. "You must go. The clan needs you."

A glance toward the wagons showed them lined-up and ready for travel. Shouts came from the north, along with the barking of a single dog, the only one the soldiers hadn't killed when taking their captives. The dog and the last of the cattle disappeared around the bend, kicking up a trail of dust on the gravel road.

"I need you, Tali. Please come with us. Let this Outlander deal with Outlander problems. You belong with me. You belong with the clan."

Lyra stared into his eyes…and found herself sinking into them, barely able to keep her head afloat. Gar cupped her cheek and leaned forward, tilting his head as their lips met. His other hand found the small of her back, and he pulled her against him. The heat of his skin against hers caused something to flare within, her body reacting to the contact. Her heart raced, feeling like it might burst from

her chest. When the kiss ended and he pulled back, she looked down, refusing to meet his gaze, fearing that she might be unable to say no.

"Again, I'm sorry, but I must stay." Requiring every bit of effort she possessed, she pushed herself away and turned from him. Her head turned to the side as she spoke over her shoulder. "Perhaps we'll meet again. Fate will decide."

"Tali," he pleaded as she walked away. "Why must you do this? You have fulfilled your promise. Why stay?"

She stopped and faced him again, feeling safer with some distance between them. "He's doing something important, Gar. You tell me you need me, but his need is greater because his cause is greater. You have to lead the clan, the Tantarri need you…especially now. You all need each other, but at least you have each other. Cal only has me, nobody else. I must help him see this through."

Lyra turned away and walked up the hill, where Cal waited at the peak, watching the rising sun. Upon reaching the top, she turned and found the wagons pulling onto the road with only Gar's remaining.

As his wagon rolled from the long grass to the gravel, the pace of the oxen quickened and soon the wagon was beyond her vision, obscured by the trees that enveloped the road. As the rumble of the wheels faded and the trail of dust settled, Cal spoke.

"Are you alright?"

Lyra nodded and wiped her eyes dry as she turned west and began walking toward the manor. "Come on. We have much to do and little time."

The empty campsite appeared far less ominous in daylight. The area was now cleared of any men – even the two Tantarri who had died while attempting to escape. Lyra glanced toward the tree line, unable to convince herself that nobody watched her from within the shadows.

"It looks like they headed south, as I expected." Cal kicked a broken spear shaft into the dormant fire. "I doubt they're bound for Sol Limar, so we'll watch

closely for signs of them leaving the road while we travel.”

“So we continue heading south?”

Cal shrugged. “Of course. Sol Limar is where the king is.”

“The king?”

“Yes. We need help.”

“What if we run into them along the way? Is that why you brought the sword?”

His gaze shifted to the weapon at his hip, its length almost touching the ground.

“No. I wouldn’t even want to try.” He shook his head. “I might cut off something important, and that cannot be healed.”

Lyra approached him, frowning. “Then, why bring it?”

He smiled. “I told you before. The sword’s not for me. I made it for someone else to use. In this case, that someone comes from Sol Limar. In the future, there will be others…assuming we get the right future. If things go wrong, it won’t matter anyway.”

Lyra shook her head and chuckled. “Never mind. I give up.” Circling the fire pit, she avoided looking directly at the red stains on the gravel. “Come on. Let’s keep moving.” She glanced toward the dark clouds to the west. “It looks like it might rain today.”

They resumed their journey south, with Lyra carrying the floating pack and her lute, and Cal carrying a more common pack and the sword. As they walked in silence, Lyra found herself frequently glancing toward Cal, who appeared not to notice. At some point during the past few weeks, her perception of him had changed. Yes, he still had his oddities, but she now found them more comforting than annoying. In addition, she found herself drawn to his powerful sense of selfless integrity. It astounded her that he had risked his life to save the captive Tantarri. Even with the aid of his magic, Cal had almost died to help people he had never even met. His single-minded goal of stopping *The Hand*’s nightmarish plan gave Lyra a clarity she had never had before experienced. She found herself believing in something larger than her own life, willing to go to extremes to see it succeed.

A cool gust blew from the west, and Lyra felt a drop of water hit her cheek. Another struck her forehead and she swung her pack around to access it while glancing toward Cal, seeing no visible reaction as his mind appeared elsewhere.

“I think it might start raining soon.” Lyra said as she pulled her grey wool cloak out before closing the pack. “You might want to grab your cloak.”

Cal looked at her “What?” He blinked as a raindrop hit him in the eye. He rubbed it. “Is it raining?”

Lyra stopped and tied the cloak about her neck, covering the lute. The cold sprinkles of water became more frequent. “I’m not sure. Maybe you should use your magic and see what it tells you.”

He frowned at her as she pulled her hood over her head. “You can be quite sarcastic at times.” Then, the rain hit.

“You’re welcome.”

Cal scrambled to pull his cloak from his pack, his wet hair sticking to his forehead as water dripped down his face. He pulled his hood up, tied the flap on his pack into place, and nodded for them to continue.

They walked in the rain for a couple hours, circling around the deeper puddles that formed in the potholes and dips. Despite the cloak’s ability to shed water, the constant rain eventually seeped through the fabric and left her wet underneath. When they reached a rise in the road, Lyra stopped and turned west in hope of finding signs to the rain ending. Below the dark clouds, between a gap in the trees, a row of tall foothills stood less than a mile away. Her gazed shifted toward what appeared to be a rocky cliffside.

“Maybe we can get out of the rain over there.”

He turned toward where she pointed, nodding after a moment before he led her off the road, through the wet brush occupying the gap between the taller trees. When they broke past the initial barrier of brush, they found themselves on a trail.

They followed a path surrounded by brush and tall grass that shed gathered rain upon them, somehow making them even wetter. After about a half-mile, the snaking trail emerged into a narrow ravine between two foothills.

Cal stopped short, causing Lyra to crash into him. He stumbled forward a

step, but said nothing. He just stood there.

“Why’d you stop? We’re almost there,” she asked.

He stepped aside and pointed. Lyra gasped upon seeing two dead men lying among the rocks ahead. Despite the dirt and rain that covered them, it only took a moment to recognize the bright colors.

“Tantarri. We’ve found them.”

Easing closer to the corpses, Lyra recalled their names – Haru and Venarri. The men were dead and their spirits had moved on. Yet, she felt horrible for them being abandoned in this manner.

Cal turned toward her. “How do your people treat their dead?”

“My people?” She glanced at the men and realized that Cal still thought she was Tantarri. “I…I don’t know.”

His brow furrowed, and he turned toward the corpses. “Will they be offended if we use a funeral pyre?”

Unsure of what to do, her only response was a shrug. It was disturbing to see these men treated this way, discarded like old furniture that no longer held value.

Glancing around, Cal nodded before cutting off the trail, toward the two men.

“Help me move them.”

Lyra bit her lip and found her stomach churning at the thought of touching dead bodies. She closed her eyes and took a calming breath. Opening them, she followed the trail of trampled grass left in Cal’s wake. He walked around the first man and slid his hands beneath the man’s armpits while Lyra grabbed his ankles. With a grunt, they lifted the man off the ground, his rear barely above it.

Cal nodded his head to the side. “To the downed tree.”

Lyra turned toward the dead pine, its trunk split where it had fallen over a boulder. They carried the man toward it, his bottom side dragging against the gentle slope. Cal backed into needle-covered branches and leaned the man against the boulder so he was sitting upright beside the tree.

They returned for the other man and carried him to the tree, propping him up on the opposite side of the rock from his dead companion. Cal stepped back and began searching the ground.

Lyra glanced up at the cloud-covered sky, blinking at the rain as it fell in her eyes.

“Nothing’s going to burn in this.” She held her hands out, palms up as the rain splattered on them. “Even when it stops raining, it will be a while before this old tree to dry enough to burn.”

“Perhaps.” Cal shrugged as he bent to grab a long, narrow rock that fit nicely in his palm. “Or perhaps a bit of magic will do the trick.”

He walked over to the boulder and began scraping something into its face using the sharp edge of the rock in his hand. Apparently finished, he stepped back and stared at the symbol. Lyra watched in curiosity as the rune glowed bright red, pulsed, and faded. Cal grabbed Lyra’s arm and backed away, pulling her with him.

The boulder burst into flames, the intense heat of the flash forcing Lyra to turn away. When she turned back, she found the rock burning brightly, setting the tree aflame along with the two men who leaned against it. As the needles burned, they crackled and popped before dropping into the long grass and setting small smoldering fires that filled the air with smoke.

“May Issal watch over them,” Cal said solemnly.

He turned and returned to the trail, leading her deeper into the ravine. After hiking a few hundred feet, it became clear that there was a recessed area within the cliffside, perhaps two stories above the canyon floor. They climbed up toward it, slipping and scrambling on the loose gravel on the way up.

The ground leveled when they reached the recess. Lyra pulled her hood back and looked up at the overhanging rock, feeling thankful for shelter from the cold rain.

“A fire,” Cal noted as he walked past her and squatted beside a pile of ashes, encircled by rocks the size of a man’s head. He picked up a small stick and dug into the ashes while holding his other hand over them. “Still warm. They were here.”

Turning toward the burning rock and tree, Lyra realized that he was right. The soldiers had camped here and had likely followed the trail along the ravine floor, heading west.

Cal stood and walked past her, heading back down the hillside.

“Where are you going?”

He spoke over his shoulder as he scrambled down the loose rock and gravel. “We’re wet and cold. I’m gathering wood for a fire.” He reached the bottom and turned toward her. “Stay there. I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He headed back down the hillside, toward the burning tree, its orange flame flickering wildly in the rain, in the failing daylight.

18

The clopping of hooves and the rumble of wheels arose from behind. Lyra and Cal moved to the side of the road, allowing the wagon to pass by. The massive hooves of the workhorses at the fore splashed through a puddle, a reminder of the rain from the prior evening. Deciding that her boots were damp enough, Lyra followed Cal around the puddle, the pair trailing behind the wagon as it drove toward the open city gate.

A glance to the top of a two-story tall wall built of grey stone blocks, revealed armed bowmen watching the traffic below. As they passed through the gate, beneath the raised portcullis, the road shifted from damp gravel to a nestled mosaic of cobblestone.

The main street ran toward the heart of the city, toward a grey castle built atop a hill overlooking the Sol Mai Ocean. The bright morning sun forced Lyra to squint as she gazed toward the bay beyond the shadowed towers of the keep. In the distance, a single ship with white sails drifted out toward the open sea.

“We have little time to waste, so we’re heading straight to the castle.” Cal turned toward her and grinned. “Have you ever met a king?”

“Um…no. Most people doubt they will ever meet one.”

Cal’s grin widened. “We’re not most people.”

His pace quickened as the street narrowed. Lyra hurried to keep up with him as he weaved among the foot traffic and vendors clogging the busy street.

“What if he won’t see you?” Lyra asked as she caught up with him. “What if

he doesn’t believe you?”

Cal continued without pause, his eyes focused on the castle. “I’ll make him listen. There can be no other course.”

Lyra rolled her eyes and groaned, afraid of whatever theatrics he had in mind.

They passed a bakery and the smell of fresh bread made Lyra’s mouth water. Her stomach growled, underfed from a light breakfast that happened four hours and ten miles earlier.

Without pause, Cal led her up the stairs that graced the side of the hill, rising to meet another open gate within a smaller wall. By the time they reached the top, Lyra’s tunic was damp with sweat and stuck to her skin – the result of the heat, thick with humidity from the precipitation of the prior evening.

Similar to the bowmen on the ramparts bordering the city, two guards dressed in leather armor with orange and white tabards waited beside the gate.

“Hold.” The older of the two guards tilted his spear to block the door. The man had a scar on one cheek, cutting a white path through his dark beard – a lonely valley where hair refused to grow. “What business do you have in the Citadel?”

Cal shared his usual friendly smile. “I must meet with King Tallinor regarding an urgent matter.”

“Sorry, but the king won’t be seeing anyone today. Come back tomorrow at sunrise to add your name to the list of petitioners.”

Cal turned toward Lyra. “Tali, these men appear to be having a bad day. Perhaps a little song will make them feel better.”

Lyra nodded, understanding Cal’s intent. After setting the floating pack down, she stood on the strap to keep the pack in place while she pulled the lute strap over her head.

“We’ve no time for this.” The guard’s green eyes reflected the anger in his voice. “Now, off with you.”

Ignoring him, Lyra began to play. The expression on the man’s face softened as the enchantment took hold. A minute later, Cal and Lyra thanked the two men and entered the castle walls.

Cal crossed the square before the entrance, circling around the bubbling fountain at the center. As he strode up the stairs, a man emerged from the open doors at the top.

Matching Cal in height, the man had an even thinner frame, his fine golden vest fitting him perfectly while complementing his white tunic, black breeches, and black riding boots. The man paused, his focus shifting from Lyra to Cal as he cast a doubtful expression.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

Cal stopped two stairs from the top. “Hello, good sir. I’m here on most urgent business, and I must speak with the king immediately.”

The man grunted while stroking his graying black goatee. His gaze landed on the sword at Cal’s hip, and his brow furrowed.

“I’d like to know how you got in here while armed. Visitors are not allowed to possess weapons within the castle grounds.”

Cal glanced at the sword and shrugged. “This sword is a gift of sorts, for one of the king’s men. I don’t know who yet. I haven’t met him.”

The man sighed. “My name is Hamilton Marx. I am King Tallinor’s advisor. I tire of your babble, and I suggest you offer a good explanation before I call the guards to arrest you.”

Cal glanced around, obviously ensuring that nobody else was nearby. He took two steps to reach the top of the stairs and leaned toward the man, who instinctively leaned backward, appearing nervous.

“The Ministry is planning something, and I must warn the king,” Cal whispered. “I have a plan to stop them, but I require help.”

Hamilton’s eyes narrowed. “What on earth are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about a revolution, not just against King Tallinor, but against the rulers of the other kingdoms as well.”

Hamilton grunted. “And if this were true, who are you that you might know of such a thing?”

“My name is Pascal. Pascal Fallbrandt.”

King Tallinor was a tall man and broad of shoulder. His doublet was unlaced to the middle of his chest with brown curls poking through the laces as he paced his private chambers. Lyra's gaze shifted from the man with the crown to the open window overlooking the harbor. The white sails of two ships, bright in the mid-day sun, drew her attention as they headed out of the bay, one angling north while the other turned south.

"If I am to believe what you're telling me, this is indeed dire news." Tallinor stared at Cal, visibly assessing him. His gaze then shifted to the other man in the room. "What are your thoughts, Ham?"

The man who had escorted them to the king nodded. The guards who had accompanied him remained outside the door, along with Lyra's dagger. Hamilton held Cal's sword in both hands, his knuckles white as they gripped the scabbard.

"If this man is who he says he is, my agents confirm that his access to the Ministry Council might expose him to their secrets. If he is who he says he is, I suggest we heed his warning and consider supporting his plan." Hamilton stared at Cal, measuring him. "His story is outlandish to say the least. However, if what he says is true, a direct confrontation with their force would be suicide."

Tallinor frowned. "You know that I find duplicity distasteful."

Hamilton nodded. "Yes, Sire. I'm aware. Unfortunately, I don't make the rules. I merely play the game as it unfolds. In this case, a bit of deception and a fair amount of guile would be the best option."

Tallinor turned toward Cal, his gaze examining him from head to toe. "How do we know that this man is who he claims?"

Hamilton nodded. "That is *the* question, Sire. If we can clear up his identity, our path becomes clear."

Cal nodded. "Very well. If you've heard of me, I assume you're aware of my abilities."

Not waiting for a response, Cal pulled a small rock from his pocket as he knelt and began scraping lines into the stone-tiled floor. When he finished, a large rune marked the floor. Cal stood, pocketed the stone, and closed his eyes. With his breath quickening, Cal's eyes flashed open and red sparks danced within them. His gaze fell on the symbol and it began to glow, pulsing before

fading. The room grew cold as frost covered the floor, white and sparkling from the incoming sunlight. An icy fog emerged above the rune, growing thicker until, miraculously, it began to snow inside the king's private chamber.

Wonder reflected within Tallinor's eyes as he held his palm out, watching the falling snow melt as it touched his skin. Bits of white glistened in his thick brown hair, encircled by a crown shaped like the rising sun. The king turned toward Hamilton, who responded with a single nod.

Tallinor stared at Cal, his lips forming a thin line, his face resolute. "What do you need?"

19

Lyra stared at the boulder, so black that it swallowed the mid-morning sunlight, appearing even more dull that the gray ashes surrounding it. Those ashes were all that remained of the two Tantarri and the dead tree. While not a grave as Lyra was accustomed, she found the blackened rock an ominous marker of another nature.

She turned toward Cal and Garrett, the former having just finished relaying recent events to the latter. Despite the outlandish nature of Cal's tale, Garrett merely nodded. While Lyra had become accustomed to Cal's magic, his abilities still surprised her. Yet, Captain Pularus behaved as if the use of magic was as common as breathing.

Garrett's gaze turned west, toward the narrow ravine. "So, you believe they took this trail inland?"

Cal nodded. "Yes. They camped up there," he pointed to the spot where he and Lyra had camped just two nights earlier. "And I found evidence that the trail beyond the campsite had been recently used."

"In that case, lead the way." Garrett nodded. "It sounds like we have little time."

Cal turned and led them down the floor of the ravine, following the dirt trail worn in the grass and weeds. Lyra glanced backward one last time, toward the shiny black rock as she said a brief prayer to La-Mordai, hopeful that the two men found peace in death.

As they walked, Lyra found herself measuring the man Tallinor had assigned as their escort. Cal had refused to take more than a single soldier, stating that any show of force would lead to a fight they could not win.

Despite obvious misgivings, Tallinor assigned his best swordsman to accompany Cal and Lyra. That man was Garrett Pularus.

Taller than an average man and sporting an athletic physique, Pularus appeared to know how to handle himself in a fight. Dark curly hair and a fierce brow lent a noticeable weight to Garrett's stoic manner, which Lyra found as a stark contrast to Cal's flippant nature.

Lyra's gaze fell to the sword at Garrett's hip, swaying in time with his steps. She smiled, recalling the expression on Cal's face when he had handed the sword to the man, as if he were being relieved of an immense burden.

Garrett stopped and turned toward Lyra, his brown eyes meeting hers. "Are you sure I can't carry that for you? It's not right for a girl…a woman…such as yourself to bear the weight of our supplies."

Lyra's brow shot up. "Are you suggesting that a girl cannot do what a boy can do? Am I some delicate flower?"

Garrett opened his mouth, preparing a reply.

"You're asking for trouble, Captain." Cal said as he glanced backward, not slowing.

"I just…" Garrett stammered.

"Think I'm not capable?" Lyra asked, hoping that Cal wouldn't reveal the nature of the floating pack.

Garrett's lips pressed together. "Fine. You can carry the pack."

"You just worry about yourself. If I need anything, I'll let you know."

Lyra adjusted the pack, causing the lute on her back to shift slightly as she passed Garrett and followed Cal down the trail.

Within the first hour, the trail turned and angled south, following a valley floor with hills rising up to the east and the west. With the sun directly overhead, Lyra found herself torn between covering herself to block the direct sunlight and removing layers to cool herself. Rather than stopping to eat, she pulled trail rations from the pack to share with Cal and Garrett as they continued walking.

At some point in the late afternoon, the trail turned west again, rising toward a saddle that straddled two mountains.

With her feet already sore, Lyra's thighs soon burned from the incline as the trail meandered up the wooded hillside. She refused to complain or even allow a single groan, unwilling to give Garrett the satisfaction. *I should have let him carry the stupid pack.* The sun was low in the sky by the time they crested the saddle, and they caught their first glimpse of what lay to the west.

Another line of peaks, covered with pines and leaf trees, stood opposite from them, hovering over the narrow valley. Beyond those peaks, hilltops and ridgelines covered the countryside until the land reached the distant ocean, which appeared like a bright strip at the horizon.

Lyra's gaze shifted closer and followed the opposing hillside downward. Upon the valley floor, she found an open meadow occupied by tents and wagons. Men in small groups crossed the area, some heading toward the dark opening of a cave cut into a cliffside to the south.

"We've found them." Cal's voice sounded somber. "May Issal watch over us."

"How many did you say they have?" Garrett asked.

"Thousands, I'm told."

Garrett grunted. "Not enough tents for thousands. Hundreds, yes. Thousands no." He pointed toward the south end of the valley. "That cave is either massive, or there aren't that many here."

"Night is almost upon us. Let's climb down while some light remains." Cal continued down the trail, leading them toward the waiting army.

The valley was dark. Red clouds within the purple blanket above appeared as if the sky were bleeding. Hovering high overhead, shining between the clouds, was the strange planet. Now appearing in early evening, it was a bright object in the heavens, sure to provide added light despite the setting sun.

Lyra moved carefully to avoid disturbing the undergrowth as she peered

through the trees, toward an oversized white tent stationed beneath a listing banner. A blue and red symbol marked the white flag, but she was unable to identify it amid the folds. The tent shifted and a man stepped out. Lyra gasped.

The man stood twice the height of any man she had ever seen. His hand was held up to shield his eyes, as if the light of dusk was too strong. He wore patchwork clothing, hastily sewn together to fit his massive frame. The giant walked toward the cave she had seen earlier. Distant shouts arose from the cave as he vanished into the dark maw. Others moved within the shadowy cave, men the same size as the ten-foot tall soldier. Deciding she had seen enough, she turned and snuck back to where Garrett and Cal stood waiting.

When she emerged from the brush, Lyra found Cal on one knee, breathing as if he were exhausted. His shirt was off, a strange symbol drawn on his stomach. Suddenly his breathing calmed. He stood and took a deep breath, appearing refreshed.

“Whew. I feel better.” Cal turned toward Garrett. “Now, lift your jerkin so I can draw a rune on you.”

Garrett did so and Cal used a piece of coal to draw a symbol on the man’s rippled stomach. Cal’s breathing quickened and his eyes lit up with red sparks. The rune on Garrett’s torso began to glow. The captain stared at it with a slack jaw as the symbol pulsed and faded. He staggered, grabbing ahold of a nearby tree to stabilize himself. A crunching sound drew Lyra’s attention to Garrett’s hand. His fingers dug deep into the tree, sending chunks of bark tumbling to the forest floor. When he removed his hand from the trunk, deep pits remained. Garrett flexed his hand, staring at it in awe.

“I feel incredible. What…what did you do to me?”

“I gave you a boost. I hope to avoid a fight, but if it comes down to that, I’m praying it will be enough for us to escape. Just be careful. Your added strength will be dangerous if you underestimate it.” Cal turned toward Lyra. “What did you see?”

“I saw…I saw a giant. He came out of a big white tent and entered the cave. There are others inside the cavern. A lot of them.”

Cal frowned. “It seems that Elias was telling the truth. I’m afraid of what that

means.” He looked at Garrett. “Keep your hand on the sword at all times. If anything strange seems to affect Tali or me, pull the sword out and swing it.”

Garrett frowned. “Swing it at what?”

“Just swing it so it sings.”

Garrett’s frown deepened, but he said nothing else.

“Be ready with the lute, Tali. You’ll need to use it if I can’t get them to believe me.”

“Okay, but what are you going to do?” Lyra asked.

“I’m going to reveal my greatest discovery…and my biggest secret.” Cal glanced up toward the bright circular shape hovering in the evening sky. “If this works, we will rid ourselves of the threat and nobody will even be harmed.” His gaze lowered, shifted to Lyra, and then to Garrett. “Are you ready?”

Lyra shrugged, while Garrett nodded. Cal took a breath and led them down the trail.

The trees opened to the meadow, its grass heavily trampled. A scan of the field revealed dozens of tents and even more wagons, filled with supplies. Without pausing, Cal led them to the pavilion beside the flag Lyra had seen earlier.

Just before they reached the large white tent, the flap pulled aside and a giant man ducked through the opening. He stood upright, towering over them. Confusion crossed his face.

“Who are you?” his voice boomed.

Lyra had been hostage to fear numerous times over the past year – when her father died, when she fell into the pit, when Gilo attacked and broke her window, and while freeing the captive Tantarri to name a few. However, she had never experienced terror like this. It rendered her unable to move, incapable of even breathing. Lyra found herself wishing she were anywhere but here. Garrett pulled his sword free and gave it a tentative swing. A whirling sound emitted from the fluted blade and the fear holding Lyra captive washed away, raw courage filling the cavity it created. The giant man eyed Garrett’s sword warily.

Cal stepped toward the tall man. “I am Master Arcanist, Pascal Fallbrandt. I must meet with the Grand Master Arcanist on urgent business.”

The man pointed toward the tent. “He’s in there.”

The fear struck again until Lyra heard the sword sing. With her mind clear, she realized that the magic infused into the sword countered something about the giant man, something about his voice.

Cal ducked into the tent, followed by Lyra, and then by Garrett.

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While it had grown dark outside, it was even darker inside the pavilion. Lyra stopped beside Cal, attempting to see beyond the slice of twilight leaking through the doorway. The dull glow of hot coals in a brazier at the center of the tent slowly gave shape to the interior.

Three poles, set at even spans, held up the high ceiling, while eight shorter poles supported the outer edge. One man stood in the center of the room, near the brazier. Seven cloaked men occupied chairs along one tent wall. Five empty bedrolls lay at the far end of the tent while crates, barrels, and a small table were arranged along the wall opposite from where the men were seated.

Lyra followed Cal further into the tent, gasping when she noticed the cloaked men's eyes, glowing not with the bright sparks she saw when Cal performed his magic, but with a dull red that reminded her of blood, reminded her of Gilo. Shifting her gaze, she recognized the cloaked man who stood in the center of the room. Before him was a shirtless man seated on an oversized chair. Like the others, the man standing had eyes emitting a red glow. His expression shifted from surprise to a grin. Lyra felt a chill snake down her spine as he stared at Cal.

"Pascal. You came just in time to see us complete our army. Here sits the last man we must convert. This common soldier will soon be an unstoppable force." Elias gestured toward the man seated on the over-sized chair, the only man whose eyes were not glowing. "If you intend to stop us, you're too late. Nothing can stop the Holy Army now, nothing ever will stop it."

“Why would I stop you?” Cal asked. “I’m here to help you.”

Elias frowned and glanced toward the other cloaked men. “Interesting. And why would you do that?”

Cal stepped closer. “It is time to draw the people of the world into Issal’s fold. With this army behind us, it will become obvious to the rulers that they cannot resist the Ministry any longer. The day has come where the Ministry will rule everyone, not just in Kalimar, but across the entire continent. Guided by our righteousness, we will erase the kingdoms of yesterday and build a new single empire – the Empire of Issalia.”

With narrowed eyes, Elias stared at Cal as the seven men seated did the same. After a long pause, Elias nodded.

“Very well. Let me see to this soldier, and then we can discuss what you can do to help our cause.”

Cal nodded. “Go on.”

Elias turned toward the man seated before him, a man of average height and build. The man’s wrists were bound to the chair arms, his eyes white with fear. However, the man said nothing. His gaze followed Elias as he reached toward the brazier and took hold of one of the two long rods sticking up from it. Lifting the metal rod, he raised it and Lyra noticed the twisted symbol at the end of it glowing orange. Elias pressed the hot metal against the man’s chest, and the man screamed in agony. When he pulled the rod away, the man’s skin smoldered, and he shook in pain. Elias grabbed the other rod and pushed it against the man’s skin, eliciting another scream, causing Lyra to cringe at the idea of that much pain.

The man shook and collapsed in the chair, fainting. Elias removed the brand and set the rod back into the brazier. He leaned forward and placed his hand on the man’s arm. The man’s body shook with a chill and he stirred, his skin no longer smoldering.

Another Arcanist stepped forward, his eyes glowing with bright sparks of energy. One of the two branded runes flared bright red and then pulsed as the glow faded. He then put his hand on the shirtless soldier’s arm as the man began to grow larger. The soldier moaned in agony. The moan turned to a roar and then

a scream as he continued to grow in fits and bursts. By the time the process stopped, the soldier's size had nearly doubled, and he towered over the other man, even while he remained seated.

Another cloaked man stood as bright red energy sizzled in his eyes. The other branded rune began to glow. The cloaked man grabbed the giant's wrist as the glow faded. This time, the man shook violently for a bit, but remained quiet other than gasping for air. The cloaked man nodded and reclaimed his seat.

Elias stepped before the giant man and waved him forward. "Rise, my son. You are a Paladin of the Holy Army, able to crush mortal men who deny the might of Issal. Your words alone will strike fear into the hearts of those who oppose you."

The man stood, bending at the waist to fit beneath the eight-foot high tent ceiling. With a nod, he accepted a massive shirt from one of the cloaked men and slipped it over his head as he walked toward the door. Cal, Lyra, and Garrett moved aside as the giant man ducked through the flap and stepped out into the twilight.

"That was our final soldier, Cal. Our numbers are now in excess of five thousand soldiers, each as strong as five men. Their very voices are forever infused with *Fear*, making it impossible for common men to stand against them." Elias looked toward his brethren again. "Under the guidance of *The Hand*, the kingdoms that have resisted the Ministry will surely bend. Tonight, we depart for Sol Limar. Tomorrow night, we attack and defeat our first king, and with him, the kingdom of Kalimar."

Lyra turned to Cal, seeking some sort of assurance. Despite Elias' ominous statement, Cal appeared unaffected.

"Your plan is flawed, Elias." Cal pointed toward the tent doorway. "Each of those men will now eat as much as three or four normal men. With five thousand of them, you must be burning through your food stores at an unbelievable rate."

Elias frowned.

"How are you going to feed an army this size while on the road, Elias?"

"What's your point?"

Cal smiled. "My point is that I'm here to reveal another discovery, one that

will not only solve your logistics problems but can also give the Ministry every major city on the continent in just weeks.”

“What are you talking about? What discovery?”

Cal stepped closer to Elias, glaring at his red eyes. “I have discovered a means to travel instantly from one place to another, a magical gateway of sorts. It will enable you to travel hundreds of miles as simply as passing through that doorway.” Cal pointed toward the tent flap again. Every person present turned toward the flap in silent consideration.

Finally, Elias shook his head. “I don’t believe you. You can’t do that. Nobody can.”

Cal stepped closer. “I can, and I will.”

Cal turned and walked toward the door, but Elias followed him.

“What do you plan to do, Cal? They won’t listen to you. They won’t follow you.”

Cal stopped at the door flap. “I don’t need them to listen to me. When I show you, you’ll see that this ability will give you what you most desire. *The Hand*, and the Ministry, will see you as a hero. You’ll capture entire kingdoms in days, the continent in weeks. You might become the most important person in history, Elias.”

Despite his red glowing pupils, the hunger in Elias’ eyes was apparent. Those eyes then flicked toward Lyra.

“I’ll be taking this before you have a chance to use it.” He reached out and grabbed the strap to her lute, cutting it with a knife that appeared from nowhere.

“What are you doing?” Lyra demanded as she tried to grab the lute.

Elias flipped it over and pointed at the symbols etched into the back of the drum. “He’s infused the lute. I’m sure of it after what happened to me during your last visit. I can’t remember most of it, but I do remember you playing, and I find it odd that I can’t remember anything afterward.”

Lyra glanced toward Garrett, who stood immobile, a statue with one hand on the sword at his hip. She turned toward Cal, and found him holding the tent flap open as he stared at Elias.

“We needed to know the truth, Elias,” Cal nodded. “If I hadn’t known, I

couldn’t be here now trying to help you.”

Elias turned and retreated further into the tent. “Perhaps. Or, perhaps your finding out enabled you to hatch a plan to stop us.” He stopped and turned to point at Garrett. “Why bring an armed soldier if your intent is to help us?”

Cal shrugged. “One armed man poses little threat to your army. At the same time, a hired sword to protect me from bandits or beasts seemed a good idea. It would be difficult for me to help you if I died on the way here.”

Elias nodded. “Fair enough. I still don’t believe you can do what you say. Food might be a challenge, but we’ll make due. Once we take a city, we’ll take the food we need to reach the next.”

Cal shook his head again. “You do that and you’ll only kill those you want to bring under the Ministry’s wing. Those who don’t die defending the city will die from starvation.”

One of the other men stood, appearing angry. “Enough of this nonsense. Go, Pascal. Take your two followers and go.”

“So you have a spine now, Pax?” Cal said with a smile. “All it took is seven fellow Arcanists and an army of five thousand giants backing you?”

Somehow, the red glow in Pax’s eyes deepened, his face becoming a thundercloud. He turned toward Elias. “Are you going to let him talk to me that way?”

Elias sighed and turned toward Cal. “Off with you, Cal. Don’t try to cross us, or you’ll wish you had never been born.”

Cal waved Lyra and Garrett over, holding the tent flap open as they ducked outside.

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Cal walked purposefully across the meadow, forcing Lyra and Garrett to move quickly to keep up. Giant soldiers roamed the field beneath the pale light coming from the mysterious planet overhead. The soldiers clustered around wagons, furiously eating whatever the wagons held. Gazing up, Lyra found the slightest hint of light to the west, beyond the purple peak hovering over them.

Upon reaching the western edge of the field, Cal stopped at a patch of dirt halfway between the tents and the dark maw of the cave. He took a long breath and nodded, as if reassuring someone – perhaps himself.

“Nightfall is upon us, so the soldiers will continue to emerge from the cave and the tents. The remaining daylight was the only reason more weren’t outside earlier.” Cal faced Garrett. “Have your sword ready and swing it whenever you hear one of those monsters speak. Their voices create an irrational fear and the sound of the blade counters it. The charm I created will help protect me, but I can’t afford any lapses in concentration, not for what I’m about to attempt.”

Garrett looked down at the sword, rotating the blade as if he were seeing it for the first time.

Cal turned toward Lyra. “This is going to make a lot of noise. I expect Elias and his overzealous fools will rush out when they hear it. However, I can’t allow them to know how this works, so I need you to keep them away until I’m finished.”

Without waiting for a response, Cal turned and began drawing something in

the dirt.

While Cal did his thing, Lyra turned to face the field. A massive group of soldiers emerged from the mouth of the cavern. One giant pushed another, and a scuffle ensued. Even the sound of their distant grunts reaching her evoked a sense of irrational fear until the whirl of Garrett's magical blade banished it and replaced it with a calm confidence. When she turned toward him, their eyes met and he nodded.

Lyra realized that she held her dagger, her knuckles white as she gripped it. It wouldn't do much to stop one of the monstrous men, but having the weapon ready made her feel better.

The soldier's scuffle ended, and the mob continued their advance toward the wagons, joining others who had finished eating. Lyra felt thankful that she and her companions remained unnoticed.

More groups of towering soldiers emerged from the caves and headed toward the waiting wagons, while other soldiers, likely the officers, emerged from the tents surrounding the clearing. The men barked orders and began to organize groups, each containing a few hundred soldiers. All the while, Garrett kept his sword moving, ensuring that the fear-charged voices wouldn't affect Cal or Lyra.

The hair on Lyra's arms suddenly stood on end as a tingle vibrated across her body. A red glow lit the area, emitted from something behind her. Turning about, she discovered a shimmering shape in the air, twisting and swirling as it grew larger. Along the edges of the doorway, red energy crackled, similar to what she saw in Cal's eyes while he used magic. By the time the portal stopped expanding, it stood five strides across and nearly as tall.

Shouts arose from the east side of camp, drawing Lyra's attention toward Elias and the other Arcanists standing outside their tent, pointing toward the portal. The cloaked men marched across the field with Elias in the lead. Lyra turned toward Cal, finding him still in deep concentration. Recalling his instructions, she ran to intercept the oncoming Arcanists.

When she reached them, she held her hands up to block them, but Elias shoved her aside.

"Out of our way, girl!"

Lyra recovered and scrambled to block their path again. “Cal requested privacy. He said…He said that if anything disturbs him, the whole thing might unravel.”

Elias’ brow furrowed.

“Unravel?” Pax asked.

“Yeah. You know, come apart.” Her arms made an outward motion. “Since he’s using so much energy, it coming apart would be really bad.”

Lyra bit her lip and waited. She had no idea how magic worked, but she hoped it might give them pause.

“We can feel the power he’s using. What is it? What’s he doing?” Elias demanded.

Lyra glanced back at Cal and found Garrett still standing beside him, his blade singing as he cut slow strokes through the air.

“Like he said, he’s making a doorway to Sol Limar.”

Elias moved to circle around her, but Lyra shifted into his path. He stood almost a head taller than she. Being stronger and armed with magic, she wasn’t sure what she could do to stop him.

The man stared at her for a moment and his gaze shifted, looking past her. Lyra jumped when Cal tapped her on the shoulder. She held her hand to her chest, her heart thumping from the start.

“Sorry.” He nodded toward the cluster of Arcanists. “The portal is ready. A doorway directly to Sol Limar.”

Elias looked at his companions. “How is that possible? Is it a new rune?”

Cal shook his head. “Sorry, Elias. I don’t trust you. As long as I can help you in ways you cannot help yourself, I have value. If I tell you this, what prevents you from killing me?”

“What prevents us from killing you anyway?” Pax blurted.

“Shut up, Pax.” Elias elbowed the man, who grunted and winced. Elias turned toward Cal. “I don’t trust you either, Fallbrandt. How do we know it even goes anywhere – that it isn’t some sort of deathtrap?”

“Why would I do that?” Cal’s gaze scanned the faces before him. “You men have known me for two years. Have I not been helpful to you? Haven’t every

one of you benefited from my discoveries?”

“You’ve never been one of us,” Pax said. “You sit in your little hovel outside the city, and you only appear when you decide to share what you want us to know. You have your own agenda, Pascal. You always have.” He pointed toward the shimmering portal. “That’s a perfect example. Why keep it from us until now? How could we not question your motives?”

A disturbing grin spread across Elias’ face as he nodded. “For once, Pax is right. We eight have been together in this from the beginning, while you keep a distance. We have no reason to trust you, Cal. You go ahead and walk through the portal. If it really leads to Sol Limar, as you say, it should be easy to pass through and return unscathed.”

Cal stared at Elias for a moment before his gaze shifted to the others. Finally, he nodded. “Fine. I’ll show you.”

He turned and walked toward the swirling gateway. After a moment’s hesitation, Lyra ran after him.

She grabbed his arm, stopping him. “Cal. Please. You don’t have to do this.”

His hand cupped her cheek as she gazed into his eyes, reflecting his determination.

“I’ll be fine, Tali,” he said softly. “Keep them away until I return. Nobody else comes in.”

Her hand covered his hand, which still cupped her cheek. “It’s Lyra,” she said. “I’m sorry, but my name…is Lyra.”

Cal blinked, and then nodded. “Lyra. A beautiful name. Much better than Tali.” He flashed a smile. “Be safe, Lyra. I’ll be back in a moment.”

He turned and walked toward the portal. Lyra bit her lip as she watched him with an increasing sense of dread. Reaching it, Cal paused for a moment and then stepped inside. Red sparks engulfed him and a loud buzzing rang through the valley. Suddenly, he was gone.

Lyra stared at the gateway, longing for Cal to reappear. Moments became minutes, and her anxiety grew more intense. She turned toward Garrett, who shrugged. Her focus shifted toward his sword, still swinging back and forth.

She turned around and found Elias speaking with one of the soldiers, the man

towering over him. Judging by the markings on the man's oversized shirt, he was some sort of a captain. The man nodded and moved away. Elias turned toward Lyra and a grin emerged, the evil nature of the expression giving her chills.

Shouting drew her attention, and she found a cluster of men, perhaps two-dozen, gathering around the giant captain. After a moment of discussion, the captain led them toward Lyra.

"Move aside," the captain said. "We have orders."

"Orders for what?" Garrett demanded.

"To kill anyone who comes out of that." He pointed toward the gateway.

Lyra was alarmed. "But, Cal's in there. He'll be back any minute."

The captain said nothing, his face appearing grim as the men formed an arc around the portal. Lyra's gaze swept from soldier to soldier, each standing twice her height. Five of the soldiers held huge weapons, bent like chevrons. Red light reflected off the polished edge of the five-foot long blades. A few soldiers held standard longswords, appearing like daggers in their massive grips. Others just stood ready as their hands flexed in anticipation.

"I'll say it again, girl. Move aside, or your fate will join that of whoever comes through the portal."

Lyra looked at Garrett. When he gave her a small nod, she backed up a few steps to position herself in front of the portal. Sliding the floating pack off her shoulder, she set it on the ground and drew her dagger. Garrett stepped back until he stood even with Lyra, leaving two strides of open space between them.

Garrett's voice rang firm and sure as he addressed the towering soldiers facing them.

"When our friend emerges, you'll allow him to pass unharmed or you'll suffer the consequences."

Lyra nodded, while finding it amazing that the man displayed such confidence in such a hopeless situation. Even with magic-augmented strength, Lyra couldn't imagine how he could defeat two dozen monstrous soldiers. If they somehow made it past this group, eight magic users and thousands of giants stood waiting.

22

A loud buzz arose, sounding like a swarm of angry bees. A red aura flared from behind Lyra, the energy causing her hair to stand on end. She turned to find Cal emerge from the portal, his body materializing before her eyes. As the buzz and light faded, she shouted.

“Watch out, Cal! They plan to kill you!”

The giant soldiers began to advance. Garrett launched himself into the air, jumping inhumanly high to fly over the monsters. He twisted at the apex and sliced down as he descended. One soldier screamed as a third of his body was cleaved from the rest. The man fell to his knees and dropped his blade before falling into the dirt.

Cal drew a rock from his pocket and his eyes flared crimson. The symbol on the rock lit with a red glow. White light exploded from the rock, becoming a small sun in his palm. Howls and shouts filled the air as the surrounding soldiers held their hands up to block the bright light. Cal tossed the rock to the ground and grabbed Lyra’s pack. Digging inside, he removed a potato with a rune carved into its skin. Crimson sparks again crackled within his eyes. When the symbol on the potato flared and began to dim, he heaved it toward the attackers. Raging fire blossomed from the potato and it struck one giant, flaming pieces breaking off at impact and setting the soldier and two nearby companions ablaze. The men stumbled about, the three living torches screaming at the agony that only fire could bring.

Fear from their screams gripped Lyra such that she couldn’t breathe, the terror so powerful that she wished she were dead.

Garrett’s sword sliced through a soldier’s leg, its sweet song banishing her fear and clearing her mind. Garrett leapt over the burning giants and parried the enemy captain’s longsword in mid-descent. He rolled and slashed at the captain’s heel before the giant man could spin around. The soldier stumbled to a knee, and Lyra made a brave dash behind the man, into the confused crowd beyond.

Racing past men twice her height, she scurried under the legs of those who stood in her way. When she emerged from the thick crowd, she found the eight Arcanists standing in her path. Panic struck.

“Kill her,” Elias growled.

The eight men spread out in a half-circle with Lyra at the center. The man at the right end of the arc knelt and drew a rune in the dirt, standing to reveal red eyes crackling with energy. Lyra backed away from the rune as she stared at it in trepidation, in fear of what magic the man might conjure. Screams, shouts, and explosions sounded from the direction of the portal, along with the constant whirl of Garrett’s sword.

Just as the rune began to glow, an enemy soldier slammed into the ground right in front of her, rolled through the glowing rune, and bowled over the Arcanists at the end of the arc. The rune exploded, blasting Lyra onto her back and covering her with dirt.

With a groan, Lyra sat up, her ears ringing as she wiped debris from her face. Blinking to clear her head, she found a massive hole now lay before her, twenty feet wide. The Arcanist who had unleashed the magic, along with his two nearest companions, lay on the opposite side of the pit. Their bodies sizzled with red energy, smoke rising from the men as uncontained power fried them.

Lyra stumbled to her feet, the world twisting and tilting. Once her equilibrium began to stabilize, she blinked and tried to regain her bearings. The soldier who had crashed into the magic users lay unmoving, his massive body strewn across the five men. Beyond them, she spotted the white pavilion. Breaking into a run, she circled about the remaining Arcanists as they struggled to free themselves from beneath the man.

“Stop her!” Elias shouted.

A glance to the side revealed two giant men running to intercept her. She looked the other direction and found another soldier who was even closer – too close.

Diving, Lyra rolled beneath the soldier’s outstretched arms as he stumbled past. After clearing the man, she rose to her feet and darted into the pavilion.

Her gaze flicked about the dark confines, seeking out hope. The tent flap opened, and the soldier bent to squeeze inside. She scrambled across the tent, stumbled over something, and fell onto one of the bedrolls. Rolling over to face her pursuer, Lyra’s hand struck an object that made a familiar sound.

Hope stirred within as she fumbled for the lute, gathered it to her chest, and began to strum. The soldier stopped his advance, the man’s head tilting as his eyes glazed over. The hope inside Lyra bubbled over, causing a chuckle.

Rising to her feet, she continued to strum as another soldier stepped into the tent, the man appearing as enraptured by the music as the first soldier.

“*Follow me*,” she sang.

Lyra stepped outside, and the two giant men followed. A blast of fire erupted near the portal, sending a flash of orange light across the field. The clanging of swords, shouts, and cries carried over the sound of her lute. However, as she continued toward the portal, the crowd around her stopped and listened. Those in her way parted, a host welcoming an honored guest.

“*Follow me*,” she sang, repeating the lyrics as she crossed the field.

Lyra’s confidence waned when she reached the Arcanists, three of whom lay dead, their bodies now burnt husks, their eyes hollow sockets. The other five, including Elias, stared at her with those creepy glowing eyes. Lyra paused and sang to the men.

“*What you seek is but steps away. Follow me and I’ll show you the way.*”

There was no response, no words spoken – only vacant expressions as she continued toward the portal with the Arcanists joining her ever-growing herd of followers.

As the final wall of towering men parted to reveal the portal, the white light Cal had created emerged. Lyra squinted, careful not to look directly at the bright

orb. Enraptured soldiers surrounded the area, towering over the blackened and mutilated corpses of their brethren. Garrett stood with a ready stance, his sword blood-soaked, his arms covered in crimson splatter, and the surrounding area scattered with body parts and viscera. The imagery was horrible – a reality worse than any nightmare Lyra's mind could concoct.

She turned away from the grim scene and found the growing crowd gathered in a tight formation, caught in the wake of her enchantment.

"*Follow me*."

The bright light faded, darkness reclaiming the area but for the red glow of the gateway. Lyra turned to find Cal with his hand in his pocket, a narrow slice of white light leaking from it.

"You did it," he grinned. "I swear you're the bravest person I've ever met."

Not daring to respond, she continued to sing loud and clear, the strings of her lute never stopping.

"*Follow me*."

Lyra glanced toward Garrett and found him caught under her spell, his eyes glazed over as he walked toward her. Cal stepped beside him and planted something in his hand. Garrett blinked and gasped, the man seemingly waking from a bad dream.

"Send them through the doorway, Lyra," Cal said as he drew Garret aside.

Lyra nodded and stopped beside the portal, turning toward her enspelled audience, singing in a voice as loud and forceful as possible.

"Enter the doorway, to the world beyond.

Through the portal, new truths to be found.

Go on, now. Go on through.

Follow your destiny. My promise to you."

She repeatedly sang the simple phrase, drawing them through the gateway. The portal crackled and buzzed continuously as the giants entered. Nobody hesitated, not even the Arcanists. Lyra had repeated the same lines a score or more times when the last of them disappeared through the gateway. The red energy calmed, and the buzz quieted. Gazing across the field, Lyra found no movement near the cave, saw no dark silhouettes emerging from the tents. Her

fingers fell away from the lute and she let out a slow breath of relief.

Cal stepped in front of her, hugged her, and kissed her forehead. Enjoying the moment, she closed her eyes and found herself wishing he had kissed her lips. When he released her, she opened them to find him settling on the ground beside the portal.

He looked up at her. “Stand over me while I try to close it.”

Cal closed his eyes and relaxed. Surrounded by dozens of giant corpses, fried, bloody, and dismembered, he appeared as calm as a summer day.

Lyra looked at Garrett, who shrugged. Sighing, she slipped the lute strap over her shoulder and stood beside Cal, waiting to discover what would happen next.

When she next looked at the portal, it appeared smaller, and she realized that the crackling edges were drawing inward, toward the center. Cal’s body began to shake, the motion becoming increasingly more violent. The portal continued to shrink, faster and faster, until Cal’s eyes flashed open, and he screamed. His eyes rolled back and he fell over.

“Cal!”

Lyra knelt beside him, afraid of what she might find. A wave of relief allowed her to breathe again when she found him still alive. She looked at Garrett, who stood over her.

“He’s alive, but unconscious.”

She turned toward the portal and found that it still remained, but was now barely a foot in diameter, too narrow for anyone to pass through. Regardless, Cal was in no shape to do anything about it now.

“Help me move him to the pavilion. We all need some rest.”

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"Are you sure you're fit to travel?"

Cal nodded. "Yes, Lyra. I'm just a bit more tired than usual. The stamina augmentation I used last night sapped my energy for a while. There's always a price to pay when using magic." He closed his eyes, rubbing them. "I just need to take a few more breaks than usual until I recover."

Lyra's gaze flicked toward Garrett, who shrugged. "Don't ask me. I understand this magic stuff even less than you do."

She sighed. "Fine. Let me know when you're ready. We're almost there, now."

It had been a long, but eventless, day.

Morning light had woken Lyra, but Cal remained in a deep sleep until mid-morning, making the intervening hours agonizingly slow. Thankfully, the camp remained quiet with no enemy soldiers appearing while she and Garrett waited. Once Cal did finally wake, he was ravenous. He finished the last of the food from the floating pack, forcing Lyra to restock from the abandoned supply wagons while Garrett refilled their water skins.

The daylong trip took even longer with frequent stops to give Cal time to recover. The heat and humidity didn't help their cause, leaving their shirts damp and water skins empty.

"Let's go." Cal said, returning Lyra's focus to the present. He began walking down the road at an even pace. "I think I can make it the rest of the way now."

She caught up to him. “Where did you send them anyway?”

“What?” He turned toward her.

“The portal. Where did it take them?”

Cal shrugged, and he glanced toward the evening sky. The bright globe of the mysterious planet hovered over the western horizon, providing enough light to make the pale path of the gravel road easy to follow.

“I’m not sure. When I stepped through the portal, I found myself in a dark land, the sky filled with heavy clouds, the ground mostly barren. I was there for but two breaths of the thick air before I turned and slid back through.” Cal frowned. “I was shocked to find us under attack. I don’t understand how things turned so sour so quickly.”

“You were gone for much longer than that. Ten, perhaps fifteen minutes.” Garrett noted.

Cal appeared surprised. “Really?” His eyes narrowed in thought. “Perhaps time works differently there than it does here…wherever *there* is.”

Lyra looked at Cal with a raised brow, trying to determine if he was serious. She glanced toward the sky again and found the planet edging below the horizon.

As they had for most of the day, the trio walked in silence. Having reached the road after sunset, not even a single wagon passed them during their journey to Sol Limar.

Crickets chirped in the surrounding woods, their evening serenade keeping time with Lyra’s footsteps. Something moved in the nearby brush and Lyra jumped. Her pulse pounded in her ears as she stared into the shadows, her hand straying to the blade strapped to her thigh. The animal moved again, scampering deeper into the woods. She released the breath held in her lungs and continued onward.

They rounded a bend and the torchlit gates of Sol Limar came into view. As they approached the gate, the dark silhouette of the city wall emerged against the starlit sky, now bereft of the added light of the strange planet, since it had fallen beyond the western horizon.

“Hold!” a shout sounded from above. “The city is closed until dawn.”

“This is Captain Pularus,” Garrett shouted. “Open the gate and let us in. I must meet with the king.”

Lyra spotted the guard who had shouted from atop the wall, a dark silhouette against the starry sky. He leaned forward, looking down.

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“I need something from the pack, Lyra,” Cal said.

She turned her back toward him as he dug in the pack. A pale blue light appeared as he withdrew the glowing stone.

“See for yourself.” Cal handed the rock to Garrett, the blue aura lighting his face.

“It does look like Captain Pularus. However, I have orders.”

Garrett sighed. “Get your senior officer, and open the damn door!”

The man gasped and disappeared. A minute later, the squeak of a winch accompanied the groan of the massive door swinging open. Torchlight flickered inside the opening, revealing two armed guards. Garrett led them inside and stopped before the man with the torch as anxiety reflected on the face of the guards standing behind him.

“Sergeant Wakes,” Garrett said as he shook the man’s hand.

“Well met, Captain. What are you doing out there so late?” He glanced at Lyra and Cal. “Where are your men?”

“I’m returning from a mission, Burl. I can’t say anything more than that.”

Wakes nodded. “Very well. Do you need an escort?”

Garrett patted the man on the shoulder. “Thanks, but we’ll be fine. I’d hate to be the thief who thinks we’re easy targets.” He patted the pommel of his sword.

Burl nodded. “Right you are, sir.” He stepped back and turned to the two guards. “Why are you standing there, you slugs? Close the gate and return to your posts!”

Garrett led them into the sleeping city, the tapping of their boots on the cobblestone echoing in the narrow streets. A dog barked a street or two over, reminding Lyra of Gilo and Striah. She missed the two dogs, missed the loving pets they had been before the magic corrupted them. *Where are they now? Are they still alive? Have they hurt anyone?*

They turned a corner and the dark visage of the Citadel appeared, its shadowy towers clawing upward in an attempt to pluck stars from the sky.

Upon reaching the gate to the Citadel, Garrett whispered to the guards on duty and they opened the gate without argument.

He led them across the plaza, up the stairs, and through the door with only a nod to the guard posted there. Torches in sconces lit the dark receiving hall, flickering and creating orange islands of light that illuminated the doors and tapestries adorning the walls.

Garrett crossed the hall and led them down a dimly lit corridor with two guards stationed at the next intersection.

“Mandrick,” Garrett said to a man with a shaved head. An angry scar ran across the man’s cheek, up to his forehead, interrupted by the black patch over his eye. “I need you to go wake Hamilton. I have orders to report to Tallinor upon my return.”

“Yes, Sir.” The guard nodded, turned, and disappeared down the hallway.

Garrett nodded to the other man, a massive brute, tall and muscular. The man gave a nod in return, but his hand remained on the pommel at his hip.

A minute later, Mandrick returned. “Go on. The Kings’ Advisor went to wake him. You are to meet in his chamber.”

As Garrett led them down the corridor, Lyra examined the tapestries hanging on the walls, finding herself in awe of the detail woven within them. She wondered how much they were worth. In her previous visit, she had been too overwhelmed to pay them any attention.

When Garrett reached the third door, he stopped and knocked. A moment later, it opened.

“Come in,” Hamilton said while holding his dark red robe closed with his free hand.

Garrett nodded and led them inside.

King Tallinor sat at his desk, writing on a sheet of parchment. Garrett, Cal, and Lyra stopped in the middle of the room and waited in silence, the moment seeming far longer than it actually was. Once finished, the king set the pen into the well and stood.

His hair was a mess, his rising-sun crown nowhere to be found. Like his advisor, he wore a floor-length robe made of rich red velvet. As it was the middle of the night, the man seeming tired was understandable. However, Lyra expected that there was more to his weariness than the late hour.

“Thank Issal that you returned alive, Captain. I pray you have good news?”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” Garrett bowed. “The immediate threat has been…dealt with.” He gestured toward Cal. “This man…and this girl, acted with selfless bravery against a nightmarish enemy led by powerful magic users and backed by five thousand giant soldiers. They would have been unstoppable. Even worse, they did something to their voices…when these giant men spoke, their voices would evoke an intense fear. I’ve never seen anything like it.” Garrett shook his head. “I’m afraid that nothing short of a miracle could have saved us, Sire. Thankfully, these two provided one.”

Tallinor turned toward Cal. “I owe you my gratitude, Master Arcanist. The entire kingdom of Kalimar owes you thanks – as do Vinacci and Hurnsdom.”

Cal nodded, not any sort of bow. “Thanks, but a threat remains until the men who hatched this scheme are dealt with as well.”

The king shifted toward his desk and scooped up the sheet of paper. “This is a writ, one of several copies that will go out to every city within Kalimar tomorrow. It declares the Ministry as outlaws, the church as an enemy of the state. Along with it, my army will depart tomorrow for Sol Polis. We will take the city from the Ministry and arrest any members who remain.” He slammed his fist on the desk. “I’ll not be subject to their duplicity again!”

“But, it is not the Ministry at fault,” Cal argued. “It was *The Hand* of Issal, one of numerous sects within the Ministry. They are more aggressive than the other groups. They believe that the Ministry should be both church and state, governing people’s lives while also guiding them in the ways of Issal. In recent years, their movement gained momentum, a majority of Ministry members siding with them. They’re the ones who brought me to Sol Polis. While I agreed to go because they offered to fund my research, I had no idea they would use it in this way. My dream was to use magic to enrich people’s lives. Their goal was to use it to enslave them.”

“That may be so, but your argument does nothing to convince me to change my course.” The king shook his head. “How will I know which Ministry members have a traitor’s heart and which have a benevolent intent, like yourself?”

“I made you a throne.”

The king’s brow furrowed. “A throne? What does that have to do with anything?”

“I *Infused* magic within the throne. With it, you’ll be able to discern truth. Any false statement will become immediately obvious.”

Tallinor nodded slowly. “That would, indeed, be useful. Where is this throne?”

“You’ll find it within my manor, about three miles east of Sol Polis.”

“The throne helps our cause, but it will only help to ferret out conspirators who present themselves within my court.” Tallinor shook his head. “I cannot take the chance of this type of aggression taking place within my kingdom. The writ will go out tomorrow, as will my army. The Ministry will have to find another place to operate.”

Cal stared at Tallinor for a long moment, appearing unhappy.

The king put his hand on Cal’s shoulder. “This is nothing against you or Issal. It is simply the most effective means to protect my kingdom.” He lowered his hand and shared a sad smile. “Kalimar owes you a great debt for what you’ve done. What can I do to repay you?”

Cal looked at Lyra, their gazes connecting. An uneasiness arose within her when she saw the sadness in his eyes.

“If the Ministry has no place here, then neither do I. Issal granted me magical abilities, and I must do what I can to use those abilities to help mankind and to spread his message. While I must leave Kalimar, I want a better life for Lyra.”

“What?” Lyra blurted.

Cal ignored her, focusing on the king. “My wish is for you to take her in and treat her as one of your family.” He turned toward her, sharing a sad smile. “If anyone has ever deserved to live in a palace, it’s Lyra.”

The king turned toward Lyra and nodded. “Very well. I’ll welcome her in

and treat her like my own daughter.”

“What are you doing, Cal? You can’t make decisions for me. It’s my life.”

Cal took her hands and stared into her eyes. “You’re right; it is your life. However, my life will now be dangerous. I crossed *The Hand*, and their network runs far deeper than you might think. Anywhere I go, I’m a risk to those around me. Do what you wish, Lyra. However, I won’t allow you to do it with me anywhere near you. I’m sorry.”

Lyra’s lower lip quivered. Deep inside, something within her cracked. A tear streaked down her cheek as she struggled to find the words. No longer able to bear it, she turned and fled from the room, running down the dark corridor, past the guards, through the receiving hall, and outside before collapsing on the stairs. No longer caring who saw it, she cried in earnest, allowing her emotions to run freely, driven by the devastation of her broken heart.

24

Lyra opened her eyes, blinking and rubbing the crust of her dried tears away. She stared up at the pale yellow canopy above her, at the sheer cloth hanging down all four sides. The soft bed hugged her body in a pleasant embrace. After thinking her bed at Mystic Manor was amazing, she realized that this bed put that one to shame. Until now, she would have doubted such luxury existed.

When she sat up, her gaze swept across unfamiliar surroundings. The bed was in the center of a room many times the size of her room at Mystic Manor. A sofa and a table stood to one side of the bed, a nightstand, a vanity, a chair, and a tall mirror were on the other. There were three entrances to the room: a door beyond the sofa and table, a narrow door beside the vanity, and a pair of glass-paned doors that led to a balcony lit by the morning sun. Looking down, Lyra realized she was in her shift. The last thing she remembered was crying on the stairs outside the Citadel. She must have fallen asleep outside, and someone had carried her in.

Swinging her legs off the side of the bed, she pulled the curtain aside and padded across the room, toward the vanity. A curled note was tacked to the narrow door beside it. After tearing the note from the tack, she read it.

Good morning, Lyra. I expect you might desire to wash away the grime of your travels. A hot bath awaits you. –Hamilton

With the note in one hand, she turned the knob and opened the door.

“…be interesting having someone new to talk to.”

The girl speaking turned toward the door. Sunlight streamed through a high window, its warm rays shining down upon a goddess.

Without a hint of modesty, the girl stood from the soaking tub and smiled at Lyra. Her eyes shone the color of emeralds, her smile lighting the room as much as the beam of sunlight highlighted the golden tones within her brown hair. Although she appeared to be about Lyra’s age, the girl had blossomed into womanhood, her flat stomach accentuating a full chest and round hips. Water rained into the tub, running off her glistening body.

“You’re awake,” the girl said with a smile.

“You’re quite observant,” Lyra replied. “Where am I, and who are you?”

“I’m Tirialle and you’re in my father’s castle, of course.”

“Your title is Princess Tirialle,” a woman’s voice noted, “and the Citadel belongs to Kalimar and its king, who happens to be your father.”

Lyra turned toward the voice and found a middle-aged woman seated near another door. With long brown hair pulled tight into a bun, the woman’s steely eyes shifted toward Lyra, her gaze bypassing the spectacles resting near the tip of her nose. The woman stood and smoothed the white apron that covered the front of her black dress.

“I know, Glynnis,” Tirialle rolled her eyes as she settled back into the tub. The girl turned toward Lyra. “You’re name is Lyra, right?”

Lyra nodded.

“Miss Lyra,” Glynnis crossed the room, toward the fireplace. “Let me add some hot water to your tub while you discard that filthy shift.”

The woman donned a pair of leather gloves and removed a steaming kettle from the coals. She turned and poured the hot water into the other copper tub, adding it to the water already within.

Lyra glanced down at her shift and bit her lip, her stomach twisting at the thought of being naked in front of the woman and the girl – especially the girl. Not seeing any way around it, she quickly disrobed and climbed into the tub. She then grabbed the soap cake resting on the table beside the tub, wet it, and began rubbing it on her body until it was covered in white lather.

“I’m happy you’re here, Lyra.” Tirialle smiled, appearing to mean it. “You might not know this, but growing up as the only child in a castle can be quite boring.”

“You’re not the only kid,” Glynnis noted as she settled back into her chair.

“Yes, there is Donte, but he’s four years younger and…he hasn’t been the same since the accident.”

“Donte?” Lyra asked.

“He’s my half-brother.”

“What’s a half-brother?”

“You don’t know? It means he has a different mother, but we both have the same father.”

“Your mother is…okay with that?”

The girl laughed, the sound as appealing as her looks.

“My mother died giving birth to me, so she doesn’t really care…at least, I don’t think she does.”

“I’m sorry she died, Princess.” Lyra’s voice softened. “My mother died the same way. Although I never met her, my father used to tell me stories about her, and how I reminded him of her.”

“I’m sorry for you, too, Lyra.” Tirialle replied in a somber tone before her smile reappeared. “Look at that. We already have something in common.”

Lyra smiled, finding herself unable to dislike the princess.

“By the way, you can call me Tiri. No need for that Princess stuff.” Tirialle rose to her feet. “I need to get ready. Father is leaving soon, and I must see him off.”

Glynnis stood and wrapped a towel around Tirialle. The girl stepped from the tub and walked toward a door, the only one besides the door Lyra had entered through. She turned toward Lyra.

“Don’t be long if you plan to say goodbye. Your friend and Captain Pularus leave with him.”

Lyra watched the girl exit, while Glynnis followed and pulled the door shut behind her. The room suddenly became far less cheery. Cal was leaving.

Released from her father's embrace, Tirialle stepped back beside Glynnis. "Be well, Father." The girl appeared radiant in the mid-day sun.

"Don't worry, Tiri. Captain Pularus and his men will capture Sol Polis in short order." Tallinor glanced toward Cal. "If the intelligence we've gathered is true, the Ministry will have few men to hold the city. Once captured, I'll ensure the city's new governance before I return. If all goes well, I'll be back within a week."

The girl nodded.

Tallinor turned to Lyra and gave a small smile. "Please remember, the palace is now your home. If you need anything while I'm away, Glynnis can help you."

With that, Tallinor descended the stairs outside the Citadel walls, toward the ranks of men waiting below. A single carriage hooked to two workhorses waited at the foot of the stairs. Beyond the carriage, soldiers stood ready, arranged in rows six men wide, a hundred men deep. Sensing his gaze on her, Lyra turned toward Cal.

He gave her a sad smile. "I must go."

She nodded. "I know."

His gaze shifted down toward her feet. "I wish you the best, Lyra. I..."

Cal stopped mid-speech when Lyra's arms wrapped about him, her lips pressed against his. After a moment, his stance softened, his arms returning her embrace as he gave himself to the moment. Her head swam with emotion, her heart pounding as she poured her soul into the kiss, praying that it might ignite something within and convince him to stay.

He pulled away and cupped her cheek, using his thumb to dry the tear tracking down. "Be well, Lyra."

Cal turned and descended the stairs. Lyra wiped her eyes as she watched him climb into Tallinor's wagon. Garrett walked to the fore of their ranks as the horses kicked into a trot and turned west, down the road leading to the west gate.

"Sun soldiers! Move out!" Garrett and two others led the army down the street, following the king's carriage.

Lyra remained still, not moving until the last soldier passed beneath the city gate. She expected that the Sun Army would have little issue taking Sol Polis, given that the city was now bereft of men – men pilfered to build *The Hand*'s monstrous army. No, she wasn't at all concerned about Garret or Tallinor. Her thoughts focused on Cal as she found herself longing to be with him.

I will see you again, Pascal Fallbrandt. When I do, you'll not leave me so easily. That's a promise.

Harman blinked as his Grandmother stood and gathered the empty cups.

"That's enough for tonight, dear." Jane announced. "It's time for bed."

"But…I…what happens next? Does Lyra find Cal? What's life like at the palace? What became of Gar and the Tantarri?"

The woman smiled. "See. History *can* be interesting. However, it will have to wait. I'll tell you the rest tomorrow, but only if you focus on your studies so you're ready for your entrance exam."

Harman stood, torn between defeat and the lure of discovering what became of Lyra.

"You promise?"

"I promise, dear." Jane pointed toward the stairs. "Your grandfather is due back tomorrow evening, and we can finish the story before he arrives. Now, go on and get yourself to bed."

Harman climbed the stairs and entered his room at the end of the hall. He removed his tunic and breeches before slipping into bed. There he lay, his mind recalling the adventures from his grandmother's tale. Eventually, sleep overcame him, and he slept peacefully, knowing that he would soon discover what became of Lyra.

PART II

Destiny

25

Harman finished recording the entry in his ledger. He closed the history book, setting it atop the stack piled on his desk before looking over his notes. A growl from his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten in hours, and a glance at the long shadows outside his window notified him that it was later than he realized.

When Harman emerged from his room, his mouth began to water when the scent of cooked beef greeted him. Taking two stairs at a time, he descended to the main level and found his grandmother stirring a black kettle sitting on a grate, the open flame licking its cast iron body.

"There you are." She gave him a smile. "I was beginning to worry that you decided to try and sneak out again."

Harman shrugged. "To tell you the truth, the thought hadn't even occurred to me." He plopped down on a chair and rested his arm on the table, his fingers tapping it absently, causing the spoon resting beside him to wobble. "It turns out that history books aren't so bad when you are actually seeking information."

Jane gave him a knowing smile. "Really? And what did you discover?"

"A lot, yet not enough," he sighed. "The story you told yesterday mentioned King Tallinor of Kalimar. I poured through the books you gave me and found references to him and his reign, but nothing explains what happened to him. The books state that he died and that a period of turmoil followed, with numerous players taking turns on the Emblem Throne over the following decades. During

that time, the borders of Kalimar expanded and contracted numerous times, primarily between them and Vinacci. However, nothing explains how he died or who ruled afterward. Kalimar endured thirty-seven years of instability after Tallinor's death, finally finding peace under the rule of King Stavin, the current ruler."

Jane removed the pot from the fire and set it on the hearth.

"So, those history books don't provide the details you're after?"

"Not really," he responded.

She crossed the kitchen to a cupboard and grabbed two bowls. "Well, you're in luck, young man." Using a ladle, she dumped two scoops into a bowl and brought it over. The woman set the bowl between Harman and the plate of hard rolls at the table's center. "I happen to know what really occurred in Kalimar… and who took the throne after Tallinor." She returned to the pot and filled the other bowl.

"Is that related to the story you told me last night?"

Jane smiled, nodding as she settled into the opposite chair with a steaming bowl of stew waiting for each of them.

"Careful, it's hot," she warned.

He nodded as he scooped up some stew, blowing on the steaming beef, potatoes, and carrots to cool them. The first bite was hot, burning his tongue in his eagerness to eat. The second, less so. By the third, Harman was eating at a hearty pace. Within minutes, his bowl was empty and only crumbs remained on a plate previously occupied by two hard rolls. A minute after he finished, his grandmother set her spoon down and sat back, their eyes meeting. She smiled.

"I suppose you're ready for the rest of Lyra's story?"

He nodded, unable to restrain his grin.

"Let's see here." Jane bit her lip as she stared into space. "When we left off, Tallinor and the Kalimar army had departed for Sol Polis. They soon captured the city, taking it from what remained of the Ministry. As a reward for thwarting *The Hand*'s plan to overthrow Tallinor and the other rulers, the king named Captain Pularus the Duke of Sol Polis.

"Lyra settled into her new life at the palace. Tirialle treated her like a sister,

Tallinor like a daughter, and she lived the life of a princess. This went on for some time, but Lyra rarely followed the rules, and her rebellious nature frequently got her into trouble. Three years passed before things went too far. Perhaps things would have worked out differently for Tallinor if she had behaved differently. Lyra felt like she should have seen it coming. Looking back, she traced the beginning of Tallinor's end to a nondescript spring evening of her eighteenth year."

A lonely flame flickered on the torch at the end of the corridor, its amber light consumed by the darkness in the other direction. Lyra crept toward the light, listening for footsteps as she neared the bend. The briefest glance around the corner enabled her to take a mental picture, recalling a long hallway lit at both ends, dark and empty in between.

She rounded the corner and scurried beyond the torchlight, melting into the shadows. Stopping before a closed door nestled between two tapestries, she tested the handle and found it locked. The sound of approaching footsteps triggered internal alarms and set her heart racing.

The far corner was too distant to reach before the guard reached the corridor, so Lyra squeezed behind a statue occupying the small alcove opposite the door. Sticky webs caught in her hair, its disturbed occupant scurrying across her forehead. With a flick, she sent the spider flying toward the wall and hoped there were no others. The thought sent a shiver down her spine.

The footsteps grew louder and a dim shadow emerged, shrinking as the man drew further from the torch and closer to her position. Lyra held her breath when the man appeared, pausing to stand between the statue and the door. The guard tested the knob, nodded, and resumed his rounds.

Only after the man turned the corner and his footsteps faded, did Lyra emerge from her hiding spot. She drew the dagger at her hip, along with the two bent needles that shared the sheath with the blade. Squatting, she pushed one needle into the keyhole, moving it carefully until she felt the tumbler. With a

twist, it clicked. The other needle joined the first, seeking the second tumbler until it, too, clicked into place. Her blade then slid into the key hole, turning such that the knob turned with it and the door opened a crack. She then stood, sheathed the knife and needles, and slipped inside the room.

Lyra quietly closed the door and listened in the darkness. As her eyes adjusted, the canopied bed at the heart of the room took form, illuminated by the dim starlight coming through the glass-paned balcony doors at the far end of the room. A divan and a table occupied the area beside her, while a nightstand, vanity, and chair were placed beyond the bed. Along the wall between her and the balcony was a fireplace, the scent of a recent fire still hanging in the air.

As Lyra crossed the room, she found articles of clothing strewn across the floor. She bent and picked one up, smiling when she recognized it as a men's doublet. Two steps brought her before the fireplace, where she grabbed the fire iron and began prodding the dark coals.

Orange light appeared as she stirred the ashes. She tossed the doublet inside and blew on the coals until flame popped to life and began licking the green velvet cloth. As the fire consumed the doublet, she gathered the other items of clothing…a dress, breeches, a bodice, men's smallclothes…and tossed them into the growing flames.

Hearing a snore behind her, she turned and approached the bed, the deep red curtains that surrounded it now illuminated in orange flickering light. She slipped beneath the curtain that covered the foot of the bed and climbed on until she was standing between the two people who lay sleeping.

"Aaargh!" Lyra shouted and raised her arms in a menacing manner.

The woman in the bed sat up and screamed. The man in the bed sat up and screamed. Lyra screamed back at them, all three screaming in unison. Lyra's scream subsided as laughter replaced it. She collapsed on the bed, holding her stomach as she laughed.

"Lyra!" the woman shouted. "How dare you?"

The man was breathing heavily, holding his hand to his bare chest. "That was most unseemly for a…a lady such as yourself."

The woman held the covers to her neck, exposing bare shoulders as she

stared at Lyra with eyes of fury, her face twisted in rage. “She’s no lady. She’s a filthy rascal who refuses to act with propriety.”

With her laughter under control, Lyra rolled over the woman’s legs and sat at the edge of the bed to pull the curtains aside. She stood and the door blasted open. Three guards stormed into the room, one with a torch in hand, the others with swords brandished.

“We’re here, my Queen! What happened?” Mandrick stood ready, searching for an enemy.

Lyra raised her hands high. “You’ve caught me. I’ll come along without a fight.”

The captain of the guard looked at her with his single eye, frowning.

“What’s this about, Lyra?”

Lyra shrugged. “I was just testing myself, making sure my skills hadn’t slipped.” She looked back and found the man beside the queen hiding beneath the quilt with it pulled over his head. “I had heard that there were rodents in this part of the castle. It turns out that the rumors were true, for I have found a rat.”

“You go too far!” Queen Jessibel shouted. She looked at Mandrick while pointing at Lyra. “I want her arrested!”

Mandrick appeared taken aback. “Arrested? On what grounds, Your Highness?”

“On…trespassing. She entered my private room without leave.”

Mandrick looked at the other two guards, who shrugged. “But she’s part of the Citadel, a member of the royal family. If I arrested her for entering your chamber, wouldn’t that apply to your servants and guards as well?”

Jessibel, a pretty woman when she wasn’t angry, yanked the quilt from the man who hid beneath it and stood, wrapping it around herself. The naked man yelped and rolled off the bed, falling through the curtain on the far side and landing on the floor with a hard grunt.

The queen sneered as she approached Mandrick, who stood a head taller than she. “Take her to my *husband*,” saying the word as if it made her sick, “and tell him that she broke into my private room and accosted me without provoke. Tell him that he needs to deal with this brat. She is *his* responsibility.”

“What about Clavelle? You know…the man hiding behind the bed?” Lyra smirked at Jessibel. “Let me guess. He lost his way to the guest room, and in your famously kind-hearted manner, you gave him access to your bed for the evening?”

The queen stared at Lyra, her eyes smoldering with anger.

Lyra shared a sly grin. “I bet that wasn’t all you gave him access to.”

The queen lunged at Lyra, but Mandrick grabbed her, the big man holding the squirming woman firmly.

“Get her out of here,” Mandrick commanded to the other two guards. “You best take her to Tallinor and let him deal with her.”

Lyra’s gaze met Mandrick’s and the man gave her a small nod. One of the guards took her by the arm and led her toward the door as Lyra glanced back at the queen to find the woman’s face a thundercloud.

“I’ll get you for this, you little brat!”

When Lyra cleared the doorway and turned down the corridor, a satisfied smile spread across her face.

King Tallinor appeared weary, even beyond the fact that it was the middle of the night. Streaks of gray highlighted his brown hair and painted his goatee, a badge earned from carrying the weight of a nation. He stared at Lyra in grim silence as the guards bowed and exited the Throne Room, their departure punctuated by the thud of the door echoing off the vaulted ceiling. Only then, did the man release a sigh.

“Why must you always play the rogue, Lyra?”

“Why?” She gestured toward the door. “That woman is *why*. I hate her. She’s mean to Tiri and treats me like I’m some street urchin. Even worse, Jessibel disrespects you.” She took a step closer, holding her open palms before her. “I thought to hurt her pride by catching her in the act.”

Tallinor sighed again. “After three years of you two living in the same house, you still can’t get along. Acts such as this won’t help. Instead, you’ll just

provoke her.”

“She’s your wife. Don’t you care?” Lyra clenched her fists, her knuckles going white. “If she even tries to keep her trysts a secret, the effort is pathetic. I always believed that marriage meant more than that…two people pledging themselves to one another forever, not merely when it suits their needs.”

Tallinor rubbed his eyes and dragged his hand down his face. “My wife is…complicated. In fact, our situation is not…typical.”

She snorted. “I sure hope not.”

He stepped onto the dais and collapsed into his throne. “I once had the love of my life. Our relationship was different. She was everything I wanted, and she made my heart whole. Losing her felt like losing a limb, a part of myself that would never grow back. After Tirialle’s mother died, I had no interest in pursuing another woman.” He stared into the air, seeing something Lyra could not, as if dreaming while awake. “But even with Lorialle gone, I still had Tiri. In many ways, devoting myself to my daughter was the means to mending my heart.”

His bemused look shifted to sadness, his tone becoming somber. “However, the glories of power come with a price, and I was forced to marry again for the good of Kalimar. By making Jessibel my wife, I strengthened Kalimar’s relationship with Vinacci and expanded our borders in a single stroke. Through Jessibel’s brother, the Duke of Yarth, the region shifted from Vinacci lands to Kalimar as part of our marriage pact.”

“So you married your first wife for love, but you got stuck with this other minx for the good of Kalimar?”

Tallinor frowned. “Be considerate, Lyra. Please.” He closed his eyes for a long moment, seeking solace. When his eyes opened again, Lyra saw sadness within them. “She wasn’t always this way, you know. I believe she loved me at the beginning, or tried to, but I couldn’t find love in my heart for her. Once she became pregnant with Donte, we stopped…sleeping in the same bed. My lack of affection for her grew into a gap between us, one that widened into a chasm after Donte’s…incident.”

“What happened to him, anyway? I have tried asking others, but they refuse

to tell me and instead change the subject."

"During Donte's tenth summer, I convinced Jess to let me take him on a hunting trip." Tallinor sighed. "It's been a tradition between father and son in my family for generations. A tradition that has likely now become extinct."

"What happened?"

"We were deep in the woods north of Sol Polis – me, Donte, and a dozen of my royal guard. We broke into two groups, me leading one group to flush out our quarry, while Donte and the others waited to make the kill. As planned, we found two spotted deer and drove them toward our trap. Unfortunately, the deer startled another animal during their flight. A wild boar exploded from the brush and rammed into Donte before he could defend himself, goring the lad in the thigh and slamming him against a tree. Unconscious and bleeding profusely when we found him, we bandaged the wound and carried him to Sol Polis. The healer there was able to save him, even save his leg. But Donte's head injury proved to be more significant and he would not wake. Three weeks passed before he finally opened his eyes. Even then, the damage to his brain had changed him…forever. Jessibel blames me for Donte's condition." He looked toward the floor. "How could she not? I blame myself."

Lyra climbed the dais and hugged Tallinor. "Don't blame yourself, father. Sometimes things happen. Unless ill will was intended, it was but a twist of fate." She shrugged. "Perhaps it was destined to happen regardless of what you did."

"Thank you, Lyra." He gave her smile as she stood, and gently squeezed her outstretched hand.

"However, I don't see how Donte's condition makes it acceptable for her to share her bed with another man."

Tallinor released his grip, dropping his hand to the arm of his throne. "As I said, Donte's accident created a chasm between us. Since I have no love for her, I allow that chasm to remain…and I look the other way rather than examine her indiscretions."

"Well, she makes me sick."

"I can't change the way you feel, Lyra, but I can't have you two causing

problems either. You don’t have to like Jessibel. You just need to leave her to her own devices. I’ll inform her that she needs to do the same for you.” His steely gaze locked with Lyra’s, the king within demanding she obey, the man within pleading that she acquiesce.

She signed, “Fine. I’ll stay away from her.”

Tallinor shook his head and chuckled. “Lyra. Do you forget that I can see lies from this throne?”

She bit her lower lip in frustration.

He rubbed his eyes again. “I need this promise from you. I have important business to address over the next few weeks, and I cannot afford your little feud as a distraction.”

“Fine!” Lyra threw her hands up. “You win. I’ll stay away from her for a month. After that, I can’t promise anything.”

“Fair enough. We’ll take it a month at a time.” He smiled. “Now give me a hug so I can get back to bed.”

She leaned in to give the man another hug. “Goodnight, Father.”

He patted her on the back and released her. “Goodnight, Lyra.”

Without pause, Lyra walked the length of the throne room, passed through the double doors, and headed toward her room. It was well past midnight, and she needed sleep before her morning duel.

26

Blades collided, the clang of metal-on-metal ringing in the courtyard. A sword swept toward Lyra's head. She ducked and spun, the strike narrowly missing her helmet. When she came around, Lyra thrust her dagger toward the man's lower back. Her opponent twisted, and his shield deflected the blow past him.

Lyra spun away, kicking up dirt as she created space before he could strike again. She eyed him warily as he adjusted his shield and loosened his shoulder. At over six-feet, the man stood a full head taller than Lyra and vastly outweighed her. Quickness was her main advantage. Strength was his.

Her opponent lunged toward her and Lyra raised her blades, crossing them above her head and bracing herself to catch the overhead strike. The shock from the impact made her teeth rattle and strained her shoulders. She pushed his blade to her left and spun to the right, trying to get around his shield. With a swing of his muscular arm, the man's shield disrupted the path of her short sword, knocking it wide of its target. The shield hit her shoulder, the padding of her leather armor sapping the sting of a blow that knocked her backward. Rather than fight it, Lyra dropped to the ground and kicked her leg into a sweep that struck the man's heel.

Rather than fall, he stumbled, righting himself in time to deflect the upward thrust of Lyra's dagger such that it harmlessly skidded across his cuirass. Overextended, she couldn't avoid his shield. It slammed into her helmet,

knocking her aside with a loud *clang*. Lyra stumbled, her ears ringing as she struggled to remain upright. She fell to one knee, her eyes watering as the world tilted, and spots invaded her vision, causing it to narrow into a blurry tunnel.

“Match,” she heard a man’s voice from somewhere distant, somewhere beyond the ringing.

With her eyes squeezed shut, she fought to keep her stomach under control, refusing to give into the nausea. She opened them to find her opponent squatting before her, his dark hair plastered to his sweaty forehead, his helmet tucked under one arm.

“Sorry, Lyra.” Mandrick grinned. “It was a good match. You’ve come far.”

“However, she must control her emotions. Committing to a thrust like that only works if you can poke a hole in your opponent. Once he blocks the thrust, it leaves you exposed.” Lyra turned toward Elan, squinting at the bald man as he approached. “How are you?”

“My head feels like my brains are trying to escape. I don’t think they enjoy being shaken like that.”

Elan nodded. “You might be on to something.”

Mandrick chuckled. “You were always an insightful instructor, Elan.”

Elan shrugged. “You were *not* always an apt pupil, Mandrick. But once I was able to cool that hot head of yours, you acquitted yourself quite well.”

Mandrick patted Elan on the shoulder and turned to leave.

Lyra tossed her training dagger and sword, the rounded points and dulled edges of the blades bouncing off the dirt floor. After sliding her helmet off, she shook her head to loosen her damp black hair, the motion causing her to stumble.

“Ugh. I’m dizzy.”

“It’s a side effect of getting your head clobbered,” Elan noted. “Don’t let it happen, and you won’t have that problem.”

“Thanks for the sage advice, oh wise Weapon Master.”

Elan smiled, which was an uncommon event for the aging war veteran. “Go on and get yourself cleaned up. Return tomorrow at sunup, and we’ll work on your technique. I spotted a few small things during your duel that I hadn’t noticed in recent training sessions.”

“Thanks, Elan.” Lyra held her hand to her temple, which was still pounding. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She turned and walked away, almost making it out of the training yard before Elan spoke again.

“It’s your emotions, Lyra. You must learn to contain them. You’re smart and you’re quick…maybe the quickest I’ve ever seen. You could be dangerously good or just dangerous. Get your emotions under control before they kill you or someone you care about.”

Lyra paused, facing the door, pressing her lips together. After a moment, she pushed it open and left the man alone.

With an underhand toss, Lyra sent her sparring helmet to her sofa as she passed her bed and headed toward the bathing room. She slipped inside and found Tiri in one of the tubs, no different from every other morning since Lyra had moved into the adjoining room. Glynnis sat in a nearby chair, knitting as usual. The woman’s eyes flicked up as Lyra entered and then refocused on the half-finished shawl on her lap.

“Good morning, Lyra.” Tiri smiled.

Despite Lyra’s headache, she smiled in return.

“Hi, Tiri.”

Lyra unbuckled the straps of her padded sparring jerkin, peeling the sweaty leather off her torso before tossing it to the floor. Her breeches and shift followed, joining the growing pile of garments before she added hot water to the cool liquid waiting inside the tub. She stepped in, and a long sigh seeped out as she melted into the steamy bath.

“How did your duel with Mandrick go?”

Lyra opened her eyes and looked at Tiri, finding a layer of soapy lather coating her smooth skin.

“It lasted much longer than last time. For a moment, I thought I had him beat, but I overcommitted and he smacked me with his shield. My head is

pounding like it might pop right off if I breathe wrong."

Tiri frowned. "That sounds horrible. I don't understand why you insist on combat training. You certainly don't have to do it. There are plenty of other things you can do without placing yourself in harm's way."

Lyra sighed, a common practice when this subject arose. "I can't rely on others to protect me, Tiri. I'm not a princess, like you."

Tiri sat up, the morning sunlight beaming down on her shapely physique.

"But, you *are* a princess. Father loves you and calls you his daughter. He's the king and that makes you a princess."

Lyra snorted. "He might be the king, but a king calling a beetle a butterfly still doesn't make it a butterfly." She shook her head. "I can't afford to think that way, Tiri. I learned the hard way when my father was killed…you cannot control fate. Things change. I prepare my mind and body for a life beyond these walls because I don't know how the bones might fall in the future."

Tiri frowned. "The bones again. Not everything equates to a game of knucklebones. I think we have more control over our lives than that."

"Are you done with that soap?" Lyra asked, accepting the foamy bar as Tiri handed it to her. "I'm not saying that you shouldn't try to make your own life, influence your own fate. I'm just saying that things happen that you can't foresee. I never expected to end up living in a castle. While I love it here, and I love both you and your father, the events that brought me here aren't something I'd choose to relive."

Lyra shivered as she thought of the army of giant soldiers and their magic-enhanced screams. Surviving that confrontation was a near thing, with an amazing blend of bravery, luck, and magic required to prevent disaster. She remained amazed that they were able to send *The Hand*'s army, along with its Arcanists, through Cal's portal.

After wetting the bar of soap, Lyra began scrubbing her body. "Perhaps I'm being overly negative and nothing will happen. Maybe I'll just live here for the rest of my life, sharing this amazing castle with my sister, the Queen. If I'm wasting my time learning how to fight, I can live with that."

"I guess, but I don't like you getting hurt. Just thinking about getting hit in

the head with a shield makes me nauseous.” Tiri lowered herself into the water, dunking her head beneath the surface. When she resurfaced, she ran her hands through her hair, squeezing excess water from it. “Oh, I forgot to tell you that Father has an important dinner arranged for tonight…with Baron Clavelle and the Artisan Guild Master. He requested that we attend.”

“Let me guess, I’m to wear a dress and do something with my hair,” Lyra said with a sarcastic tone. She paused and turned toward Tiri. “Am I to…play?”

Tiri nodded. “Yes. He wants to know why the artisans recently raised their rates. They claim that they must do so to survive, but Father is doubtful.”

“I wish he would just use the throne instead.”

“The throne might tell him that they’re lying, but it doesn’t necessarily reveal the truth. Besides, it has…become somewhat famous, and people know what it can do now. They are careful not to lie in front of it, instead saying things that are true, yet hiding the real answer behind duplicity.” Tiri rose from the water and Glynnis wrapped a towel around her. “In addition, your playing allows him to get the info he needs without anyone remembering the conversation. It helps to prevent unnecessary friction.”

Leaving a trail of water on the stone floor, Tiri padded toward the door to her bedroom. She turned toward Lyra as Glynnis opened the door.

“Will you join me for lunch and a walk in the garden?”

Lyra smiled, nodding. “You know I will.”

Tiri’s bright smile appeared. “Wonderful. I’ll see you in a bit.”

The two women exited through the doorway, leaving Lyra to herself. She closed her eyes and sank deep in the tub, her temple still throbbing from the blow to her head.

27

Sixteen candles mounted to a massive circular chandelier lit the center of the room, the lighting fixture hovering above a dark oak table. At each end of the room, torches mounted in wall sconces straddled a pair of closed doors, their flame dancing wildly each time a nearby door opened.

An old man sat on a stool in the corner, plucking at the strings of his lute, the music quiet enough to allow the coexistence of easy conversation. Lyra resisted the urge to comment on his playing, finding it serviceable but uninspiring. Seated at the long dining table, she found herself wishing the meal to end, although it had barely begun.

Baron Clavelle sat beside her at one end of the table, opposite from Tallinor at the far end. The queen sat in the chair beside him, as far from Lyra as possible. Donte and Tiri sat between Lyra and Jessibel as an added buffer. Guildmaster Vernon, his wife, Ursula, Lady Gariella, and Tallinor's advisor, Hamilton, occupied the chairs across from Lyra.

"You see, Your Majesty, despite the fact that our tax rate has remained steady, the cost of raw materials has increased," Vernon droned. "Without responding with increased prices, the Artisans would yield lower profit margins, something that they cannot suffer due to already living on the edge of poverty."

Tallinor finished his drink of wine and set his chalice down, the gems embossed within the gold cup gleaming in the flickering light. Lyra's focus shifted from Tallinor to Vernon, noticing the man's bushy eyebrows below a

forehead that extended deep into his gray-peppered black hair. The eyebrows shimmied each time the man shifted his eyes, as if they were alive and had a mind of their own.

“So you say, Vernon. However, the other guilds have not complained, and many use the same materials.”

A server approached with a carafe and refilled the king’s cup before circling the table, doing the same for the queen and the king’s guests. Lyra took of a drink of her cider as she stared at Vernon, trying to read the man.

“It is but a matter of time before they, too, must raise their prices.”

Vernon appeared confident and at ease, despite his present company. Lyra had never seen the man before, making it at least three years since he had dined with the king, if ever.

Tallinor nodded. “If what you say is true, I expect that will, indeed, happen.”

Clavelle chuckled, drawing everyone’s attention. The man’s wavy brown hair was combed to the side, the ends of his thick mustache waxed and curled per the latest trend. Despite the pleasantly cool evening, his green doublet was half-unbuttoned, exposing his chest hair. Lyra frowned as she recalled catching the man in bed with Jessibel. He clearly thought highly of himself, likely more so after bedding his queen.

“I’ve often considered the Artisans underpaid for the work they perform.” Clavelle spread his arms wide. “Consider this palace, a work of art that has stood for nearly two centuries. Were those men paid for two centuries worth of work? I highly doubt it.”

Tallinor frowned. “Paying a man for how long their work might survive is ridiculous. You pay him for his time, effort, and skill, not for the duration of his creation.”

“Hmm…” Jessibel put her finger to her chin. “Perhaps Clavelle is on to something here.”

Vernon grinned, obviously sensing leverage.

Tallinor’s frown deepened and his gaze shifted to Lyra. Their eyes met and he gave a small nod. Lyra returned his nod and pulled her lute from beneath the table.

“Clavelle, Vernon, Lady Gariella, have you ever heard Lyra sing?”

The king gestured toward Lyra, her gaze shifting toward the guests as they turned toward her. She gave a shy smile and pulled her lute above the table for the others to see. The man in the corner stopped his strumming, and all fell quiet.

Tallinor nodded toward Lyra, more deliberate this time. “Lyra, could you please grace us with your gift?”

Lyra pushed her chair back and stood. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

As she strummed, her gaze fell on Jessibel and found anger flashing in the queen’s green eyes. If looks could kill, Lyra would have been struck dead at that moment. The next moment, however, belonged solely to Lyra.

As she strummed, the eyes of everyone in the room began to glaze over, her audience falling beneath the spell of the magic lute.

Having performed in a similar capacity on a regular basis over the past three years, Lyra had grown accustomed to the results. She rarely even bothered singing any longer, knowing that the lute and a few suggestions would yield the same result.

“Vernon, please tell me the real reason why the Artisan Guild has raised their prices.”

The Guildmaster stared at Lyra blankly as he spoke. “We have struck a deal with the Artisan Guilds in Sol Polis, Sol Gier, and Yarth, all agreeing to raise our prices twenty percent so we can increase our profits.”

Lyra nodded, expecting that response. “Was the reason truly driven by increases in raw materials costs?”

Vernon shook his head. “No. The costs have remained steady. That was only a guise for the guild to use as an excuse.”

The man’s response was exactly what Tallinor had suspected, and it had come far too easily once Lyra began playing. Her gaze shifted to the man seated beside Vernon. She stuck her tongue out at Clavelle, knowing that he wouldn’t remember her doing so. Her brow furrowed in thought, deciding that she needed to leverage the opportunity before her.

“Clavelle, why did you sleep with the queen?”

“When the queen pursued me, how could I not capture the opportunity? Not

many men can say they have had a Queen in their bed.”

Lyra laughed. “I believe that Queen Jessibel is on a mission to change that perception.” She continued strumming to the blank faces surrounding her. “Clavelle, if Jessibel approaches you again, you are to turn her down. In fact, you are to tell her that she disgusts you. Tell her that you now feel so unpure after your tryst, you find yourself bathing five times a day in an attempt to wash yourself of her.”

A smile spread across Lyra’s face at the satisfaction of the moment. She turned toward Jessibel, and the hatred she felt for the woman stirred inside.

“Jessibel, please push your chair out and get on your hands and knees.”

The queen did as commanded, pausing for the next instruction only once she was on the floor.

Lyra kicked her slippers off. “Now crawl over to me and lick the bottom of my feet.”

Much like a dog, Jessibel scooted across the floor and began lapping at the bottom of Lyra’s foot. The licking tickled, forcing Lyra to grit her teeth and bear it. The satisfaction of the moment made it worth the physical torture. She wished she had an artist on hand at that moment to capture the image on canvas as something to cherish.

When Jessibel finished licking Lyra’s other foot, Lyra commanded the woman to reclaim her seat. As the queen settled back into her place at the table, Lyra found herself in an internal battle to push further, to embarrass the woman beyond repair. However, she had promised Tallinor that she would play nice.

“When I stop playing, the only things you will recall are the amazing tenor and range of my voice and the immense skill I’ve displayed on the lute, but nothing more.”

With her final command in place, Lyra ceased her strumming, the final note lingering for a moment before it faded to silence.

The eyes of those seated in the room suddenly lit up, blinking as they arose from their waking dream. Clavelle clapped enthusiastically while the others joined him.

“Truly magnificent, Miss Lyra!” Clavelle exclaimed.

Vernon nodded. “You possess amazing skills, Milady. Surely, you have been blessed by Issal himself.”

“Wonderful, my dear!” Gariella exclaimed, the first words from her in twenty minutes.

“I told you she was talented.” Tallinor grinned and nodded as he continued to clap.

A sour look reflected on Jessibel’s face before she downed her glass of wine. Lyra bowed and smiled at the private joke she shared with herself, a joke at the expense of Queen Jessibel.

Elan’s fist flashed toward Lyra, and she dodged to the side as her own fist jabbed toward his midriff. He bent, absorbing the blow and threw one toward Lyra’s kidney. She twisted and got low as she spun, throwing her leg out to sweep Elan’s feet from beneath him. He leapt clear, much quicker than should be possible for a man his age.

Lyra rose and took on her ready stance, left hand in front of her right, both chest high. Twisting her upper body backward, her leg snapped out toward Elan. He shifted aside, and he lifted her extended leg. Rather than fight it, Lyra flipped her legs over her head until she landed in a ready stance two strides away.

Without hesitation, Elan came at her, slapping away her jab as he smashed into her. “Oof” Lyra grunted at the impact, slamming onto her back. The force of her landing drove the wind from her lungs.

As she fought to reclaim her breath, Elan grabbed her wrists and pinned them to the dirt. Lyra’s lungs regained their function, and she gasped for air.

“You cannot allow a larger opponent to use their weight as a weapon. For you, that includes pretty much anyone you might face.”

Lyra nodded. After years of Elan preaching the same rhetoric, she had learned that arguing would gain her nothing.

“Can you please get off me now?”

Elan smiled. “Of course I can. However, I wonder if you have learned

anything today."

"Sure. I learned that you're heavier than you look."

Elan's smile widened. "That'll do." He slid off her and rose to his feet.

Lyra took a deep breath, sat upright, crouched, and stood. She patted the seat of her breeches to clean them, sending a storm of dust into the air.

"We've been doing this for years, yet I rarely win," she sighed. "What am I doing wrong, Elan? You tell me I'm quick, but you're just as quick, and you're stronger too."

Elan patted her shoulder. "Don't be too hard on yourself. I've spent my entire life being faster than anyone I've faced. The fact that your speed can match mine is an achievement. You just need to prevent your opponent from using size or strength as an advantage. Playing dirty doesn't hurt either, as long as it isn't against me. Just remember the weak points…eyes, throat, temple, and groin. In a real fight, any of those will buy you time and can give you an advantage."

He smiled again and Lyra nodded.

"We're done for today. I need a break before the trainees arrive. I'll see you tomorrow for forms practice."

"Thank you for sharing your wisdom, Master." She bowed to Elan before turning to leave.

As Lyra walked back toward her room, she found herself looking forward to a hot bath. She exited the courtyard and climbed the stairs to the second level. Entering, she turned toward the section of the castle where her bedroom resided. Servants bowed to her as they walked past, most of whom Lyra knew by name. The hallway that ran past Jessibel's room was quiet, lit only by a torch at each end. As she neared the mid-point, light filled the heart of the corridor when the door to the Queen's room opened and Jessibel emerged. The woman's eyes flared with anger and then narrowed as she stared at Lyra.

"What did you do to Clavelle?" Jessibel demanded.

"What do you mean, Your Highness?"

"You know what I mean, you little brat. He refuses to see me. Me! He says that I disgust him. There is no way a man would say that without influence. I know what you can do with that lute. It had to be you."

“I believe you underestimate yourself, Jessibel. You need no magical assistance to disgust a man.”

Jessibel’s eyes grew wide and her open palm flashed toward Lyra’s face. With ease, Lyra redirected the slap and clamped her fist around the Queen’s wrist.

“You’re slow, Milady. Perhaps you should spend time training with Elan.”

“Let go of me.” Jessibel yanked her arm back, but Lyra held firm. The queen yanked harder, and Lyra released her grip, sending the woman tumbling backward to slam into the door.

“I’m sorry, but I’m late for my bath. Have a good day.” Lyra walked past the outraged woman.

“I’ll get you for this!” the queen shouted. “You’ll soon regret you ever crossed me!”

Lyra continued walking, refusing to acknowledge the hateful woman.

28

The pale stones of the pathway shone brightly in the mid-day sun, guiding Lyra toward her destination. A butterfly flitted past, its yellow-streaked blue wings a striking contrast to the dark foliage of the fruit trees surrounding her. She rounded a bend, and the trees gave way to a sea of color.

Flowers of every type dotted the garden. Yellow tulips, white and purple lilies, red and pink roses, orange hibiscus, lavender lilacs, and more, all finely trimmed and tended. The buzzing of bees hummed in the air, joining the sound of the surf from the nearby ocean. Lyra's gaze fell on a particularly fat bee, black and yellow and fuzzy. The bee's round body bounced from flower to flower, wobbling and weaving through the garden on its quest for pollen.

The path led Lyra to the heart of the garden, where a lonely tree stood, ten stories tall. Long branches – thick with gold and green leaves – gave the impression that a massive globe had descended from the heavens and hovered just above the garden. In the shade of that tree stood a circle of benches, all facing toward the surrounding flowers. Lyra approached the only occupied bench.

"Hello Tiri, Donte."

Tiri smiled. "I'm glad you're here, Lyra. We found a green-winged starfetch in the tree this morning."

Lyra's brow furrowed. "Green? Starfetches have orange on their wings."

Tiri's eyes lit up. "I know. That's why this one is so special!"

“I seen it too, Lyra. I did!” Donte grinned. “It was real pretty.” The boy nodded emphatically, his eyes glowing with excitement, matching his grin.

Lyra smiled. “That’s wonderful, Donte.” She looked up. “The bird is somewhere up there, then?”

“Yes.” Tiri walked around the circle of benches, staring up into the branches overhead. “I hope it hasn’t flown off. The tree is so big, it could be anywhere.”

“Let me try something.”

Lyra began to sing a wordless aria, seeking the right tone. Moments later, a flash of color caught Lyra’s eye as a bird materialized from the branches. It flitted about and fluttered down to land on the bench beside Donte. His eyes lit up, his face grinning so wide, Lyra thought it might split in two.

The starfetch began to tweet along with her song, swaying from side to side as its tiny beak aimed toward the sky. Tiri stood beside Lyra, both facing the bird, just a single stride away. Not wanting the bird to leave, Lyra continued her sad melody, the bird matching her note for note. Eventually, the emotion of the moment resided and Lyra stopped singing. The bird tweeted for a moment longer before it stopped and took flight, circling about the garden once before soaring east, beyond the garden wall. Lyra watched it circle and dip, disappearing behind the wall, somewhere above the ocean waters.

“That was amazing.” Tiri grinned with tears in her eyes.

“Wow, Lyra.” Donte’s eyes were wide. “The bird sang just like you. It sat right by me, too. Did you see it?”

“We saw it, Donte.” Tiri replied.

Lyra smiled at the boy. “I’m glad you liked it, Donte.”

“Oh, I liked it a bunch, Lyra. A whole bunch.”

“What a beautiful day!” Tiri exclaimed.

“Yeah.” Donte nodded. “My uncle is coming today, too.”

“Your uncle?” Lyra asked.

Tiri sat beside Donte, occupying the spot where the starfetch had perched. “Jessibel’s brother is the Duke of Yarth. The duchy became part of Sol Polis when she married my father.” Tiri’s mouth twisted into a frown at the mention of her stepmother.

“I’ve been here for three years, yet I’ve never seen this man.”

Tiri shrugged. “I’ve only seen him twice, myself. He came here when my father and Jessibel wed, and one other time about five years ago. I don’t care for him much. I don’t trust him. There’s something about his eyes…”

“Excuse me, Princess.”

The three teens turned to find Hamilton, the king’s advisor, standing in the garden. He gave them a brief bow and turned to Lyra.

“Miss Lyra, King Tallinor requests your presence in the Throne Room.”

Lyra’s eyes narrowed. “Did he say what this was about?”

Hamilton shook his head. “No, Milady.”

Without another word, he turned and walked down the path, expecting Lyra to follow. After a moment’s hesitation, she did so, quickly catching up to him.

Lyra expected that she was in trouble, trouble likely relating to the Queen.

When they reached the Throne Room, Hamilton held the door open, gave a bow as she passed him, and closed the door behind her. She bit her lip as she strode down the stripe of dark red carpet that marked the center aisle. Tallinor watched her approach from his throne, anger apparent on his face. Only after she passed the last row of benches and stopped before the dais, did he speak.

“You promised me that you would stay clear of the queen.”

“I did, Father.” Lyra protested. “She’s the one who approached me when I happened to be passing her room.”

“Well, she’s upset and she’s blaming you.” He leaned forward. “What is this about?”

“I didn’t do anything.”

Tallinor shook his head. “Did you forget that I can see your lies when I sit upon The Emblem Throne?”

Lyra groaned in frustration. “Fine. All I did was suggest to Clavelle that he choose his bed mates more wisely.”

Tallinor frowned. “Did you abuse the lute’s magic again?”

“It’s not abuse when it’s the right thing to do.”

“Why do you constantly challenge me, Lyra?” His voice grew louder. “Why can’t you behave like a proper princess?”

“I’m not Tiri.” Lyra’s anger boiled over and she shouted. “You and I both know that I am *not*, and will never *be*, a princess. I’m just some stray that you were saddled with. I’m just another burden for a weary king.”

After a long moment of silence, Tallinor responded.

“Is that how you feel? Is that all you think of me?”

Despite the sadness in his voice, Lyra’s anger wouldn’t allow her to respond, to give in. Finally, he waved her away.

“We’ll discuss this another time. I must prepare for a dinner with the Duke of Yarth.” He glared at her. “I beg you to restrain yourself tonight. I hope you can handle that for one simple dinner.”

She spun about and retreated toward the door, resisting the urge to turn back and apologize. *Don’t let him off that easy*, she told herself. *Wait until tomorrow, once you’ve proven your point*.

Lyra turned and eyed her reflection, examining her hair. Long needles held her black locks in a pile atop her head, per the latest fashion. The yellow dress she wore was tight in the waist, ruffled and flowing at the hips. While it was uncomfortable to wear, she appreciated the results.

With a nod, she opened the door and passed through the bathing room to knock on the door at the other side.

“Are you ready, Tiri?” she asked through the door.

The knob turned and the door opened to reveal a work of art. Like Lyra, Tiri’s hair was piled atop her head, with lonely strands hanging down at the sides. Unlike Lyra’s black hair, golden hues highlighted Tiri’s brown hair and perfectly offset her jade eyes. With her shoulders and upper chest exposed, her green dress augmented Tiri’s curves in an almost obscene manner. If Lyra didn’t love Tiri as a sister, she would hate her for the way she looked.

“I’m ready, if you are.” Tiri smiled, warm and heartfelt.

“Let’s go then.”

They passed through Tiri’s room, along the dark corridor, down a flight of

stairs, past the throne room, and through the double doors that led to the dining room.

The staff had extended the long table, now able to seat twelve. Those already seated were in deep discussion, with three separate conversations happening at once. Tallinor occupied one end, as usual, while the chair at the opposite end stood empty. Oddly, the queen occupied Lyra's normal position, the furthest side chair from the king. Donte, and a man with dark curly hair and a black doublet, sat between Jessibel and two empty chairs.

Hamilton sat adjacent to Tallinor. Seated beside him were Baroness Lamona, Duke Rionelle of Sol Gier, and Baron Clavelle, whose face was twisted in a grimace as he stared at Jessibel.

Tiri approached the table and gave a curtsy with Lyra doing the same. The man seated beside Lyra's chair turned and her eyes lit up with recognition.

"Garrett!"

The Duke of Sol Polis stood, and gave her a hug. When he released her, she stepped back and examined him. A finely trimmed dark beard framed his smile, his dark eyes glowing as much as his white teeth.

"You look well," Lyra remarked. "Dukedom appears to suit you."

"You look amazing, Lyra. I must say that you've grown into quite the young woman."

"Sol Polis is not so far. You could have visited us before now," Tiri chided.

Garrett slid around Lyra and hugged Tiri. "Sorry, Tirialle. Getting Sol Polis in order has fully consumed my life these past years. The government was in shambles after we captured the city. It took quite some time to fill out the necessary positions and to rebuild the city guards with men who were sufficiently trained. And then, there is *The Hand*…even as little as half a year ago, I found their spies hiding within Sol Polis. "

"Well, now that things are running more smoothly, I hope you'll visit more often."

"I will make an effort to do so, Miladies." He smiled and gave a slight bow.

Tiri and Lyra gave him a curtsy before all three sat.

"Hello, father," Tiri chimed.

“Hello, Tiri…Lyra,” Tallinor smiled. “You two look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” Lyra intoned.

“May we eat now, Sire?” Rionelle grumbled, his forehead covered in sweat despite the temperate evening. Lyra covered her nose when the scent of body odor wafted her way, undoubtedly from the vastly overweight Duke sitting across from her. Well known for his love of food, Rionelle was also known for his lack of hygiene.

“Soon, Rio. Soon. We await our guest of honor.”

Rionelle sighed, the motion accentuated by his size.

Two guards unfamiliar to Lyra entered the room. One stationed himself beside the door, the other stopped behind the empty chair at the end of the table. A tickle of recognition teased Lyra upon seeing the guard standing near the table. He was of average height and average build. His short-cut brown hair matched his trimmed goatee while a strong nose and brow surrounded steely gray eyes.

Another man entered the room, striding to the table with a sense of command, an air of confidence. Not a single wrinkle marred his gold-trimmed black coat, nor did one of his brown hairs stray from the others, all slicked back to appear as if he wore a shiny brown helmet. Like Clavelle, he sported a dark mustache, waxed at the tips. Unlike Clavelle, there was a weight to his gaze – visibly measuring his surroundings as his eyes swept the room. He smiled and nodded toward the king.

“You’re Majesty, a thousand pardons for my tardiness. I sincerely appreciate your invitation to dine, but I have been feeling ill and thought it best to let it pass before joining you.”

Lyra stared at the man standing behind the Duke. She couldn’t shake the sense that she knew him – knew those unsettling gray eyes.

Tallinor stood. “Nonsense, Berrilon. Please, sit.”

Upon hearing the name *Berrilon*, her memory connected the man to the moment.

With a smile, Duke Berrilon took a seat opposite from the King as his man, Rainer stood behind him. Here, in the same room where Lyra dined with her new family, stood the man who had killed her father.

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Fear and hatred battled within Lyra as she stared at the table, unsure of what to do. She found her hands shaking and the sudden urge to run. With closed eyes, she took two deep calming breaths. Her eyes opened and flicked toward the man at the far end of the table, looking away when he turned toward her. When she next turned that direction, Lyra found the man in a conversation with his sister, Jessibel.

She looked at Tallinor when Hamilton leaned over and whispered in his ear, the king nodding in response. The dinner had just begun and Lyra felt trapped, desperately wishing to tell Tallinor of what Rainer did to her father, while knowing that it would have to wait until after dinner.

A steward appeared between Tiri and Tallinor, leaning over the table with a carafe of dark liquid.

“Wine, Sire?”

The king nodded and the man filled Tallinor’s chalice before turning toward Tiri.

“For you, miss?”

“No, thank you.” Tiri replied. “Cider for me, Lyra, and Donte.”

Used to ordering for Donte, Tiri often did so for Lyra as well. Moments later, a second steward circled the table as he filled their cups with cider. Surprisingly, Berrilon also opted to drink cider, stating that his stomach remained too unsettled for wine.

Other servants then emerged from the doors to the kitchen, each carrying two plates filled with steaming food. Lyra stared at her plate while she ate, oblivious to the conversation around her as she struggled to come to terms with her father's killer sharing the room with her.

Rionelle ordered a second serving, the big man clearing that plate before Lyra gave up on her first. When the servants came to collect plates, Lyra's was only half-eaten. Her gaze flicked down the table, and she noticed that neither Donte nor Jessibel had taken a single bite.

The king coughed and Lyra looked up to find the man's forehead coated in sweat. He coughed again, trying to clear his throat before taking another drink of wine.

"Are you alright, father?" Tiri rested her palm on Tallinor's hand. "You're hot." She lifted her hand to his forehead. "You're burning up."

"I don't feel well, either." Garrett said. "Perhaps it was something…" His face contorted as he leaned into the table and grunted.

Across the table, Rionelle was sweating profusely while holding his stomach, the guests beside him doing the same.

"Excuse me."

Lyra turned to find Donte standing.

"I believe that it's time that I shared something with you." Donte turned toward Tallinor. "Father, I apologize for the guilt you've been carrying since my accident. The ruse for me to play a simpleton was of Mother's device. I'm not saying that it wasn't a brilliant plan, I just wanted to be clear that it was her idea." Donte smiled. "As was the idea to poison you."

"Poison?" Tallinor grimaced and doubled over. "Why, Donte?"

"Why do people do what they do? Power? Money? Revenge? Jealousy? Perhaps all, perhaps none." Donte shrugged. "The *why* doesn't really matter. Only the results matter."

Donte turned toward Lyra. "I must thank you, Lyra. Mother's distaste for you helped me convince her to accelerate her plan, rather than waiting another two years."

Lyra stared at Donte, unable to speak, finding herself trapped within a

nightmare.

Jessibel's eyes grew wide, her face pale as she bent over the table, her breath coming in rapid gasps as her stomach cramped.

"Sorry, Mother." Donte shrugged. "While it was your plan to make me king, Uncle Berrilon provided a better offer. Accordingly, rather than poisoning the food, he convinced me to taint the wine instead."

Jessibel turned toward Berrilon, rising to her feet. "You would turn my own son against me?"

"You're letting your emotions get the better of you, *Sister*," Berrilon sneered. "Which is nothing new. In fact, our new young king here was convinced that your emotions would be his downfall."

"You hunger for power, Mother." Donte stared at Jessibel with a look of disgust. "You might have been willing to make me king, but the price was for me to be your puppet. Uncle here only asks to be Grand Duke of Northern Kalimar, ruling Yarth and Vinacci after we invade and dispose of Queen Iglesia." Donte smiled. "My life, and Kalimar, will be my own without you around."

"You ungrateful…" Jessibel dove toward Donte, her fingers clamping around his throat.

Donte gripped her wrists while one of the guards pulled her away from him. Jessibel stumbled backward and tumbled to the floor, curled up on her side as she heaved and gasped and foamed at the mouth.

Berrilon chuckled as he stared down at his sister. "I've always said that you drink too much wine, Jess. You must watch your intake because it might kill you some day. Oh, I guess today is *some day*."

"Kill anyone else who tries to touch me" Donte commanded as he circled around his mother to stand beside Duke Berrilon.

The people seated around Lyra and Tiri began to foam at the mouth, shaking violently as sweat poured down their face. Tallinor slumped face-first into his plate, and his crown slid off his head to roll across the table, settling before Donte. Baroness Lamona shrieked and gurgled as Clavelle did the same. Garrett's chair tipped backward and crashed to the floor, the man rolling to his side in a curled ball as he coughed and heaved. Desperate, Lyra reached for the

lute hanging from the back of her chair.

“Stop her!” Donte shouted.

A guard grabbed the lute strap, pulling it so hard that Lyra’s chair almost toppled over before she let go. The man then tossed it across the room to land in Donte’s hands.

“I’ve learned what you can do with this, *Sister*. I’ll not be your fool.” Donte sneered. “You have played it for the last time.”

He spun around, swinging the lute to smash it into the wall. The drum shattered and wooden shards rained down as the ringing of the strings echoed in the room. Donte turned back toward her and raised his hand, revealing the neck and strings of the broken instrument, dangling like a man on a noose. Lyra’s heart sank as hope fled.

Rionelle’s eyes were wide, the man shaking violently as he choked on his own vomit. Hamilton’s body hung limply in his chair, the man already dead. Clavelle and Lamona lay face down on the table, dead as well.

Garrett rose to his hands and knees, attempting to stand. The guard beside the door kicked and Garrett twisted to grab the man’s foot as a dagger appeared in his hand. With a slash, Garrett sliced the guard’s inner thigh open, the wound gushing blood from the severed artery as the man screamed and collapsed.

When Garrett dove toward Rainer, the man dodged the blow. Garrett fell to his knees, his faced wracked with pain as he clutched his stomach with one hand and supported himself with the other. Blood oozed from his bulging eyes, foam covered his mouth and chin. Lurching forward, Rainer stabbed Garrett in the back. The former captain collapsed to the floor, twitching.

Lyra grabbed Tiri’s hand and yanked her to her feet, both girls leaping over the dying guard to dart out the door.

The two girls ran down the corridor and burst into the throne room to find a pair of guards standing near the Emblem Throne.

“Help!” Lyra cried. “The King has been poisoned and men are after the Princess.”

The two men turned toward Lyra, staring at her with unfamiliar faces. She noticed a man lying on his back behind the throne and realized that the real

guards were dead. The two men drew their weapons.

“Run!” Lyra ran out the other door and down the stairs with Tiri close behind.

They ran down a hallway with several open doors, past the startled servants who lived in the apartments. At the far end, Lyra paused and lifted her dress so she could draw the dagger strapped to her thigh. She then began to cut away Tiri’s skirt.

“What are you doing?” Tiri shrieked.

“We need to move faster. No time to worry about impropriety.”

She yanked the bottom half of Tiri’s dress off, leaving the girl’s torso covered by the top half of her green dress, only her white shift covering her from her waist to her thighs. Lyra did the same to her own dress, tossing it aside as she pulled Tiri up the stairs.

As they reached the next level, a guard leapt from the upper stairwell to land in the corridor before them. A humorless smile twisted his face as he turned toward Lyra. At six-feet tall, he doubled Lyra’s weight. The man had deeply tanned skin and a shaved head, marked by an angry white scar from his brow to the top of his scalp, reinforcing an image of ferocity. He pulled his sword from its scabbard, the ring of steel accompanying the clanking of the metal plates adorning his leather armor.

Lyra released Tiri’s hand and strode toward the man, his grin widening just before his sword sliced toward her. Shifting sideways and twisting to avoid the sword, Lyra redirected it with her dagger as she dropped to the ground. The man began a motion to chop downward. In a sweeping kick, Lyra’s foot struck the back of the man’s heel as hard as she could muster, the pain of striking his boot making her wince. The kick knocked his weight-bearing leg from beneath him and he fell, landing hard on his back and striking his head on the stone floor. Lyra then lunged and swiped her dagger across the back of his raised leg, opening a gash across his hamstring.

Hearing a ruckus from behind them, Lyra turned to find men emerging from the doors at the top of the stairs and others shouting from the corridor below. She grabbed Tiri’s hand and pulled her down the hallway, past the guard who lay on

his side, groaning in pain.

The two girls reached the end of the corridor and found themselves in a storage room, closing the door behind them. A frantic glance about the room revealed wooden crates and wine barrels along one wall, while rows of shelves occupied the other half of the room. There were two ways out: the door that they had just closed and a narrow window, high above.

“Help me block the door.” Lyra shifted behind the nearest crate and pushed hard, the object only moving a few inches. Tiri stood beside her and they pushed in unison, the crate moving a full foot this time. Four additional pushes pinned the crate against the door and left them gasping for air.

A thump hit the door, followed by shouting from the corridor.

“They’ve locked themselves in here.”

“Is there another way in?”

“No. It’s a storage room. Only one door.”

Lyra pulled Tiri over to a wine barrel. They both heaved and it tipped over with a crash, rocking and rolling unevenly. The two girls positioned themselves behind the barrel and rolled it until it was tight against the crate that blocked the door. Lyra then upended a sack of potatoes and wedged it beneath the barrel so that it wouldn’t roll.

“There.” She gasped for air. “Hopefully that will hold them for a bit.”

She turned toward the window, perhaps a foot tall and three feet long, tucked up against the high ceiling.

“Come and help me push the shelf over.”

“What? Why?” Tiri complained.

“If we can lean it against the wall, we can use it as a ladder to get to that window.”

Standing beside the shelf, the two girls pushed but it didn’t move.

“Let’s empty the lower shelves.”

A massive thud sounded against the door.

“Hurry.” Lyra grunted as she pushed a bag of apples off the bottom shelf.

Another thud sounded and small splinters sprayed into the room.

“They have an axe.” Tiri said in a frightened voice.

“Just help me.” Lyra pulled a wooden box filled with carrots from the shelf.

A thud sounded and splinters rained into the room, the axe leaving a hole two inches wide.

“Now push!” Lyra leaned against the shelf with Tiri beside her. The thing tipped a few inches and then rocked back down. “Rock it until it tips!”

They pushed and pulled in unison. Each time, the shelf tilted further. Backward it tilted, hanging in a moment of equilibrium as Lyra’s gut twisted at the thought of it tumbling the wrong direction. It then tipped forward again and she lunged into it. The shelf crashed into the wall, its contents creating a ruckus as they fell to the floor.

A loud thud sounded from behind and chunks of wood blasted across the room. Lyra turned to find a man’s face poking through the hole in the door.

“There they are!”

Lyra quickly scaled up the shelves. At the top, she drew a dagger and began working at the window casing. After a moment, she was able to pry it open, swinging it upward on its hinges as she sheathed the blade.

She turned toward Tiri, who stood below, watching the door as the axe hit it again to widen the hole.

“Tiri! Climb through the window. Now!”

Tiri climbed up the shelves, past Lyra and pushed her head through the opening.

“There’s a shrub below us. I don’t want to land in it.” Tiri complained.

“If we stay, we’re dead! Move!”

Tiri slid forward, grunting to squeeze her chest through the opening. With the girl’s lower body still in the storage room, Lyra gave her a shove and launched Tiri out the window. A scream and a grunt followed.

Another smash of the axe and the door opened wide. Lyra looked back as her head reached the window and found a guard with a gleaming sword in his hand, climbing over the crate.

Driven by urgency, she pushed through the opening, clinging to the windowsill with one hand as she pulled one leg out and the other.

“They went through the window!” A guard shouted.

Lyra let go and fell into the shrub, scraping her legs on the branches as she landed. She fell backward into the dirt path and found herself beside Tiri, who lay on her side, attempting to catch her breath.

Scrambling to her feet, Lyra pulled Tiri up as the girl gasped for air. She looked around and realized that they were in the garden. After years of spending time there, Lyra knew the garden well…and knew she had only one option.

With Tiri's hand firmly in her grip, Lyra pulled her sister down the path, through the fruit trees, past the colorful flowers that encircled the massive tree, and toward the wall at the east end.

"What are you doing?" Tiri gasped. "The way out is that way."

"We can't go that way. If we do, they'll be there and we'll be dead." Lyra didn't pause when she reached the wall, quickly scaling it until she stood on the top. Far below, ocean waves flowed through the narrow inlet that ran up to the castle, crashing over dark rocks to slam against the base of the wall in a white spray of foam.

Lyra turned to look behind her, finding Tiri standing below.

"We have to jump."

Tiri's face turned pale. "But…it must be a hundred-foot drop."

"Keep your legs together, arms in, and land feet-first." Lyra stared down at the water, mentally preparing herself. "Now, get up here before they kill us."

Tiri climbed up on the wall, wincing as the jagged edges of the eroded bricks cut her palms. Lyra grabbed her sister's hand, helped her to her feet, and looked her in the eye.

"Trust me. You can do this." Lyra surprised herself with the confidence in her voice, despite her own fears. "Just be sure to leap outward so you don't hit the wall on the way down."

Tiri nodded.

"At the count of three." Lyra took a breath.

Shouts sounded behind them.

"One."

"They're on the wall!"

"Two"

“Archers, fire!”

“Three!”

They jumped.

Lyra’s breath caught in her throat in a moment of raw terror. She and Tiri plummeted past the walls, past the natural cliff face as two arrows sailed over their heads. Waves crashed into rocks below, the angry ocean swirling and roiling, growing ever closer…until it swallowed them.

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"Shh" Lyra hushed Tiri. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

Tiri nodded, the motion barely visible beneath the shadow of the trees.

A pang of jealousy struck Lyra at the way Tiri could appear beautiful despite the torn rags she wore, despite her snarled and twisted hair. Lyra turned toward the farm and examined the buildings in the failing light. A man appeared with a pitchfork full of hay, which he tossed into the pen that held his oxen. The moment he returned to the barn, she darted across the yard, and put her back against the house.

"Earl!" A woman's voice called from the house. "Time for dinner!"

"I hear you, woman!" the man in the barn shouted. "I'll be there in a minute!"

A sense of relief arose. With the homeowner focused on eating, Lyra's job would be easier.

The man strolled out of the barn and wiped his brow as he crossed the yard. Hearing the door to the house slam shut, Lyra ran to the clothesline strung between the two buildings.

Moving quickly, she pulled the trousers, shirt, and dress from the line, pausing briefly before grabbing the blanket hanging there as well. With her prizes clutched to her body, Lyra ran toward the woods where Tiri waited.

"Take this." Lyra handed the pile to Tiri before running back toward the

barn.

She circled the far side of the building, opposite from the farmhouse. When she reached the door, she eased it open and slid inside. Fumbling in the darkness, she found the man's plow and felt the leather strap of the man's water flask hanging from the handle. After sliding the flask over a shoulder, she began digging through the crates and sacks on the shelf.

With an arm full of vegetables, Lyra eased the barn door open and noticed the man's hat hanging from a nail on the back of the door. Inspiration struck and she grabbed the hat before slipping out and creeping around the barn. When she reached Tiri, the girl frowned.

"Why'd you steal that poor man's hat?"

"They'll be looking for two girls. I plan for them to see us as a farmer and his wife, making a trip to the city."

Tiri's frown deepened. "You want me to pretend to be a man?"

Lyra grunted. "Nobody would believe that." She slipped the hat on her head. "I'll dress like a man and you'll be my wife. I've pretended to be a boy before, and I can do it again."

She opened the water flask and took a drink, not caring that the water was warm. With her thirst quenched, she handed the skin to Tiri and began to dress.

Leaves rustled in the wind. A murwing hooted from a nearby tree, the sound echoing in the night. The two girls huddled together with a blanket wrapped around them. Lyra rested her head against the tree behind her, while Tiri's head leaned on her shoulder.

"I'm cold." Tiri whispered.

"We'll need to get a flint. Without it, we can't have a fire."

"I want to go home, Lyra."

"You know we can't. Perhaps ever," Lyra sighed. "You're a threat to Donte, and he knows it…Berrilon knows it."

"Father's dead. I can't believe he's gone." Tiri began to cry. "What are we

going to do? Where do we go?”

Memories of Lyra’s flight from Vingarri surfaced, although it seemed a lifetime ago. Her journey then had somehow led her to Cal. Helping Cal had resulted in her moving into the palace, living as a princess. Now, that life had been crushed, again leaving Lyra homeless and on the run, back where she started.

Tiri nestled against her, sobbing. Lyra hugged her sister, realizing that this time was different. She wasn’t alone.

“We have to get out of Kalimar, beyond Donte’s reach. We’ll head north,” Lyra whispered, hoping she sounded confident. “Once beyond Kalimar’s border, we’ll figure out our next step.” Lyra thought about Rainer. “I need to tell you something about Rainer.”

Tiri continued to sob, showing no response.

“When I was fifteen, he and another man broke into my house and…they killed my father.”

Tiri sat up, looking at Lyra. “What?”

Lyra nodded. “Rainer had bribed my father to betray Queen Iglesia, but when my father changed his mind and refused to do it, they killed him.”

Tiri stared at Lyra for a long moment. “And now you’ve lost another father… I’m so sorry.” Her sobbing returned.

Lyra thought as Tiri leaned against her. “Have you heard of an organization called *The Hand*?”

Tiri nodded. “Yes. Father says that they were behind an attempted revolution. He said that you and Captain Pularus stopped them.”

“Yes…and Cal. None of it would have been possible without Cal.”

“And now, Captain Pularus is dead, too. How could Donte do it? How could he kill his own father…and his mother?”

Lyra rested her chin on Tiri’s head. “I don’t get it, either. Somehow, he believes that being king is more important than having a family. That’s why we must flee Kalimar. He’ll apparently do anything to secure his position. You’re a threat as long as you live.”

Tiri whispered, “I’m scared.”

“Me too.” Lyra hugged her sister. “However, I’ve survived this kind of thing before. And this time, we have each other.”

“Are you sure about this?”

Lyra nodded to Tiri, whose eyes reflected obvious trepidation.

“We need money, Tiri. As it stands, we can buy nothing. Aren’t you craving a hot meal?” Lyra pointed toward Tiri’s feet. “Wouldn’t you like some better footwear? Those slippers might be suitable for a dinner at the palace, but they’re a poor choice for walking a hundred miles.”

Tiri sighed. “My feet *are* killing me.”

“Mine too.” Lyra gave Tiri a smile. “Trust me. I can do this.”

Despite the apprehension in her expression, Tiri nodded.

“Good.” Lyra gestured toward Tiri’s dress. “I need you to pull the neckline a bit lower, and tease your hair. These men need to feel that you’re worth the bet.”

Tiri did as instructed, fluffing her hair, its golden highlights brilliantly lit by the setting sun. She then adjusted her dress to reveal more of her tawny skin and a hint of cleavage. Satisfied with the result, Lyra nodded and led her sister through the door.

In stark contrast to the quiet street, the tavern buzzed with the sounds of conversation and laughter. Sliding between the full tables, Lyra and Tiri crossed the room toward the crowd in the corner. As she forced her way toward the center, Lyra saw a man stand upright, holding a fist full of bones above his head. The crowd roared. Men patted the winner on the back as he grinned and nodded.

“I challenge anyone here to toss bones with me.” Lyra announced in a gruff voice, attempting to maintain her charade.

The surrounding crowd quieted, separating so that she and the man with the bones stood alone at the center. He stood a head taller than she, well-tanned with dark wavy hair and dark eyes. Lyra decided that he wasn’t bad looking until his grin revealed two missing teeth.

“It looks like this boy wants to play.” The man waved toward the door. “I

suggest that you run home and play with your toys, boy. You don't want me taking your coin."

The men surrounding Lyra laughed, the ones near the man patting him on the shoulder. "Good one, Pern."

Lyra waved Tiri over, the crowd quieting when Tiri sauntered into the space beside Lyra. Pern's laughter faded, but his smile remained as he stared at Tiri, his gaze sliding over the curves of her body.

"I don't have coin, but instead offer an opportunity." Lyra gestured toward Tiri. "For a bet of two silvers, I'll play you or anyone else for a night with my wife."

Pern's brow furrowed as his gaze shifted to Lyra. "Your wife? This goddess is married to *you*?"

Lyra nodded and grinned. "Yes and her skill in the bedroom exceeds her beauty."

"I'll do it," said a man from the crowd.

"No!" Pern held his fist up, his eyes meeting Tiri's. "I won the last game. The floor is mine. *She* is going to be mine." He pulled two silvers from his pocket and tossed them to the floor. "Let's play."

Tiri bit her lip and glanced toward Lyra, who nodded and waved her to the side of the circle.

"Winner throws first." Lyra said. "However, I have no bones and will need to borrow yours."

Pern's grin took on a sinister light. "You don't even have your own bones." His gaze shifted to Tiri. "You're lucky. I promise you a night you'll never forget."

With confidence, the man tossed the bones up and caught four, choosing his taw among them. He continued to throw well and Lyra had to admit that the man exhibited skill, among the best she had ever played. By the time the game was done, both he and she had successfully cleared fours and each had to throw and collect fours a second time. On the third throw of fours, Pern missed the taw. Lyra did not.

When the crowd quieted, Lyra collected her two silvers and led Tiri out the

door. They emerged to find the street dark, with only the slightest hint of twilight remaining in the sky above them. Lyra grabbed Tiri's arm and led her down the street.

"That was close," Lyra grumbled.

"You were amazing. I didn't know that you could move that fast."

"Yeah, but he was good, too. I actually feared that I might lose for a moment there." Lyra turned the corner, dragging Tiri with her.

"Oh, you did lose. You just don't know it yet"

Lyra stopped cold. Pern and another man blocked the street before them. Pushing Tiri behind her, Lyra slid her dagger from the sheath strapped to her thigh.

"Oh, no, Jinks" Pern elbowed the man beside him, "It appears that the mouse has teeth."

Steel rang in the narrow street as Jinks drew a short sword, Pern a small dagger. The two men slid apart, leaving a stride between them.

"You don't need to die, boy," Pern crooned. "I'll let you live if you drop the dagger, give me my coin, and…" His sinister grin returned. "Let me spend the night with the girl."

"That's quite an offer. After much thought, I believe I must decline." Lyra gave Tiri a wistful smile. "Plus, the girl finds your tiny little dagger quite disappointing. If she were to be poked tonight, she prefer it to be by something more substantial."

Even in the dark alley, the anger on Pern's face was apparent. He growled and charged. Lyra ducked below the swipe of his knife. Spinning forward, she sliced his thigh and ran past him. Jinks stood wide-eyed before her. He sliced his sword toward her mid-section, but Lyra leapt and ran up the wall beside the man, her slippered feet taking two steps on the bricks as she flew over his strike, her body parallel to the street. As she sailed past him, she grabbed Jinks' head and pulled the man onto his back with all her weight, his sword clattering to the cobblestones.

Lyra rolled and scooped up the short sword, rising to face her foes. With his face contorted in pain, Pern limped toward Tiri and grabbed her wrist. Tiri

screamed as he twisted her in front of him and held his knife to her throat. Jinks climbed to his feet, rubbing the back of his head. The man turned toward Lyra and she sneered at him.

“Go!”

With a momentary glance toward Pern, Jinks bolted down the alley, his footsteps fading into the night. Lyra advanced, focused on Tiri.

Pern jerked Tiri back a step. “Stop, or I’ll kill her.”

“If you kill her, I’ll kill you.”

He backed away further, pulling Tiri with him as he limped down the alley.

“Put the knife down, and I’ll let you live,” Lyra growled.

“I’ll cut her,” he warned. “I’ll do it.”

Lyra stopped, “Fine.” She dropped the sword, it clattering noisily as it settled. Pern appeared to relax, lowering his knife slightly. Lyra tossed her dagger upward, and the man watched it spin above Lyra’s head. Focused on the blade as it fell, Lyra’s hand darted out, caught the dagger by the tip, and launched it. The man staggered backward with Lyra’s dagger embedded in his forehead. His knife fell from his grip as he stumbled against the wall, sliding down it until he was lying in a heap, blood tracking down his tilted head.

Tiri ran toward Lyra and hugged her so tight that it was hard for Lyra to breathe.

“It’s alright. He’s dead.”

“I...was so scared,” Tiri sobbed. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“Calm down. It’s over.”

Tiri nodded as she relaxed her arms. Lyra walked over to Pern and knelt beside the man, finding his wide-eyed gaze empty of life. A search through his clothes produced a coin purse, which Lyra pocketed as she stood. Drawn to the starlight reflecting off the blade of Jinks’ sword, Lyra strolled over to it, picked it up, and slid the weapon beneath her belt.

“Let’s go. We’ll find an inn, get a meal, and get some sleep.” Lyra grabbed Tiri’s arm and led her toward the street. “We need to get far from Sol Polis before any of Donte or Berrilon’s men arrive, so we’ll have a long day tomorrow.”

31

"That's not him."

"Who is it?" Tiri asked.

"I don't know. I just know that's not Cal."

Although Lyra knew better than to feel disappointed, she felt it anyway. Upon seeing smoke rising from the chimney at Mystic Manor, unexpected feelings stirred inside her, feelings she had forgotten.

The man locked the gate, shouldered his pack, and walked off toward Sol Polis, the morning breeze ruffling his dark hair. The girls remained still, waiting until the man disappeared over the hill to the west.

"Come on." Lyra rose from behind the trees and circled behind the house, toward the field.

Holding her skirt up, Tiri ran to catch up with Lyra.

"You miss him, don't you?"

Lyra looked down at the long grass while she walked, thinking about Cal.

"Yes."

"We've been sisters for three years, yet you never speak of him."

"I tried…I need to move on…forget about him."

"Do you…love him?"

"I don't know. Can we talk about something else?"

Tiri was silent for a moment before resuming. "I've never been in love. I hardly…know any boys. Being trapped in the palace made it difficult to meet

anyone…and even if I fell in love, it would be for naught.”

Lyra turned toward her. “Why do you say that?”

Tiri shrugged. “As princess, I would be paired with someone for political reasons. Falling for a boy would just lead to pain, since father wouldn’t allow it to lead anywhere else.”

“Tiri. I realize this is difficult, but you’re not a princess any longer. Even if you appeared and tried to reclaim the throne from Donte, who knows you? Who would support you? Even your father’s guards are dead. Donte has won. You must leave that life behind.” Lyra’s expression softened, replaced with a soft smile. “However, you’re now free to love whoever you want. I won’t stop you.”

Tiri suddenly wrapped her arms about Lyra, hugging her fiercely.

“What would I do without you?”

“Most likely, get yourself killed.”

Tiri released Lyra, laughing as she wiped tears from her eyes.

Through the knee-high grass that covered the fields east of Sol Polis, the two girls traveled in silence. Lyra’s feet felt better in the riding boots she had purchased with Pern’s silver. She expected that Tiri felt the same, having traded in her slippers for real shoes.

The sun was almost to its mid-point in the sky above them when they reached the eastern edge of the field…where the Tantarri used to camp.

Appearing abandoned for years, Lyra found the dirt patches now filled with weeds and long grass. Similar to when she had approached Mystic Manor that morning, images came flooding in…memories of dancing around the fire, playing music, listening to Numi tell stories. Her time with the Tantarri had lasted mere months, but the mark they made on Lyra remained.

“There’s a stream down in the trees. We can fill our skins.” Lyra led Tiri past the row of oaks and through the undergrowth that filled the hillside beside the stream. The gurgle of the water rose above the breeze rustling the leaves overhead, one harmonizing with the other in the melody of nature.

Lyra squatted beside the creek and dipped the water skin below its surface, a stream of bubbles emerging as water trickled in. Tiri squatted beside her, intent on filling her skin. She lost her balance and a shriek escaped as her arms swung

about to keep her balance. Too late, Tiri fell into the water, but not before she could grab ahold of Lyra's coat, plunging her face-first into the water beside her.

With a wide-eyed gasp from the cold wave of wetness, Lyra lifted her head above the water and climbed to her feet. Tiri lay below her with only her head and knees above the waterline. Laughter took hold of Tiri, the look on her face shifting from surprise to mirth. Despite the fact that she was now soaking wet, Lyra joined her, both girls laughing heartily for the first time since Tallinor's death.

Even in her new boots, Lyra's feet ached after a long day on the road. The previous day had begun with a slow start in Sol Polis as they waited for shops to open so they could purchase new footwear and supplies required for their journey. Combined with a brief stop to inspect Mystic Manor, and their unfortunate little swim in the creek, half the day was spent by the time they reached the road.

An uneventful night sleeping under the stars in a clearing near the road was followed by a long day of walking. The hours passed like a slow drip, making the ache of Lyra's feet seem that much worse. With the sun low in the western sky and her stomach screaming for something besides trail rations, Lyra forced herself to continue walking.

Surprisingly, Tiri displayed more fortitude than Lyra had anticipated. The girl hardly complained, not even when presented with a breakfast consisting of only a hard roll, a slice of dried beef, and an apple.

Lyra turned toward her sister and felt a stab of pride at the determined look on her face. She was about to say something when she heard a noise from ahead. The rumble of wagon wheels grew louder, accompanied by the slow clopping of hooves.

Panicked, Lyra grabbed Tiri's hand. "We need to hide! Come on!"

Lyra darted toward the brush that bordered the road with Tiri following. They eased between the first barrier of branches and squatted, safely hidden

from view when the wagon emerged.

"…guy was a bit overzealous."

"He was just doing his job, dear," A woman said.

"Still, do we look like a pair of killers? Do I look like a girl?"

She laughed as the wagon rolled past, hugging the man seated beside her. "If you looked like I girl, I wouldn't be married to you. If they really are killers, I hope they catch them."

"They didn't need to destroy our crates while searching. There isn't…"

As the voices faded, Lyra turned toward Tiri and found frightened eyes staring back.

"Their looking for us, aren't they?" Tiri whispered.

Lyra nodded. "Yes. There must be soldiers stationed further up the road, stopping anyone who crosses the border."

"What are we going to do?"

"We have to go another route." Lyra thought of the route she took with the Tantarri, somewhere to the west. Pressing her lips together in determination, she nodded. "I know another way, west of here."

She turned and began walking toward the setting sun, its orange light filtering through the leaves overhead.

"It's growing dark. Can you find it?"

Lyra focused on where she was headed, weaving a path through the brush and tree trunks.

"We'll camp when we get further from the road. At first light, we head west until we find the other route."

"Are we lost?"

Lyra shrugged, unwilling to admit defeat. "To be lost, we'd have to know where we want to go."

Tiri appeared doubtful. "But, do you know where we are?"

"Somewhere north of Kalimar by now…I hope."

Tiri stopped walking. “You hope? What do you mean, you hope?”

Lyra stopped and turned to face her. “Even if this trail isn’t the one I was looking for, it heads north. That means it takes us to Vinacci, or somewhere else that isn’t Kalimar.”

Tiri crossed her arms over her chest, appearing frustrated. “We can’t walk forever. My feet hurt, and I’m hungry.”

“I know.” Lyra sighed. “Even rationing what we’ve got, we’re almost out of food. Worse yet, we’re out of water.”

She turned to face north, trying to decide if the peaks before her appeared familiar. Her thighs already burned after crossing the foothills that morning. It would only get worse with the mountains to their north. For now, the trail followed the valley floor.

“Let’s keep going. Hopefully, we’ll find a stream soon.”

Tiri frowned but remained silent as Lyra led her down the trail. With the sun high overhead, the heat began to wear on the girls, no longer protected by the shade of the surrounding trees. Lyra took her coat off, but felt thankful to have the wide brimmed hat. They crested a small rise and a cacophony arose above the padding of their footsteps and the rustle of the breeze stirring leaves. The downhill slope led them toward the noise, growing louder as they approached a tree that towered over its neighbors.

Dark shiny leaves grew on bushy branches, thick with black birds chirping heartily, the sheer volume drowning out all other sound in the area. Lyra’s gaze shifted past the tree and found a gully just beyond it, dark in the shadows of the surrounding foliage. Without a word, she veered off the trail, toward the tree. When she drew near, the birds burst into flight, a black wave swallowing the sun for a moment. The flock of birds turned and twisted, flying southeast until it faded beyond the hills.

Lyra bit her lip as the birds disappeared behind a hilltop. A flock of black birds was a sign of La Mordai, warning that the goddess would soon greet someone in the halls of death.

“Was that a bad omen?” Tiri asked.

Lyra shrugged. “That depends on what you believe, I guess.”

A new sound arose from beyond the tree, one that lit a spark of hope and brought a smile to Lyra's face. Before she could say a word, Tiri darted past her. Lyra followed, running through the underbrush and down into the gully. Tiri reached the brook first, laughing as she squatted beside it and began to scoop water into her mouth. Lyra knelt beside her at the water's edge and did the same, not caring that the front of her tunic received as much water as her mouth.

With their thirst quenched, the girls refilled their water skins, climbed out of the gully, and rejoined the trail that led north.

A crunch woke Lyra, her eyes flickering open in the darkness. She pushed herself up on an elbow and peered over Tiri's shoulder in the direction of the sound, into the gloomy woods beyond their dormant fire.

Another noise sent her heart racing, the hair on her arms standing on end. She leaned close to Tiri, clamping her hand over the girl's mouth as she whispered.

"Something's out there."

Tiri's body went rigid, but she made no sound. A rustle and a crack followed, the sound closer than before. Lyra lifted the blanket off her and Tiri, setting it aside as she tugged on Tiri's arm, indicating that she rise.

As both girls stood, Lyra spotted movement…a dark shape emerging from the trees. Tiri gasped and Lyra's sense of alarm solidified to ice-cold fear when a pair of glowing red eyes appeared.

Lyra pulled Tiri backward, turning her toward the old oak they had camped beneath.

"Climb up! Now!"

Without a word, Tiri began to climb the tree. Her foot slipped and Lyra scrambled to help her sister, hoisting the dangling foot as Tiri pulled herself up. A rumbling growl drew Lyra's attention. She turned to find one of Cal's gigantic dogs glaring at her from across the camp, perhaps twenty feet away.

With a loud, angry bark, the dog leapt toward Lyra. She dove and rolled,

rising to her feet as the dog scrambled after her. It launched itself at her and Lyra dove again, rolling into their travel pack. As the dog turned and collected itself for another attack, Lyra hastily pulled the short sword from the pack. Her pulse pounded in her ears as she scrambled to her feet and urgently removed the towel wrapped about the blade.

"Lyra!" Tiri screamed.

The beast charged. Lyra pointed the sword toward it as she retreated, tripping when her heel clipped the rocks surrounding the fire pit. She stumbled as the dog leapt toward her, its massive jaw open wide and its red eyes glowing with madness. The dog struck her and she slammed to the ground, hitting her head as everything fell to blackness.

Pain. Lyra felt pain and wondered, *Am I supposed to feel pain if I'm dead?* Breathing was difficult, almost impossible. Something jutted into her stomach, causing more pain. Her head hurt, thumping with the beat of her pulse. *A pulse. I'm alive. I'm alive and it smells like dog.*

Lyra opened her eyes to a face full of black hair, nasty and smelly. Breathing was difficult with the weight of the dog on her, even worse with the pain of whatever was digging into her stomach. She heard Tiri crying from somewhere nearby.

"Help," she croaked, lacking the air Lyra needed to shout.

Hearing no response, she gathered as much air as she could muster, her chest aching with the weight on it.

"Help," Lyra's voice squeaked.

"Lyra?" Tiri's voice shifted to alarm. "I'm coming!"

Four painful breaths later, Lyra felt the weight on her shift. Tiri grunted, and the dead dog shifted again. Pressure from object digging into Lyra's gut eased as some of the weight shifted off her, allowing her to breathe more deeply.

Now able to move her left arm, Lyra pushed on the dog's body, sliding herself out from beneath it as Tiri grunted and heaved, trying to move the dog in

the other direction. When half of Lyra was clear, Tiri stopped pushing on the dog and instead began pulling her from beneath it. With Lyra finally free and clear, Tiri collapsed and hugged her sister as both girls gathered their breath.

“It’s alright,” Lyra took a breath. “I’m alright.”

Tiri sat up. “I was so scared. I thought you were dead.”

Lyra propped herself up on her elbows, wincing as the world tilted. Her head hurt.

“Apparently, I’m not that easy to kill,” she groaned. “But my entire body hurts if that counts for anything.”

“What happened?” Tiri asked.

Lyra found the tip of her short sword poking from the dog’s back.

“I got lucky.”

Groaning as she rose to her feet, Lyra said a silent prayer to Yanetta in appreciation of the luck given. She lifted her shirt and felt her sore stomach, tender but intact. A glance toward the sky revealed a faint glow to the east, a precursor to the impending dawn.

“The sun will be up soon.” Lyra drew the dagger strapped to her leg. “Gather some wood for a fire.”

“Why? Aren’t we leaving?”

“I thought you might like a hot meal.” Lyra grinned as she knelt beside the dead beast. “Have you ever eaten giant, psychotic dog before? I hear it’s quite the delicacy.”

With heavy legs, Lyra and Tiri climbed the saddle that connected two mountains. Despite their relatively low elevation compared to the peaks surrounding them, Lyra felt like they had been going uphill forever. In the lead, she crested the ridgeline first, pausing to gaze at the view as Tiri caught up to her.

To the north and to the west, an open plain spread out to the distant horizon. The wind flowing across the expansive field sent ripples across the green ocean of grass, making it appear alive. The mountain range they stood on encircled the

plain, containing it from the east and south edges, while another range, barely visible through the haze, stood to the distant northwest.

“It’s beautiful,” Tiri remarked. “Do you know where we are?”

Lyra shook her head. “I don’t have the slightest idea.”

She spotted dark shapes in the distance, near the eastern boundary of the grassy fields.

Pointing, Lyra said, “I think those are cows.”

Tiri peered in the direction indicated and shrugged. “Maybe. It’s hard to tell.”

“Come on.” Lyra began navigating the downslope. “When we get closer, we’ll know. If they belong to someone, people will be nearby. If they’re wild, we’ll have something good to eat tonight.”

Unbidden, thoughts of eating the dog meat resurfaced. Lyra resisted the urge to gag. She reminded herself that they were in survival mode. Still, she found herself praying that they could discard the leftover meat in favor of a side of beef…or anything else.

By the time they reached the edge of the plain, the sun was nearly at its apex. It was warmer on the valley floor, in the open and without any shade. Lyra removed her cloak and stuffed it into the pack in exchange for the sword. She then led Tiri into the grass, the tall shoots coming to Lyra’s chin. Swinging the sword side-to-side, Lyra cut a path toward their destination.

Despite the wide-brimmed hat she wore, sweat poured down Lyra’s face, stinging her eyes. After an hour of cutting a path through the grass, she found herself drenched and exhausted. A sense of relief arose when a black cow appeared less than two hundred feet away.

Suddenly, a man with a shaved head and a black leather vest rose up from the grass, just a handful of strides before them. Other warriors appeared to her left and right, all with tanned scalps, shorn save a single black topknot that hung down the back. In unison, they lifted spears and aimed the barbed tips toward Lyra and Tiri.

“Stop!” the man before her commanded. “What are you doing on our land?”

Lyra glanced at Tiri and found her sister’s eyes flicking about in fear. “We mean no harm. We didn’t know it was your land…in fact we don’t even know

where we are.”

“You will come with us.”

The man turned and began walking north. The others holding the spears gathered behind the girls, the tips drawing dangerously close when they hesitated. Finally, Lyra grabbed Tiri’s arm and followed the man.

“Where are you taking us?”

“We take you to the clan leader. He will decide if you live… or if you die.”

32

As they passed the first herd of cattle, two warriors peeled off from the others, leaving Lyra and Tiri with an escort of three. Lyra considered fighting the men, but she had never trained against a spear and felt unsure of the outcome.

After another half-hour of walking, they passed a second herd of cattle. Those tending the cattle raised their fists, holding them high as the group walked past. The man leading the group held his fist high in some sort of greeting.

Over the next four hours, they journeyed north across the never-ending fields. During that time, they passed three more herds of cattle, each with an escort of five men…all sporting a topknot surrounded by a smooth, tanned scalp.

The man turned, and Lyra realized that they were on a trail, the grass trampled in a path three strides wide, wagon wheel ruts marking the edges. They continued down the path for a while before the ground began to slope downward. A low area suddenly became apparent, with more than a dozen brightly colored wagons in a circle at the bottom of the grass-covered bowl. A man with long dark hair emerged from the wagons and a wave of joy washed over Lyra. She burst into a run, darting past warrior in the lead.

“Gar!” she cried, her hat falling off just before she reached him.

“Tali?”

He grunted as she slammed into him, wrapping her arms about him tightly. Her eyes closed in a moment of relief and joy as he returned her embrace. When

his arms relaxed, she let hers fall away and stepped back, drying her tears.

“What are you doing here?” He looked her up and down. “And why are you dressed like that?”

“Something happened, and we had to flee Kalimar.” She looked down at herself. “I wore this to disguise myself.”

Gar’s gaze shifted past her, locking onto Tiri. His mouth fell open and something sparked within his gaze.

“Who is this vision that accompanies you?”

Lyra turned toward Tiri, waving her forward. “This is Tiri…my sister.”

Gar’s gaze flicked to Lyra and back to Tiri as she approached. “Sister?”

“Well, not technically. I was…sort of adopted by her father.”

Gar moved forward to meet Tiri, taking her hand and bending to kiss it. He looked up at her with his dark eyes, his smile showing white teeth amidst the dark stubble of his unshaven face.

“Well met, my dear. You truly grace us with your beauty.”

Lyra had seen others react in a similar manner to Tiri’s appearance, but few had Gar’s smooth nature and none rivaled his handsome looks. She felt a stab of jealousy for her sister, who actually blushed at the compliment.

“Thank you, kind sir.” Tiri smiled, a flower blossoming to Gar’s sunlight.

Gar called out, “You can put the spears away. These two ladies are our honored guests.”

Holding out an elbow to Tiri, she took it, and he led her toward the wagons. Lyra frowned and tried to swallow her envy, but found the taste quite bitter.

As they entered the camp, other familiar faces appeared, most with shaved heads save for a single tail, banded at the scalp and hanging down the back of their head. Most were dressed in a black leather vest and breaches, even the women.

“Hello, Flori.” Lyra gave the girl a smile.

“Tali?” Flori’s eyes brightened, and her arms wrapped about Lyra.

Surprised, Lyra silently hugged the girl back. The moment they released their embrace, Midurri slipped in and hugged Lyra.

“I’m happy to see you, Tali.”

“It’s good to see you as well.” Lyra bit her lip. “I’m sorry if this sounds rude…but, why are your heads shaved?”

Gar turned toward her and nodded. “Yes. We have much to catch up on.” He turned toward the other girls. “Flori. Midurri. Will you please help Tali and Tiri get cleaned up? Also, find them some suitable clothing.” Gar released Tiri’s arm and gave her a bow. “I will meet you ladies beside the fire.” He turned toward Lyra. “We will feast to celebrate Tali’s return, and I will explain what became of the Tantari since our last meeting.”

Tiri sat on the edge of the bed, pulling tall boots onto legs bare below the leather shorts she had been provided. Lyra did the same and thanked the girls helping them. Flori and Midurri exited the wagon, leaving Lyra and Tiri alone. The moment the door closed, Tiri turned toward Lyra.

“Why do they call you Tali?”

Lyra pulled the laces on her vest tight, ensuring no gap remained between the black leather panels before tying them together. “I met these people while I was fleeing Vingarri, focused on evading my father’s murderers. At the time, using a different name seemed a good idea.” She bit her lip as she finished tying the laces. “Once you’re deep into a lie like that, it becomes difficult to tell the truth. I had earned their trust and was in fear of losing it.”

Tiri stared at Lyra for a moment and then nodded. “Very well.” She smiled. “Tali.”

Lyra smiled in return. “Thank you.” She nodded. “Are you ready?”

Tiri nodded and Lyra opened the door, emerging from the wagon to find flickering firelight bathing the camp in orange. Stars dotted the night sky above, like a black canvas with holes punched in it.

Dozens of people milled about the area, many sitting upon up-ended crates or barrels. A full side of beef strung on a spit sizzled over the flames, the aroma causing Lyra’s mouth to water. A woman spread a bucket of potatoes and squash across a metal grate near the beef, the flames causing the vegetables to sizzle in

mere seconds.

Squeals and a burst of laughter drew Lyra's attention to a group of children, kneeling in a circle. She judged their ages to range from four to twelve summers, and every child had a full head of hair. Two of the children stood in the middle, a girl and a boy playing a game of knucklebones. The girl tossed her taw upward, scooped up all four bones in a swipe, and caught the taw. Laughter and cheers erupted again. Some of the children stood to congratulate the winner, patting her on the back. The girl turned toward the fire, and Lyra realized that it was Gar's sister, Dari. Now a full head taller than when Lyra last saw her, the girl's expression carried a weight that her younger self lacked.

Gar spoke with a group of Tantarri, the warriors nodding and running off into the night as he approached Lyra and Tiri.

"Hello, Tali, Tiri." He smiled, his gaze lingering on Tiri. "You two look wonderful."

Lyra looked down at herself, feeling self-conscious at the way the vest exposed her upper chest. Although the top revealed less skin than some dresses she had worn, the snug fit caused a bulge that made the region more noticeable. When combined with form-fitting leather shorts and tall boots that left her thighs bare – save for the dagger strapped there – she couldn't decide if she looked silly, intimidating, or overtly sexy. Perhaps all three.

Her gaze flicked toward Tiri, dressed in a similar manner but with a singular result. Despite her sweet, innocent nature, the girl oozed sex appeal. Lyra worried that Tiri's vest might be unable to contain contents that threatened to spill over at any moment. Lyra's concern grew to alarm when the girl bowed to Gar.

"Thank you for your kindness, Sir Gar," Tiri said with a smile.

Two Tantarri men moved to the ends of the spit, grunting as they lifted the side of beef free and carried it away. The woman tending the vegetables gave them a turn, stirring them using a giant spoon with a handle as long as Lyra's arm.

"Please, sit." Gar gestured toward nearby crates, arranged in a rough circle. "While we await dinner, I'll tell you our tale. After we're done, I'd love to hear

your story.” His gaze shifted to Lyra. “I’ve often wondered what became of you, Tali.” The man’s eyes refocused on Tiri. “And I’m curious as to what could possibly force a beauty like you to flee Kalimar.”

Tiri blushed again and Lyra snorted.

“Now, where do I begin?” Gar stared into the flames, the firelight reflecting in his dark eyes. He turned toward Lyra and she saw an intensity in those eyes. “As you know, the Ministry soldiers captured the Tantarri men with the intent of making us fight in their army. Thankfully, you and your friend saved us from that fate, freeing us before things had gone too far.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Gar,” Lyra said. “They were using magic to change the soldiers into giant beasts.” She shivered as she remembered their terrifying howls. “I shudder to think that they had planned to force you through the same transformation.”

“Well, then. I must thank you, again.” He nodded and took a slow breath. “When the other men and I were freed, we returned to the clan and headed north. However, we found ourselves without a leader after Eddrick’s death. Seeing that the clan required guidance and strength, I volunteered my name among those who might become the new Head Clansman. I knew my chances were slim, because I lack the wisdom of the older men, but felt it was my duty to demonstrate the willingness. Ironically, I was awarded the responsibility when mine was the only name submitted.

“In the past, the clan had traveled the same route year after year, spending winters in the fields outside of Sol Polis and summers in pastures north of Vinhagus. Rather than continue this tradition, I chose to lead the clan in a new direction, in hope of avoiding other travelers, especially anyone who was part of the Ministry. We discovered a rarely used trail that took us into the mountains, away from the coastal cities. Eventually, that trail disappeared, forcing us to cut our own path, but I refused to relent. Let me tell you, it is not easy getting wagons through wooded mountains. A full six weeks passed before we crested the final saddle and looked down upon the plains.”

“We made camp at the edge of the fields and woke the next morning to the sound of thunder. I emerged from my wagon, but found not one cloud in the sky.

The noise grew louder and I turned toward it, squinting in the light of the morning sun. My heart stopped when a white stallion crested a nearby hill and galloped past the camp, leading a herd of wild horses. Faster than anything we had ever seen, these majestic creatures were surely gods themselves. They sped across the fields as the entire Tantarri clan watched in awe. The moment the last horse faded from view, I declared that this was our new home, and that I would one day ride that white stallion."

Gar stood, holding his arms out wide. "These plains go on for miles and miles, an endless supply of food for our cattle." He gestured toward the darkness, "Just north of here, you'll find a creek that leads to a river that is always flowing. Our spring crops are planted along that creek; vegetables and grains to sustain us so that we need not call upon Outlanders ever again."

"Here, we have everything we need." He sat down again, staring into the fire. "But we also wanted to ensure that what happened would never happen again."

"Since the world is not as peace-loving as we wish, we now acknowledge that we must defend ourselves. Every healthy Tantarri adult is now a trained warrior. These Tantarri cut their own spears, train their bodies, and practice their weapons every day. Even the women. All adult warriors now shave their heads, but for a single topknot and tail that they maintain as a way to honor the horse gods who live here. No enemy will know if they face male or female Tantarri. By contrast, non-fighters grow their hair long as a woman might in your society, making them appear less fierce and less likely to draw enemy attention. As clan leader, I keep my hair long to separate myself from the warriors, a clear symbol to them when in the field, regardless of distance."

Lyra glanced at Tiri and found her focused on Gar, listening intently as the man spoke.

"These horses you speak of – have you ever captured one?"

Gar scoffed. "You do not capture such amazing creatures, Tiri. You must instead give yourself to them."

"Fine. So have you been able to ride one?"

He sighed. "No. I have tried many times, but no horse will allow one of us

within twenty paces.”

Lyra frowned as she imagined these swift horses, considering how one might befriend them.

“So, you live out here in these fields?” Tiri asked.

“Yes. We move the herds about from time to time, but the main camp is here during the cooler months.” He pointed west. “We will soon move to the upper plains for the summer, but we must complete our harvest first.”

Tiri leaned toward Gar, concern reflected in her eyes. “It must be difficult to survive out here with no businesses to buy from, no government to support you.”

“You don’t understand.” He shook his head. “Those things you describe are part of the problem. Rather than embracing the Spirit of Nature…embracing freedom…those things contain you, bind you to society.” He smiled. “The Tantarri will never again be bound in such a way.”

Lyra considered his words, understanding what he meant, but unable to decide if she felt the same.

“Ah, dinner appears ready.” Gar stood and turned toward the gathering crowd, now surpassing forty people. “Fellow Tantarri.” Loud and firm, his voice echoed throughout the camp. “As we sometimes do, we found a stray girl three years back and brought her into the clan, making her one of us. A tragic series of events stole that girl from the clan, events that included the murder of three Tantarri, their souls rejoining those of our ancestors.”

The crowd fell silent, the clearing still but for the crackle of flame and whisper of the breeze.

“Miraculously, that girl has now returned to the family, guided back to our wagons by the spirits themselves. Tonight, we celebrate the return of Tali, adopted daughter of the Tantarri.”

Everyone cheered, many yelling her name.

“Eat well. Afterward, we dance as our ancestors did so long ago.”

Those with shaved heads gathered to sit around the fire as the others, often children or the elderly, brought plates filled with slabs of beef, potatoes, squash, and flatbread. Lyra grinned as Dari ran to her, holding a plate of food with an eager grin.

“I have your dinner, Tali.” The girl’s eyes lit up as she spoke. “I’m so happy that you’re back.”

Lyra accepted the plate with one hand while wrapping the other arm around Dari, squeezing her tight. “I’m happy to be back, Dari.” She released her and smiled at the girl. “My, you’ve grown since I last saw you.”

“I’m ten summers now.” Dari stood tall and proud. “Gar says that I can start practicing with the spear this summer. I plan to be a warrior.”

“I’m sure you’ll be a fierce warrior, too.”

Dari grinned. “Thanks, Tali.” She then turned and ran to grab another plate of food.

Lyra found herself ravenous, not thinking about anything else until the plate was empty. She sat back and turned toward Tiri and Gar, Tiri reciting the story of Donte’s betrayal and the subsequent flight. Their plates remained half-full.

Seeing Gar again brought back memories, reminding Lyra of their bittersweet goodbye. When presented with two paths, she had chosen to help Cal put an end to *The Hand*’s plan rather than leave with Gar. Regardless of the situation, Gar likely took her decision personally. Even now, she felt an invisible wedge between them, forever changing their relationship.

Lyra always knew that Gar would move on after that rejection, but the reality stung more than expected. She sighed at the way Gar looked at Tiri, a gleam in his eyes as he laughed at something she whispered.

A tap on the shoulder caused Lyra to turn back toward the fire, finding a man with a shaved head standing there. He extended his arm, holding a stringed instrument toward her.

“You play and sing so wonderfully, Tali.” Hentar bowed his head. “I would be honored if you took my spot tonight and played with the others.”

Lyra felt excitement stir inside at the thought of playing. “I’d love to, Hentar. Thank you so much for asking.”

She grasped the instrument gently, tilting it up as she moved it into position. A quarter-circle around the fire pit, two men were preparing makeshift drums. She stood and circled toward them, receiving smiles in greeting.

“Let’s play something fun.” Lyra grinned as the two men nodded.

She patted the guitar's body to a beat. The drummers matched the rhythm, one with a deep bass tone and the other with a metallic clang. Lyra strummed the strings, her fingers dancing along the frets on the neck, and she began to sing.

In moments, the Tantarri were dancing in pairs around the fire. The children again formed a circle, taking turns dancing at the heart as the others clapped to the music. Gar took Tiri's hand and found an open space, twirling her to the music as she laughed. Lyra ignored it, focusing on the music, urging it to mend her damaged heart.

The song ended and she began another, again and again without pause, playing until the fire had fizzled to glowing coals. Lyra's fingers felt raw and her throat felt parched when she allowed the music to stop. She glanced around and found that half of the Tantarri had retired for the evening, including the children. However, Gar remained with Tiri, him talking and her laughing at something he said. Seeing what was happening, a pang of jealousy twisted within Lyra, the feeling passing in a breath.

Expecting that Tiri and Gar would carry on late into the night, she decided to get a good night's sleep. She found Hentar and handed the man his guitar, thanking him before she headed toward Gar's wagon, very much looking forward to sleeping anywhere but on the ground.

A scream woke Lyra. She lifted her head and turned toward the door, causing her hammock to swing.

"What was that?" Tiri asked from the hammock beside her.

Gar stood and pulled a tunic over his head as he moved toward the door. "That was Elden Duratti."

The door opened, and Gar slipped out into the night.

"Who?" Tiri asked.

"He used to be a ministry healer." Lyra twisted and looked down at Dari. "Should we get up and help?"

"Don't worry about it," Dari mumbled from the bed below. "He does this

almost every night.”

“Bad dreams?” Tiri suggested.

“I guess.” Dari sounded tired. “He calls them something else. Profetsi or something.”

“Prophecy?” Lyra offered.

“Yeah. He says something bad is going to happen a long time from now.”

“What should we do?”

“There’s nothing you *can* do. Go back to sleep. Gar will be back soon anyway.”

Lyra stared at the doorway, recalling a prophetic vision waking Cal in the middle of the night. That vision enabled him to prevent *The Hand* from taking over the world with their twisted army.

She wondered what future events Elden might be witnessing…and if there was anything she could do to help.

33

Lyra gritted her teeth and attacked, dipping as she spun about with one hand raised to block Flori's spear as the other swept low, her wooden short sword slicing in a broad arc. A loud *clack* sounded as the spear struck Lyra's wooden dagger. Her spin continued without resistance when Flori leapt over the strike aimed for her legs. Before the other girl could strike, Lyra spun away, standing upright three strides from her opponent.

Flori grinned. "Did you really think that move would work on me again?"

"It's been a few days," Lyra shrugged. "I figured it was worth a try again."

"Try this."

Lunging forward, Flori jabbed the blunted spear tip at Lyra, who twisted as she knocked it aside with her dagger. When Lyra chopped down at Flori with her sword, the other girl flicked the butt end of her spear up to block it. *Clack*. Flori raised the spear and flicked one end toward Lyra's head, but she ducked beneath the blow and spun away.

The two girls locked gazes, one measuring the other as they had done every morning for the past week. Lyra expected that Flori would next attempt a jab. She focused on the girl's spear, readying herself to try something new. Flori's spear lashed out toward Lyra's midsection, but Lyra spun toward her, the blunted spearhead sliding across her back. Lyra then locked her dagger arm around the spear and rammed her sword at Flori, knowing that it would connect unless the other girl released her spear. The shock of impact drove Flori backward as the

end of the wooden sword slammed into midriff, the girl's ribs breaking with an audible crack. An intense wince crossed Flori's face and she fell to one knee, holding her injured side as she struggled to breathe.

The crowd that had gathered clapped as Elden stood and crossed the dueling circle to kneel beside Flori.

"It sounded like you've some broken ribs," he said as he put his hand on her bare arm. "I'll have you fixed in a moment."

He closed his eyes and all fell still. A shiver shook Flori's body, as if overtaken by a sudden chill. Her eyes bulged and her mouth hung open for a long moment before she gasped for air, reclaiming breaths she had been denied since the moment of the injury. Elden patted her back and stood.

"Thank you, Elden Duratti."

"You're welcome, Flori." He squeezed her shoulder and departed from the circle, retreating to his wagon.

Gar approached with Tiri at his side, which was now a common sight.

"Wonderful match, Flori," Gar noted. "You're getting better against Tali's two-handed fighting style."

Flori bowed toward Gar. "Thank you. It *has* been good practice. I believe we should have sword fighters among the Tantarri, if nothing more than to offer practice against such weapons."

Gar nodded. "I agree. I will have Shrepp forge a few swords and get Luyis and Berrin to carve more practice weapons like Tali's once we've settled into camp on the plateau."

Flori gave Gar another bow before turning to walk away.

"Until seeing you this week, I never realized that you're such a fierce fighter…um…Tali." Tiri bit her lip, glancing toward Gar. "It appears that the mornings you spent with Elan have been effective."

Lyra shrugged, glancing at the wooden weapons in her hands. "Using these as weapons isn't the same as a blade, but at least I don't have to worry about cutting anything off myself or my opponent."

Gar nodded. "Yes. Elden Duratti tells us that he cannot heal a dismembered appendage, but he can heal bruises and broken bones. This is why we only

practice with blunt weapons made of wood.”

Lyra glanced toward the former Ministry healer, now surrounded by children, who listened intently as the man spoke to them. She decided that Elden had settled in well with the Tantarri and expected that the clan was thankful to have his abilities at their disposal.

“Tali, Tiri,” Gar put a hand on each of their shoulders, “now that the duel is finished, would you two mind helping Dari pack the wagon? The herds are already miles west of here, and we must leave soon if we are to catch them by nightfall.”

“Of course, Gar.” Tiri replied. “We are happy to help.”

“I forgot how slow the Tantarri travel,” Lyra grumbled.

Gar laughed. “Cattle pace us. Cattle move slowly. We actually prefer it that way.” His head bobbed side to side with the slow sway of the wagon, matching the lumbering motion of the oxen pulling it. “If they do move quickly, something has frightened them, and you had best not get in their way.”

Tiri leaned forward from her seat beside Gar, opposite from Lyra. “I don’t mind at all. It gives me more time to admire the beauty surrounding us.”

Lyra’s gaze scanned their surroundings, finding a similar view that spanned many miles in any direction. The wind caused the sea of grass to dance, sending rippling waves across it from west to east and creating the illusion that the wagon was moving far faster than reality. Tall cliffs towered over a lake to the north, with only a thin slice of the water visible from her angle. To the south, a ridgeline with cliff walls facing the plains matched the cliff walls to the north, coming together like a funnel, with only a narrow gap open in the distant west. Gar pointed toward the opening.

“Through that gap, the ground rises to the upper plateau…our destination.”

“How far is it?” Tiri asked.

He shrugged. “Perhaps twenty-five miles.”

“Ugh,” Lyra groaned. “We’ve been riding on this wagon for four days

already. Now, you tell me we have two more days of sitting on this stupid wooden seat?”

Gar snorted. “You can get off and walk if you wish.”

Lyra’s brow furrowed as she considered his words. A moment later, she leapt off to land in the grass, bent and trampled from the passing herd of cattle.

Gar chuckled, “Suit yourself.”

“Oh, I’m happy to walk. My feet have many miles in them before they’re sore.” Lyra rubbed her backside. “I can’t say the same for my rear.”

Tiri giggled, the twinkle of her voice mixing with Gar’s hearty laugher.

If traveling across the flat plains was slow, the slog up the incline to the upper plateau was torturous. Due to the weight of the wagons and the steepness of the incline, the Tantarri had to unload supplies and carry them up by hand, while the oxen pulled the unladen wagons uphill in fits and grunts. Although the total incline was merely a mile in length, the process consumed an entire afternoon. By the time the wagons were on level ground, settled into a circle, and the goods had been carried into camp, the sun was edging below the tall snow-capped spires to the west.

The area in the center of the wagons had been cleared of grass, leaving only sporadic shoots showing among the dark dirt. At the core of the clearing was a fire pit, encircled by rocks the size of a man’s head. While some members of the clan prepared the wagons for their stay, others prepared dinner for the evening. Before they could be assigned a task, Lyra took Tiri by the elbow and snuck out of camp.

“What are you doing?” Tiri asked.

“While I appreciate the Tantarri for taking us in, the clan does this every year without our help.” Lyra glanced back at the camp, finding only the wagon tops and people’s heads visible above the wavering grass. “It seems a good opportunity for a bit of privacy and a chance to explore a bit.”

Tiri shrugged. “I guess.”

Lyra looked around as she walked, gazing at their new surroundings. Similar to the plains below, they stood among an immense field of grass, the tips of which stood just below Lyra's line of vision. To the north, a line of foothills arose, growing taller as her gaze shifted west. There, she found a wall of incredibly tall peaks, capped by white. She turned southward and gazed at the distant line of foothills that lay beyond a closer series of ridges, the nearest of which presented a cliffside that towered above them a mile to the southeast.

Away from the others, Lyra finally approached a subject that she had, until now, avoided.

"How do you feel about Gar?"

"What? Gar?" Tiri's eyes flicked down, and then back toward Lyra. "I guess he's thoughtful…and quite charming."

"And handsome," Lyra added.

"Yes, that too."

Lyra stopped walking and faced Tiri. "Come on, Tiri. Admit that you like him."

"Of course I like him."

Lyra sighed. "You know what I mean. You have feelings for him, and you know it. Whenever I turn around, you are with him or staring at him, or both."

Tiri's gaze shifted toward her feet. "Yes, he makes me feel…special. And his eyes, I could look into those eyes all day."

"Tiri, I love you, but you don't have any experience in this area. While I lived at the castle, I never saw you with a boy…because there were no boys around. You've never even been friends with a boy before, have you?" Lyra did not want to mention Donte.

"No." Tiri shook her head. "I do like him, but I don't know what to do."

Lyra took Tiri's hand. "You need to be more confident. You're beautiful and smart…and don't worry about him not feeling the same way toward you. I'm surprised he hasn't thrown himself at you yet. He has little attention for me or anyone else when you're around. Trust me; he is falling for you in a big way."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes. Now, don't doubt yourself. Remember that you were a princess, so be

sure he treats you like one. You can't let him have all of the power."

"If you say so."

"As long as you have that straight, I suggest that you kiss him. That will set things into motion. Trust me on that one, too."

Tiri smiled, her cheeks growing red. "Kissing him would be nice."

"Just go on and do…"

The ground shook, and Lyra looked down at it in confusion. A rumble arose above the swishing of the grass, growing louder. She turned toward the noise as a white horse crested a rise to the north. Moving faster than Lyra had thought possible, the stallion sped toward her, trailed by dozens of horses varying in color and pattern.

"Run!" She grabbed Tiri's arm and ran toward camp, trying not to fall as she stumbled through the tall grass.

As the rumble increased in intensity, Lyra felt it thumping in her chest, matching the beat of her racing heart. The lead stallion blasted past them, passing through the spot where they had been standing a moment earlier. Not stopping, the two girls continued running, narrowly avoiding the stampeding horses as they trampled a broad swath through the long grass.

When the intense noise began to fade, indicating that the herd had passed them, Lyra slowed to a stop, breathing heavily as Tiri settled beside her. Her gaze followed the herd as it continued south, growing ever more distant until the rumble faded to the swishing of grass, swaying to the rhythm of the cool mountain breeze.

"You two were lucky. Surely, the horse gods must favor you to spare you like that," Gar said.

Lyra snorted. "I don't know about any horse gods, but we were lucky alright. It was a close thing, nearly being trampled by that herd."

She took another bite of the jackaroo leg, gnawing on the chewy meat until it was ground enough to swallow.

“They were beautiful, Gar. When you first described them, I didn’t understand what you meant.” Tiri stared into the fire. “The only horses I had seen were the big ones that used to pull my father’s carriage. These, however… these were lithe, majestic creatures, swift and stunning.”

“We want to help you, Gar,” Lyra said.

“Help me?”

“Not you. The Tantarri.” Lyra glanced at Tiri, who nodded. “We want to help you track them…earn their trust…ride them.”

His eyes narrowed as he stared at Lyra, his expression visibly softening when they shifted to Tiri. “Maybe you’re right. We’ve tried everything we can think of, but you two did not grow up as one of us. Perhaps you can offer a new approach.”

Lyra smiled, mirroring Tiri. “Good. Can we start in the morning?”

Gar stared at Lyra for a moment before nodding. “Yes. I have a few things to do at daybreak, but we can leave shortly after that.”

Lyra’s grin widened. She had gotten him to commit. Now, she needed to figure out a plan.

34

Lyra looked to her left, finding six Tantarri warriors walking through the tall grass. A glance to the right revealed Tiri, Gar, and four more warriors. The group had been walking south for more than an hour, with everyone scanning the horizon in hope of locating the infamous herd of wild horses.

A distant rumble caused Lyra to glance toward the sky, dark with rolling clouds, as she tried to determine if the sound was from a stampede or the storm on the horizon.

“It looks like rain is coming,” she said, loud enough for Gar to hear. “Maybe we should turn back?”

The sky to the west roared with thunder and a flash of lightning arced to the ground, a bright streak against the dark background behind it. The rumble echoed throughout the plain. Oddly, the rumble grew louder until the horses suddenly emerged from a low area to the southwest.

“Here they come,” Gar shouted. “They’re heading toward a canyon again.”

The Tantarri broke into a sprint, racing toward a canyon mouth to the east, matching the angle of the herd but at a far slower pace. Startled, Lyra and Tiri ran after them, trailing the group. A glance to the south showed the horses passing the Tantarri with ease. In moments, the white stallion raced into a narrow canyon. Seconds after the last horse vanished from sight, the lead Tantarri warriors reached the gap.

Lyra passed Tiri and two of the slower Tantarri, trying to keep up with Gar

and the others at the fore. Loose sand and rock covered the canyon floor, forcing her to watch her footing as she weaved through the scattered scrub that dotted the ground. She glanced up at tall canyon walls that drew closer and closer together as she ran further into the canyon.

The men in front of Lyra faded from view as they rounded bends in the ravine, only to reappear at the next straightaway. She felt wet drops hit her arm, her head, her shoulder. Suddenly, the sky opened up and it began to pour. The rain fell so heavily that Lyra's vision was obscured beyond fifty feet. She found herself slowing, the heavy rain beating the last of her energy away. The Tantarri warriors at the lead reached a higher spot, a rocky rise in the canyon floor, and stopped. Gar and the others gathered into a cluster, gasping for air as Lyra settled beside them.

"We've lost their trail," Wuli, one of the Tantarri warriors stated. "The rain is going to make it difficult to track them."

Frustration was apparent on Gar's face. "We're so close."

Lyra looked down at her feet, seeing a rivulet of water running past them, down the rocky rise. She turned toward the canyon walls and found water pouring down them, gathering at the bottom.

"This canyon will be dangerous in the rain," Wuli warned. "It could flood in moments."

Tiri and the last three Tantarri slowed to join the group, panting from the exertion.

Gar frowned and looked down at the water flowing past, steadily gaining in volume. "You're right. We need to get out or find higher ground, fast."

Lyra looked up at the canyon wall to the north, finding it a sheer rise of hundreds of feet and no visible way up. She spun about to look at the other side and discovered what appeared to be a narrow ledge about twenty feet up a moderate incline.

Thunder shook the canyon and lightning crashed, sending a bright flash crackling across the sky. The rivulet on the canyon floor became a swift-flowing creek.

"I see a ledge up there," Lyra pointed toward it. "It should be a safe spot to

wait out the storm.”

Gar’s gaze followed and he nodded. “Let’s try it.”

Lyra scrambled up the hillside, her foot slipping twice as she sought higher ground. When she reached the ledge, she found it wider than expected. It continued upward, heading deeper into the canyon. She walked a few steps and turned to find Gar helping Tiri to the ledge. Half of the Tantarri huddled beside him while the others closely trailed Tiri.

Without a word, Lyra continued upward, taking the ledge around a bend, where it became much wider, providing enough space for three men to walk shoulder-to-shoulder safely. She wiped rain from her eyes and squinted at the ledge ahead, finding that it ran as far as she could see, continuously going upward.

“Where are you going, Tali?” Gar called to her.

Lyra turned around to face the others. “This ledge continues for a while and is wide enough to be safe. I want to see where it leads.”

Gar glanced at Tiri, who nodded. He then turned and spoke with the others. While they discussed the situation, Lyra looked down at the canyon floor and found that it had become a river. Judging by the ferocious current, she knew that they had made the right choice to find higher ground. The deluge at the front of the storm had eased to a steady rain, which was more than enough to continue feeding the newly formed river.

“Wuli, Tiri, and I will join you while the others remain here,” Gar said as he walked toward Lyra. “We’ll see where this leads, but only if you promise to turn back should it become dangerous.”

“Of course.” Lyra nodded and Tiri smiled.

Leading the small group, Lyra walked up the ledge while she kept one hand on the cliff wall beside her. They reached a level spot and rounded another bend, only to discover that the ledge continued upward as far as they could see.

The trail leveled and widened as a rocky wall rose on the previously open side, tall enough to obscure the opposing canyon wall. Lyra slowed to a stop as she stared into the mouth of a cave, three times her height and just as wide. Tiri and the two men stopped beside her, staring at the cave with furrowed brows.

“Come,” Gar said as he marched into the opening.

When they stepped inside, Lyra wiped her forehead and eyes dry, happy to be out of the rain. The cave was dark before them, with the slightest bit of light coming from ahead. Wuli reached into his pack and pulled out a torch and a flint. After a few strikes, the torch began to smoke. The man blew on it, feeding air to the orange spark until flame blossomed, black smoke billowing from the flickering light as the man led them forward.

The cave walls were surprisingly smooth, the floor even and flat. They rounded a bend and the light ahead grew brighter. Lyra turned and found a dark opening in the side of the cave, eight feet tall and half the width.

“Another tunnel,” she noted.

Without a word, Wuli ducked through the opening, followed by Tiri, Lyra, and then Gar. The tunnel turned and Lyra noticed drawings on the wall, depicting symbols, horses, and people dressed in strange garb. As they continued down the corridor, Lyra inspected each scene drawn on the wall, finding images of various seasons and different events.

They emerged from the tunnel into an open chamber, large enough that the light from Wuli’s torch barely reached the far wall or the high ceiling. Gar continued forward, walking toward an object that sat at the center of the room. The rest of the group followed, encircling the object to examine it under the torchlight.

“It’s some sort of brazier.” Gar grabbed a chunk from the square opening and held it up. Lyra leaned closer, finding it black and smooth.

“Try lighting it,” Gar suggested. “I suggest we all step back first.”

They backed away a step, and Wuli held the torch to the black rocks, which soon began to glow. A small flame came to light and he pulled the torch back, the flame spreading across the brazier until its glow illuminated the room.

Lyra glance up and found the ceiling uneven. “This cavern is natural, but someone made the tunnels we took to get here.”

“There’s another opening ahead,” Tiri pointed past Lyra.

“Let’s see where it leads.” Gar waved Wuli forward.

Again, Tiri and Lyra followed the man while Gar took the rear. The tunnel

curved until they reached a stairwell heading upward and another going down.

“Let’s try down first,” Gar suggested.

Wuli began his descent, using his torch to sweep cobwebs away, the thin strands lighting and instantly burning to dust. Upon reaching the bottom, Lyra noticed a light beyond the man. Seconds later, they emerged to daylight.

Lyra squinted as her eyes adjusted, blinking as she tried to comprehend her surroundings. They stood in a plaza, tiled with multi-colored panels of blues and oranges and surrounded by flat-roofed buildings made of stone – not assembled stone bricks, but walls carved from solid stone with no seams and few cracks. The doorways and windows of the buildings stood open with no door or window to fill them. Daylight lit the city, emitted from a massive opening above a rock wall that ran along one side, leaving open air between the top of the wall and an overhanging cliff that acted like half-a-dome, protecting the city from the rain that fell outside.

At the middle of the plaza, beside the outer wall, was a fountain, gurgling as bubbles stirred water that flowed over the edge of a knee-high wall and disappearing into a stone grate.

With their mouths open in wonder, Gar led them across the plaza, his neck twisting this way and that as he absorbed the view.

“What is this place?” Tiri asked.

“Who made it? And where are the people?” Lyra added.

“I…do not know,” Gar mumbled. “Wuli, have you ever heard of a city like this, a city built inside a mountain?”

“I know nothing of such a city…and I would doubt that one might exist…if I were not standing in it.”

“Hello!” Lyra shouted, the sound echoing throughout the quiet city. “Is anyone here?”

“Shh,” Tiri hushed her. “What are you doing?”

Lyra shrugged. “I want to know if anyone is here.”

Not moving, the group listened in silence for a full minute, but they heard nothing but the patter of the rain outside and the gurgle of the nearby fountain.

“Exploring the city will take some time. Let’s worry about that later.” Gar

headed toward the tunnel they had taken. “Let’s see where the other tunnel leads, the big one we took to get here.”

Wuli followed Gar, the two men leading the girls up the stairs, through the corridor, past the flaming brazier, and into the dark cave from where they had first arrived.

Gar turned when he reached the larger tunnel, and Wuli shifted to the Tantarri leader’s side, holding the torch up as the two girls followed closely behind. They rounded another bend, their surroundings growing brighter as they approached an opening that led to daylight. Emerging from the tunnel, the group stopped and stared in wonder.

A lush valley stood before them, filled with long green grasses, trees, shrubs, and a shimmering lake at the center. Tall cliffs encircled the valley, their sheer faces containing it from the outside world. Lyra noticed the herd of horses feasting on the lush grass, halfway between her and the lake that lie a mile away. At that moment, the rain stopped and a ray of sunlight appeared, a wide beam shining down upon the herd and striking a rainbow in the sky above. Lyra doubted that she would ever see anything so beautiful as that moment. She stared in wonder, striving to capture and absorb every detail of the scene before her, hoping to bottle the vision to cherish and relive it as a precious, priceless memory.

“My people have many stories,” Gar said softly. “Legends that we tell around the campfire. One is of a land so beautiful, so pristine, that it can be the only true home to the Spirit of Nature. In the stories, this land is called Viridian.” His voice fell to a whisper. “We have found Viridian.”

35

"Wait here," Gar said quietly as he strolled into the tall grass, toward the herd.

Wuli blew hard on the torch, making multiple attempts before he was able to extinguish it. Tiri grabbed Lyra by the elbow and pulled her away from the Tantarri warrior. When they had moved a dozen paces, Tiri stopped and looked toward Gar and the incredible vista surrounding him.

"What is it?" Lyra asked.

"This place…is so beautiful. It lifts my heart," Tiri said.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Lyra agreed. "But what of it?"

Tiri glanced toward Gar again. "I feel…inspired. I want to…I want to kiss him."

Gar stopped immediately, frozen stiff at perhaps one hundred paces from where Tiri and Lyra stood.

"Well, I already told you what I thought. You're a fool for not kissing him already." Lyra snorted as she thought about it. "He's enthralled with you, Tiri. I'm shocked he hasn't made a move on you himself."

Gar turned to face them. His mouth moved, but they heard nothing.

"We can't hear you," Lyra shouted, flinching at the way her voice reverberated. The herd of horses stopped eating, raising their heads, their ears upright and alert.

Lyra looked up at the tall arching overhang above that formed a perfect curve

to the cliff wall behind her and reminded her of the formation above the city of stone, identical in shape, but facing the opposite direction.

She turned to find Gar running toward them.

“Hush!” he said in a loud whisper as he approached. “You’ll frighten the herd.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize it would be so loud.”

He slowed to a stop a few strides from the girls. His eyes were focused on Tiri, a hunger burning within them. He moved close to her and put one arm about her waist, pulling her close as he whispered.

“I heard every word.” He stared into her eyes, his expression intense. “I’ve been wanting to do this since the moment I first saw you.”

He bent and pressed his lips against hers. Tiri’s body stiffened, visibly relaxing as her arms wrapped about his shoulders. Lyra smiled but looked away, sensing that she was intruding on something private. She considered Gar’s words and wondered at how he could hear them so well from such a distance. Glancing up at the overhang, she was struck by the volume of her own voice when she had shouted. There was something unique about the acoustics. She felt a surge of excitement as an idea formed in her head.

Lyra cleared her throat and took a deep breath. A wordless aria sprang to life, her voice ringing deep notes, true and clear. The horses in the distance stopped grazing again, standing alert and unmoving. The kiss ended and Gar released Tiri, with one arm still about her as he stared at Lyra.

Everything felt perfect. The notes coming from Lyra’s voice. The way the sound reverberated, amplified from the surrounding shell. The fact that Gar and Tiri were together. The rainbow above, the lush land below. Perfection.

Led by the white stallion, the herd strolled across the field, drawn toward Lyra by some invisible tether. When the horses drew close, Gar stepped toward the stallion, moving slowly as he met the majestic beast less than ten paces from where Lyra stood. Tentatively, he placed his palm against the stallion’s neck. The horse shifted slightly but did not flee. Gar gripped a handful of mane and leapt, swinging his leg over the horse’s back. The stallion shuffled its feet, nodded, and snorted, but did not rear or bolt.

Throughout this process, Lyra continued to sing, afraid of how the horses might react if she stopped. Movement caught her attention, and she turned to find the eight warriors they had left on the ledge. With dropped jaws and starry eyes, they stared at Gar atop the horse.

“What are you waiting for?” Gar asked. “Climb on a horse, but make no sudden movements.”

Wuli and the other Tantarri crossed the open space and approached the herd. Similar to the stallion, none fled, and they displayed only the slightest hint of nervous behavior. Only once every warrior sat atop a horse, did Lyra stop singing. She bit her lip, concerned that the herd might bolt, but they remained calm, placid.

“Tiri,” Gar held his arm toward her. “Climb up behind me.”

Tiri approached the horse and took Gar’s hand, leaping and throwing a leg over the stallion’s back as he pulled her up.

“Wuli, please help Tali onto your horse.” Gar said, sounding confident.

Lyra approached the chestnut mare that Wuli had chosen, took his hand, and climbed atop the mount.

“Let’s return to the clan and share the news. The Tantarri are now forever changed.”

Gar nudged the stallion, and the horse broke into a trot, heading toward the tunnel with the herd following closely behind.

36

Lyra moved to the edge of the terrace and put her hands on the low wall as she stared at the city below. People moved about in the open areas, going in and out of the dark openings of the stone buildings. An old woman filled a pitcher in the fountain of the plaza below, while a group of children played in the fountain of the far plaza. The sounds of laughter drifted up to where Lyra stood, and she found herself smiling at their innocent joy.

"This is a wondrous sight," Tiri noted.

Lyra nodded. "Yes. I believe that we have witnessed something special. These people were nomads, moving about from place to place, their wagons the only home they had ever known…until now."

"Gar said that the last load of goods is on its way up," Tiri turned toward Lyra. "He plans to burn what remains of the wagons tonight. He thinks it necessary to convince the older clan members that this is their new home…that the Tantarri will never leave."

"Burning the wagons would make his point."

Lyra's mind drifted back to the moment they rode the wild horses into the Tantarri camp. Stunned faces greeted them, soon evolving to cheers. Some proclaimed that Gar was the greatest leader the Tantarri had ever seen. Some claimed he was the best that the world had ever known. Sitting atop the glorious white horse, he certainly looked the part.

When he announced that he had found the Tantarri a new home, some

members had resisted, iterating that the Tantarri had no home and were meant to follow the Path of the Butterfly. Gar agreed, but stated that even butterflies transform, their nature changing as they evolve from a caterpillar, to a cocoon, to a butterfly.

“For generations, the Tantarri were that caterpillar, moving up and down the coast and feeding off the land alongside the Outlanders.” The stallion shifted, strolling the area as Gar spoke to his people from its back with Tiri seated behind him. “Three years ago, events caused us to change, and the Tantarri went into our cocoon to await the next form. Today is the day we emerge, today is the day we truly become the butterfly. We have a home, private and unknown to the Outlanders. In addition to a city of our own, I have found Viridian.”

The crowd stirred, clan members exchanging glances and excited whispers.

“Yes. The very home of the Spirit of Nature. It was there that I befriended this majestic animal.” He patted the horse on the neck. “It is there that we can plant crops to grow the food we need to survive.”

The mention of Viridian quieted the dissenters. Gar then dismounted, as did the others. The horses shuffled off to eat, but did not flee.

The subsequent two days were long and laborious. With the wagons unable to make it far into the canyon, the Tantarri disconnected the Oxen and tied packs to them, leading the beasts of burden up the narrow trail in single file while clan members carried smaller, lighter items.

Parts of the wagons were removed, dismantled to reuse as tables, benches, and shelves to augment their city of stone. Within a day, the city seemed more a home than a cold, dark cave.

Movement pulled Lyra from her reverie. She leaned forward to look down at the rooftop plaza directly below the terrace where she and Tiri now stood. Tantarri warriors carried wagon axles, with wheels still attached, toward the fire pit at the center of the plaza. They piled them atop one another, the only pieces of the wagons that had not been rebuilt into something else.

“We celebrate tonight.” Hearing the voice behind her, Lyra turned to find Gar standing at the far end of the terrace. “A feast of thanks for our new home…for our new lives here in Mondomi.”

He waved them over. Lyra turned toward Tiri and shrugged before crossing the terrace.

“Mondomi?” Tiri asked as she approached Gar, who met Tiri and wrapped his arms about her waist.

“Yes, it is the name for this city. In the old language, it means *home in the mountain*.” He grinned at Lyra. “I thought it best to pull you two away from the edge. You may not have noticed, but words carry far from that spot, similar to when Tali sang to the horses in Viridian.”

Gar’s grin widened as the girls considered what others might have heard. His gaze locked with Tiri, his grin falling away as he stared into her eyes.

“Although I’ve only known you for a short time, you’ve captured my heart, Tiri. I don’t think I ever want it back.”

“I...”

“Please. Let me finish.” Gar took Tiri’s hand, holding it in both of his. “It is not just me for whom I speak, but for my people as well. You were born a princess, raised to lead others. I have no doubt that you can earn the love and respect of my people, as you have earned mine.” Gar squatted and placed one knee on the stone floor as he stared up at Tiri with adoration in his dark eyes. “Tirialle, if you would agree to be my wife, you would make me the happiest man alive. Be my wife and rule by my side. Help me guide the Tantarri into a new age of prosperity and hope.”

Tiri’s breaths became rapid, her eyes flicked toward Lyra, then back to Gar. A tear tracked down her cheek, it dropping away as her lips spread into a smile. “I never imagined I might marry a man I love.” She gave a tentative laugh, as more tears appeared. “I love you, Gar. I would very much like to be your wife.”

Gar’s face stretched into a grin. He stood, placed his hands on her cheeks, and kissed her. After a moment, his arms slid down to grip her waist and her arms wrapped about him.

Lyra turned and crossed the terrace to stand beside the wall, looking down at the busy city while she wiped the tears from her eyes.

37

Lyra blinked in the darkness, once again drawn from a peaceful sleep by the sound of screams. She wished that they would find another place for Elden to sleep, somewhere far from where he could wake others. It wasn't that she didn't like the man, but waking in the middle of the night to the sound of screams was quite unsettling. She rolled over to her side, sending the hammock swinging.

"I see you're awake as well," Tiri said.

"I find it difficult to sleep with a man screaming a few rooms away. The curtains that cover the doorway do little to block sound."

"True. At least *you* were able to sleep for a while."

"Nerves?"

Tiri sighed. "Yes. I've often dreamt of my wedding, imagining my dress, a beautiful hall, some handsome man at my arm. Tomorrow, those dreams solidify into something real. I…I love Gar. I am just kind of…afraid."

"Afraid of what?"

"I don't know. What if I'm not a good wife? What if I disappoint him? What if he comes to realize I'm not who he wants to be with?"

Lyra reached out and put her hand on Tiri's shoulder. "Tiri, you are the most lovable person I've ever met. Gar is a lot of things, but he's not stupid. It was a grand stroke of luck when you entered his life, and he knows it. Gar's also extremely loyal. He'll pledge himself to you in two days, and I can't imagine

anything that could cause him to shift course.” She gave Tiri’s shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Don’t worry. You’ll be a wonderful wife. I expect that you’ll soon have numerous little Gar’s and Tiri’s running about, and you’ll be a wonderful mother as well.”

Tiri laughed. “Do you really think so?”

“I do. You just...”

The room brightened as the curtain was drawn aside.

“Excuse me, Tali.” Wuli held a torch as he stood in the doorway. “Elden Duratti requests your presence.”

Lyra rolled out of the hammock and stretched, wearing only her shift. The stone floor felt cold on her bare feet. She grabbed the blanket off her hammock and wrapped it about her shoulders as Tiri slid out of her hammock.

“You can stay and rest, Tiri.”

Tiri shook her head. “I can’t sleep, and I want to know what this is about.”

Lyra shrugged as Tiri wrapped a blanket about herself. The two girls ducked through the curtain and followed Wuli down the corridor, past two other closed curtains, and into the third room down the hall.

A single torch on the wall lit the room. Gar sat on a bench beside a square table, while Elden sat across from him. Upon seeing Tiri enter the room, Gar stood.

“Tiri. You did not need to come,” he sounded concerned. “There is much to do before the wedding and you need rest.”

Tiri chuckled. “What about you? You’re in the wedding as well. Why are you here?”

“Well, I’m Head Clansman and…”

“And I’m about become your wife…to rule by your side. Remember?”

Gar grinned. “Fair enough.” He indicated the bench where he had been sitting. “Here. Sit beside me.”

Tiri smiled and both sat side-by-side, their hands clasped together on the table.

Lyra turned toward Elden and found him staring at the table, appearing disheveled, exhausted. He seemed to have aged two decades since she first met

him three years prior.

“What is this about, Elden?” Lyra asked. “Am I somehow…involved in one of your visions?”

Elden nodded. “Yes. Sit and I’ll explain.”

Lyra grabbed a stool, set it beside the table, and sat as requested.

“The visions began a little over a year back. I have them most nights. The nights where I avoid them are precious and too few.” His knuckles went to his face, rubbing his weary eyes. “Each night, I would experience a similar vision, depicting a series of future events that lead to the end of humanity.

“Night after night, I have endured this horrible conclusion, one without hope. Can you imagine what it’s like to live with this dark cloud hanging over you? I try to go on with my daily life, try to forget the pain, the suffering, the…hopelessness.

“Tonight, something different occurred. Things began in a similar manner, but there were new elements involved, key events that happen at just the right time, such that they shifted the vision and changed the result. More importantly, it gives me hope.”

Lyra frowned. “Why do you look so worn then?”

“These visions…they consume a lot of energy. I’ll recover by morning with some rest. However, I must record the details of the prophecy for future generations. It is vital that the information be shared with the right person at the right time.”

Lyra’s brow furrowed. “What does that have to do with me?”

“I’m getting to that.” Elden glanced toward Gar, who nodded. “There was more to my vision than what I will record…a series of events that begin now. If these events do not occur, the rest of the vision will never come to be, and we will be back where I was before: without hope.”

Lyra shrugged. “Why are you telling me this?”

“Because it begins with you, Tali. You must leave Mondomi and journey southward, toward the free city.”

“No!” Tiri blurted.

“Leave?” Lyra felt confused. “Why?”

“I’m sorry, but if you remain, things that must occur cannot, and the one possible future that enables humanity’s survival will be forever lost.”

Lyra turned toward Tiri, whose lower lip quivered as a tear tracked down her cheek.

“I don’t want to go,” Lyra said. “My sister is about to get married. I want to be here with her.”

“This future we hope to avoid, it will mean the end of the Tantarri – the end of everyone.” Elden put his hand on her shoulder, his eyes pleading as he spoke. “I don’t expect you to understand. I only beg you to believe me.”

Moisture blurred Lyra’s vision, tears that she tried to blink away. Tiri was her only family. With Tiri, Gar, and the other Tantarri, Lyra thought she had found a home. Instead, she once again found herself banished from a life she had built, leaving her outcast and abandoned. She shook her head, not wanting to be alone again, unwilling to start over. Finally, she stood and fled, unable to stop the flow of tears.

38

Lyra lifted the heavy pack and slid it over a shoulder. Turning about, she found Gar and Tiri staring at her with concern in their eyes.

Gar handed her two full water skins, which she accepted and slid over her other shoulder.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take a horse, even for a day or two? They’ve already shown that they know how to return to Viridian.”

“No, Gar.” Lyra shook her head. “It doesn’t seem right. They belong here… belong with the Tantarri. I’ve traveled on foot before. I can do it now.”

“I wish you could be here for the wedding.” Tears clouded Tiri’s eyes. Again.

Lyra steeled herself, focusing on her task to avoid the emotions welling up inside. “You’ll be fine, both of you. You have each other and that makes all the difference.” She forced a smile. “Besides, Elden says that I can return in the future, once I’ve done whatever it is I must do in Wayport.”

“Be careful,” Tiri warned. “I know that they call Wayport the *Free City*, but the term is deceiving. Father always said that the pirates running Wayport were not to be trusted. They have their own laws and their own agenda.”

Lyra nodded. “So you’ve told me, at least three times now. Don’t worry about me. You know I’m careful, and I know how to blend in.”

Tiri leaned forward with an embrace that Lyra returned. Unbidden, tears emerged again. When Tiri stepped back, Lyra wiped her eyes dry.

“Be well, sister,” Tiri said.

“You too.” She looked at Gar. “Take care of Tiri. If you don’t, I’ll come back and beat you bloody.”

Gar grinned. “I guess I best treat her like a princess then.”

Lyra chuckled as Gar gave her a hug. When he released her, Lyra heard another voice.

“Tali?” A girl stood in the doorway, holding a glass jar, sealed with a cork. “I wanted to give you a gift before you leave.”

“Hello, Dari.” The girl approached, holding the jar toward Lyra. “There’s not much left, but I thought you might like some honey as a treat during your journey.”

Lyra accepted the jar and eyed the amber gel that filled the bottom third of the jar.

“This is a thoughtful gift, Dari. A taste or two of honey each day will surely make my travels more enjoyable.”

Dari smiled and burst forward, wrapping her arms about Lyra. “I wish you could stay.”

Lyra held the girl tight as she kissed the top of her head. “So do I, Dari. So do I.”

When Dari released Lyra, she wiped her eyes, her nose, and bolted from the room.

Lyra stared at the curtain sway until it settled in the doorway. Just as she was about to follow, the curtain slid aside and Elden stepped into the room.

“Hello, Tali,” he said. “I…I wanted to tell you that I’m sorry for the way you’ve been forced to leave. I wish things were different, but I must do what I can to ensure the future of our people…of all people.”

“I realize that it’s not your fault, Elden.” Lyra felt oddly surprised that she didn’t blame him. “I’ve seen what Prophecy can do, and the things it can prevent when you follow the guidance of a vision.” She shivered, thinking of what might have happened if not for Cal’s prophecy three years earlier.

Elden nodded. “I’m glad to hear that.” He then held his hand out. In his grip was a black scabbard made of hardened leather straps, held in place by gleaming metal studs. “A gift from me. I believe it will fit your sword, and you’ll find it

easier to carry on your hip than shoved into your pack.”

Lyra stared at the scabbard as she lowered the pack. She pulled the sword free and unwound the cloak that was wrapped about the weapon. Accepting the scabbard from Elden, she slid the sword inside and found the motion smooth as silk until she reached the hilt, the last bit fitting snug.

“Thank you, Elden. This is perfect.” Lyra undid her belt, looped it through the scabbard, and slid it to her hip, opposite from the leg where she kept her dagger.

“Good luck, Tali. I don’t know what it is you must do, but allow your conscience to guide you, and I’m sure you’ll find your destiny. Your very nature should place you on the right path. At least, I hope so, because thousands of lives depend on it.”

Lyra nodded, but felt helpless. Some unknown fate awaited her in Wayport… a fate that affected the entire world. *What if I arrive in Wayport too late? How will I know what I am supposed to do? What if I make the wrong choice?* So many questions, so much doubt.

She lifted her pack back to her shoulder, took a breath to steel herself, and, with a heavy heart, stepped through the doorway.

39

Lyra looked back, gazing across the vast field of grass, trying to find the narrow canyon from which her journey began. The ridges and foothills that surrounded the southern and eastern edges of the upper plateau shone bright oranges and reds in the light of the setting sun. Dark shadows marked numerous openings, making it difficult for Lyra to decide which canyon led to Mondomi.

She sighed and resumed her journey, cresting a rise that connected the hill on her right to the one on her left. Unlike the fertile fields behind her, the hills were dotted by green scrub amidst dirt-covered ground. Weaving among spiked shrubs and tufts of dry grass, Lyra descended into the shallow valley, searching for a place to stay the night.

When she reached the bottom, she turned westward and followed the valley floor toward a copse of trees she had spotted on the way down. Shadows overtook her as the sun dropped below the tall mountains to the west. Almost an hour passed by the time she reached the trees, the purple sky above providing just enough light to see the pond that the trees encircled. Without any better ideas, she found a flat spot beneath a tree, took her cloak from her pack, wrapped it about her, and lay down while using the pack as a pillow. Sleep was slow in coming.

Waking with the sun, Lyra gobbled down a hard roll and a strip of dried meat before resuming her journey southward. The day passed slowly, the foothills all seeming the same, monotonous and never ending. Up and down, she went, hill after hill, as the sun made its own journey across the sky above her. It was well past its midpoint when she reached a steeper hillside and was forced to shift east or west before she could advance.

Without any form of guidance, she opted to head west, thinking that route appeared easier than the other. Lyra followed a wash up the steep hillside, climbing over boulders and rock piles in her path – the result of the hill breaking loose from erosion.

When she reached the top, she found herself panting, thirsty, and tired from the effort. Sweat ran down her forehead, stinging her eyes and forcing her to rub them with her knuckles. She stumbled along the ridge, noticing a canyon to the east, bounded by two steep ridgelines.

The ground gave and her foot suddenly slid downward. She tried to grab the nearest rock, only to find that it, too, fell with her. Scrambling, she urgently tried to grab ahold of something, anything, as she slid downward until the earth swallowed her.

Lyra woke to darkness. Her head hurt. Her hand hurt, scraped from the fall. She moved the other hand, shaking loose pebbles from it before she brought it to the back of her head. Pain shot through her brain when she touched the lump, but she felt nothing when she pulled her fingers away and rubbed them together.

“Dry. At least there’s no blood,” she mumbled.

Looking up and blinking, her eyes found their focus on white specs far above – a narrow view to the night sky visible through a long chimney of stone. She forced herself into a sitting position. A groan escaped her lips from the pain, her body bruised and battered from her fall. Debris fell off her body and she wobbled, gripping a nearby wall to steady herself.

A blue blob tilted and twisted before her eyes. She blinked to clear her vision

and she realized that a dull blue light illuminated the cave walls before her. She pulled her feet beneath herself and stood, wincing when her head struck the ceiling. Bent at the waist, she shuffled forward with her gaze focused on the blue light.

After a few steps, the cave floor angled downward, soon allowing her to stand upright. She rounded a bend and found a rock formation blocking the path but for a narrow gap between it and the ceiling. The blue light poured through that gap, giving her hope that it was a way out.

Finding secure handholds, she scaled a wall of rock that stood twice her height. When she reached the top, she took her pack off and held it in one hand as she shimmied through the opening, having to make adjustments when her sword became wedged against the top of the gap.

Lyra pulled herself forward on her belly, her head turned to the side until the space opened to a wider room. She rose to her hands and knees and stared at her surroundings in wide-eyed wonder. Blue light illuminated the cavern, emitting a glow from veins that swirled within the dark walls and ceiling. The cave was thirty strides across and nearly as wide. Long stalactites jutted down from the roof as stalagmites on the floor stretched up in an attempt to meet them. A shallow pool was nestled at the center of the cavern, occasional drips from above echoing in the chamber.

Placing her hand on a large rock to support herself as she stood, Lyra felt it move. She yanked her hand back from the boulder as it wobbled, hanging still for a moment before it tipped toward her. With a yip, she dove forward just in time to avoid the boulder as it tumbled from its resting spot to land right where she had been standing. Her heart raced as images of her crushed body flashed before her eyes.

“Oh, no.”

She scrambled to her feet and found that the boulder completely blocked the opening she had crawled through, making it impossible to escape by that route.

Turning about, she crossed the room toward the pool. She knelt beside it and dipped a hand in the cool water, lifting it to her nose. Her face scrunched at the smell of sulfur, making her thankful that she still had one full water skin.

Thinking of water reminded her of her thirst and she took a drink from the water skin, briefly considering eating something as well before deciding against it. She might need her food to last longer than expected.

When she stood, she noticed another cave opening and moved toward it to investigate. Similar to the cavern, the tunnel walls had veins of blue, glowing to light the way. Further inspection revealed two other strips beside the blue. One strip appeared a bright gold, shimmering when she moved her head. The other strip also contained metal flakes, but of a far darker shade. Similar to the metallic stripes in the walls, chunks of gold stone and the darker metal lined the cave floor, broken off from the walls at some point in the past.

She followed the tunnel, its floor making a slow decent, while a rivulet of water flowed down it from the pool. Illuminated by the blue glow of the veins in the walls, she continued down the tunnel for fifty paces before the glow faded, leaving the path dark before her.

Backing a few steps, Lyra dug into her pack and removed the jar of honey. She popped it open and used her dagger to dig out a scoop, leaving the jar nearly empty. The honey tasted sweet, with a gummy texture. Another scoop and only thin trails of honey remained, little enough that Lyra didn’t mind wasting it.

She held the jar beside the cave wall and used her dagger to scrape some of the blue rock away, watching glowing powder settle into the bottom of the jar. Not satisfied, she scraped more of the soft stone away, until the bottom quarter of the jar was filled with glowing dust.

Sheathing her dagger, Lyra pressed the cork back into the jar to seal it. She then shouldered her pack and resumed her journey down the dark tunnel, holding the glowing jar up as a means of light.

Not long after she left the veins of light behind, the floor leveled. Lyra stopped and stared at the pile of debris blocking her path. The well of hope within her drained out, the vacuum it created filling with despair.

Exhausted and defeated, Lyra slid down the wall until she was sitting upright, staring blankly at the glowing jar on her lap. She slid her pack off her back and laid her head on it before drifting to sleep.

A dull pain woke Lyra. She sat up and rubbed at her side, discovering that a rock had been jutting into it while she slept. Picking it up, she looked at it and frowned. It was made of that dark metal she had seen earlier. Shifting her gaze toward the jar of glowing powder, she found its glow barely visible, although it rested beside her. Yet, there was light.

Turning toward the debris that blocked the tunnel, Lyra saw slices of bright light slipping through the narrow gaps. Daylight.

She scrambled to her feet and put her hands on the rocks, searching for a gap that she might exploit. The smallest rocks blocking her path were the size of her head. Most were far larger, too big for Lyra to move. Frustration began to bubble inside as she stared at the light, realizing that escape was so near, yet unreachable.

Her frustration boiled over, seeking release. She turned and wound up, throwing the rock in her hand as hard as possible. It hit another rock and a spark flashed in the darkness, flaring to a green flame and creating an explosion that reverberated in the narrow chamber. Lyra landed hard on her rear, wincing as bits of debris fell from the ceiling, pelting her head and shoulders.

Her ears rang and her head hurt again, but Lyra didn’t care. Hope had returned.

Rising gingerly, she collected her bag and the jar of powder and began retracing her path up the tunnel. Her gaze landed on the jar, and she realized that the glow was brighter. Curious, she shook it, and the glow flared to life, once again shedding pale blue light on her surroundings.

“Neat.”

She grinned and lifted the jar to light the way until she reached the point where the walls glowed. After setting her pack down, she began collecting rocks of various sizes. She set the golden ones beside her pack and treated the darker ones with care. With an armful of dark metallic rocks, she returned to the debris that blocked the tunnel, and carefully stacked them into a pile. She then returned up the tunnel to collect more rocks.

After a half-hour of repeating this process, she had built a sizeable pile at the end of the tunnel, stacked against the dead end. Lyra then collected some chunks of gold and stuffed them into her pack before carrying the pack back to the cavern with the pool. She set the pack down and returned down the tunnel with a single stone gripped in her palm – a stone made of the dark metal.

The blue light faded behind her, leaving only the jar she held to light the way. When the cracks of daylight appeared ahead, she stopped. Her pulse began to pound and anxiety swirled inside, making her stomach queasy. She bit her lip and cocked her arm back. A long slow breath blew through pursed lips as she exhaled. Focused on the pile of rock she had built, Lyra threw the stone, turned, and bolted in the opposite direction.

She made it three steps before light flared behind her. A half step later, the concussion of the blast blew her forward, causing her to stumble face-first into the rivulet of water. The ground shook, and debris rained from the ceiling. Lyra pushed herself up to her hands and knees, surprised to find that she still held the jar in one hand. Her face and vest were wet. She shook her head and used her free hand to clear away the dust that had settled in her hair. With an odd mixture of hope and fear, she slowly turned around.

Daylight seeped into the tunnel, a beacon of salvation invading the former darkness.

Lyra scrambled to her feet and ran back to the cavern to grab her pack. Although it was heavier than before because of the rocks she had collected, she didn’t notice. Her hands and knees were scraped and bloody, but she didn’t notice. Lyra ran down the tunnel, toward daylight, toward freedom.

40

Lyra squinted at the shock of bright light, almost painful after leaving the dark confines of the caves. She stood in the shadow of a sheer cliff, the morning sun yet to breach its defense. The cliff terminated the end of a canyon, enveloped by steep hills to the north and south. Other than the rubble caused by a small landslide, the surrounding area was flat and barren, without a plant, human, or animal in sight. Having no other option, Lyra headed west, toward the mouth of the canyon.

When the ridgeline to her left ended, she turned south. At some point, she would reach a road or the sea. Either way, at least she would have a better idea of where she was.

Needing her food to last until she reached Wayport, she forced herself to walk for a full hour before eating, despite her gnawing hunger. She reached into her pack and grabbed a small leather bundle, wrapped about strips of dried beef. The chewy meat took time and effort to eat, making it seem more satisfying than the sustenance it provided. As Lyra bit into the meat, she crested a rise and the world opened up before her.

The land sloped downward for three or four miles, with the sea waiting beyond trees that divided a road from the shoreline. Lyra smiled, swallowing the last bite of the salty meat before taking a drink from her water skin. She had found the road, and she just needed to follow it until she reached Wayport.

As it had for the entire day, the thick forest in the valley floor hugged the dirt roadway, providing little chance to see anything beyond the next bend. Birds sang to the sun, bidding it farewell as it hovered just above the mountains to the west. The tweeting left Lyra torn between enjoying the peaceful sound and dreaming of eating the little buggers. Her food had run out the previous evening, and she had walked the entire day living off nothing but a handful of berries she picked from a roadside bush. At the time, she didn't know if the berries were safe to eat, but she threw caution to the wind in favor of eating something… anything.

Thankfully, she had crossed a bridge over a river shortly after the road descended into the valley, giving her the chance to fill both water skins. While she might survive for a while without food, water was something else altogether.

She rounded a bend and the trees suddenly terminated, revealing a field of stumps and grass. Across the field, a half-mile away, stood the wooden palisade surrounding a city, the gate standing open.

Lyra stopped and stared, thinking about the gold she had in her pack – enough gold to buy almost anything, enough gold to kill for.

She backed up a few steps and walked into the forest, counting ten trees from the road, ten from the clearing, and found a young maple, noticeable among the gray trunks surrounding it. She knelt and used her dagger to dig up the forest floor. Opening her pack, she removed all but the two smallest gold chunks and buried them, careful to cover the disturbed earth with dead leaves.

Moments later, she was back on the road and heading toward the city, eager for a hot meal and a soft bed.

When she passed through the open gates, she found herself unchallenged. In fact, there were no guards in sight.

The buildings varied in construction, some stone, most wood, most rundown. The streets were all dirt, busy with foot traffic and carts, their owners selling wares.

The people filling the streets appeared rough and unrefined. Many of the

men were dressed like sailors, wearing rough, patchwork clothing that rarely matched. The women were sometimes dressed in breeches and tunics, like the men, while others wore dirty and faded dresses, tight at the waist and cut deep at the neckline. A fair number of people appeared homeless, huddled against a wall or in a corner as they begged for coin. Most ignored those people, acting as if they were invisible. Perhaps to them, they were.

“Hiya, missy.” A man with missing teeth gave her a grin. “You be new in Wayport? I got a room for ya. Won’t cost you a thing…well, not a copper at least.” The man chuckled.

Lyra shook her head. “No need.”

He shouted from behind her. “If you change your mind, come back, and I’ll be here.”

Lyra caught sight of a man selling bread, shouting to passers-by that it was half price. She considered buying some, but spotted an inn down the street and decided on a hot meal. Weaving her way through the crowd, she approached a building with a sign of a pig, its eyes bulging as a knife poked through its head. The placard below the sign read *The Poked Pig*.

The streets outside appeared seedy, but the interior of the inn was perhaps worse. A group of men in one corner held their mugs high as they bellowed a song common to sailors. Lyra winced. They were doing a very poor job of it. In another corner, two men played knucklebones, surrounded by a crowd cheering them on. Lyra considered playing, but she didn’t need the money and didn’t want to invite trouble. It would likely find her without help.

She passed two men harassing a waitress, with one grabbing the woman roughly. Lyra paused and considered helping the woman but smiled and moved on after the woman grabbed the man’s finger and bent it back until his eyes bulged.

Reaching the bar, Lyra flagged the bartender. The man had a bushy black beard and thick black hair that surrounded the bald spot atop his head. He was an obese man, three times Lyra’s weight, yet only a half-head taller.

“What do you need?” the man grumbled.

“I’m looking for the owner. I need a room…and food.”

He snorted. “My name is Darvin, and I own the place. I have both, if you’ve got coin.”

Lyra dug into her bag and held her hand toward the man.

“What will this get me?” Lyra rolled her hand over, revealing a chunk of gold slightly larger than a gold coin.

The man’s bushy brows rose in surprise. “Hmm. Raw gold. A good-sized chunk, too.”

He reached for it, and Lyra yanked her hand away.

“Not until we have a deal.”

Darvin nodded. “Fine. Food and a room for a week.”

“That’s it?” Lyra held the gold chunk up, rolling it in her palm as she examined it. “This is worth far more than that. In addition to food and a room, I need a bath…and food for the road when I leave as well.”

“Deal.” He held out his hand, appearing eager. Lyra set the gold into it as greed reflected in his beady eyes.

Her stomach growled. “I’ll take dinner now, please. Then you can show me to my room and the baths.”

Lyra stepped outside, completely rejuvenated. Dinner, a bath, and sleep, followed by a hearty breakfast, and she was ready for a new day. Before entering the city, she worried that her leather Tantarri garb might make her stick out, but she now realized that the city hosted such a variety of styles, hers was not outside the norm. There was no norm.

Not having any particular agenda, she strolled down the street, toward the harbor. A man with a cart of produce called out to her, but she ignored him. Another man, this one in a wide-brimmed black hat and a white tunic grinned at her, the gaps in his smile spoiling his otherwise handsome appearance. She passed an alley and heard a groan. A glance in that direction revealed a man passed out across two crates. An empty bottle lay in the alley, below his dangling arm. Lyra shook her head and moved on.

A woman in a faded blue dress emerged from a shop, directly into Lyra's path as she swept dirt out the door.

"Oh. Sorry Miss," the woman said as she stepped aside. "Do your boots be needin' any repairs by chance?"

Lyra shook her head as she walked past. "Not today."

"All shoes wear out. When they need some fixin', be sure to come back. My husband is the best cobbler in Wayport."

With a wave to the woman, Lyra emerged from the shadowed street into a large square. A dark stone keep bordered the east end of the square, otherwise surrounded by streets spreading outward, like the spokes of a wagon wheel.

She crossed the square, empty other than the waist-high platform at the center, large enough to fit twenty people. Lyra's brow furrowed as she passed the platform, curious as to its purpose. Rather than linger, she continued toward the waterfront, seeking cooler air. Despite the early hour, the heat from the sun was intense, made worse by the humidity of mid-summer in a port city.

Beyond the square, Lyra entered another street, covered in shadows cast by a row of two-story buildings blocking the rising sun. A cluster of men walked down the street in front of her, quiet and subdued as they headed toward the harbor. She slowed to match their pace, trailing the men as they headed toward the docks. Stopping when she reached the end of the street, Lyra surveyed the view.

A long dirt incline ran down to a wooden boardwalk that encircled the bay, connecting docks to waterfront warehouses where goods were stored for transit. Beyond the docks, bright blue water shimmered in the morning sun, becoming a darker shade near the breaker line further out in the bay. Ships of varying sizes and types lined the docks, while others sailed out toward open waters. Some of the sails were a bright white, gleaming in the sunlight, while others were darker shades, many worn and tattered.

A slap to Lyra's backside made her jump. She turned to find a tall man passing by, gaps noticeable amidst the toothy grin stretching across his face.

"A good mornin' to ya, lassie!"

Lyra stared at the man with a sense of vague recollection. She watched the

man walk down the boardwalk, heading toward a ship tied to a slip along the center dock. The image of his shaved head and goatee suddenly clicked with a memory.

“Sully?” she frowned as she recognized the man.

Still unsure of what she needed to do in Wayport, she recalled her last meeting with the sailor and how she had taken his gold in a game of knucklebones. *Could Sully be the reason I’m here?* Elden told her that she would find herself compelled by her own nature to do it, whatever *it* was. She certainly felt no compulsion to help Sully or even speak with the man.

With a sigh, Lyra broke her gaze from the sailor and headed toward the boardwalk, enjoying the breeze coming off the water as it eased the intensity of the suppressing heat.

For hours, Lyra meandered about the docks, not willing to leave the ocean breeze by venturing further into the hot city. After a couple hours, she grew tired and opted to sit on a short wall to rest her feet, still sore from four days of travel.

Now nearly mid-day, the harbor remained busy, with new ships arriving from other ports, filling the slips vacated by those that had set sail during the morning hours. Even near the water, soothed by the caress of a cool breeze, Lyra found herself sweating. It would be even worse in the city, but her stomach urged her to return to the inn for food. After all, she had paid for it.

As she gathered the motivation needed to brave the heat, she felt a small tug on her belt. She glanced down and found a hand on her coin purse as a knife cut it loose. Lyra’s hand darted toward the retreating purse. The knife slashed out, and she yanked her hand back in pain, glancing at it to find a shallow cut on her palm, filling with blood.

Lyra slid off the wall and faced the cutpurse, a boy of eight or nine summers. Dressed in rags topped by a mess of long hair and a freckled face smudged with dirt, the boy appeared to be among the dregs of the rough city.

“Give me that, you little runt.”

Without a word, the boy darted off. Lyra leapt over the wall and made chase down the narrow street, toward the heart of the city. He reached a crowd at the end of the street and wiggled through. She slowed as she approached the crowd. Standing on her toes, she tried to peer around the people for the thief, but she couldn't see him.

Seeking a better viewpoint, Lyra turned and found a drainpipe secured to the corner building's wall. She gripped the pipe and pulled herself up, finding a foothold on the sill of a nearby window. When she had risen high enough, she stretched, gripped the rail of the second-story balcony, and pulled herself onto it. The square below was crowded with hundreds, perhaps a thousand people. A man paced the platform at the center, shouting to the crowd. With a head of long, dark curls and a mustache with waxed tips, curled at the ends, the man had the look of a Kalimarian aristocrat. His red jacket, with tails at the back, along with his puffy white tunic, only added to the image. Two guards, big and burly, stood behind him. The guards held a man between them – his hands shackled behind his back and a sack over his head.

Lyra listened absently as she searched for the boy, somewhere amidst the mass of people.

"…as I, Joven Harrington, have promised on numerous occasions, as Governor of Wayport, to remain vigilant in protecting our city and its lovely citizens."

The crowd cheered, and the man waved his arms to quiet them.

"When I discovered that vile witchcraft was being conducted inside the very walls of Wayport, I immediately ordered the city watch to capture the offender. Worse yet, this man had been hiding his use of witchcraft behind a church, one that sought to convert innocent Wayport citizens to his twisted beliefs through the subversion of black magic.

"Last night, my men located the man and sought to arrest him. Unfortunately, he killed four guards and wounded a dozen others before he could be subdued."

Harrington appeared upset, shaking his head. "Good men, lost to black magic. They will be missed.

"This offender now stands before you. Within my court, this man has been

tried and has been found guilty. What kind of man would conspire with demons, you ask? Behold!”

In dramatic fashion, the governor placed his hand on top of the man’s head, gripped the sack, and pulled it away. The crowd gasped. Lyra gasped.

“Cal?”

Cal’s face was bruised and scraped. His brown hair was damp with sweat, pasted to his forehead.

Harrington continued, waving the sack around as he spoke. “Per the laws of our free city, this criminal will be publicly executed for his vile deeds. Let this be a warning to others who seek to corrupt Wayport with black magic. Any person who wishes to view the end of witchcraft in our city, come to the square at dawn.”

The crowd cheered again, far louder than before.

Expelling shallow, panting breaths, Lyra watched the guards drag Cal down the stairs, through the crowd, and toward the stone building that bordered it to the east.

With the cutpurse completely forgotten, she now knew why she was in Wayport. Lyra steeled herself to her task. She would free Cal, or she would die trying.

41

The streets below were quiet and had been for hours. Lyra stared across the square, toward the torchlit keep entrance, watching for movement.

Where is he?

A dog barked a few streets over, followed by a woman's voice.

"Shut it, you stupid dog!"

Lyra smiled, thinking that some things remained the same everywhere. Her smile faded when the guard appeared, strolling out the doorway a few strides. The man surveyed his surroundings, his gaze sweeping the empty square before he turned and walked back inside.

The moment the man disappeared, Lyra slid off the edge of the roof until she hung by outstretched arms. She released her grip and dropped to the balcony, bending her legs to absorb the landing. Without pause, she climbed over the railing and lowered herself down again before dropping to the ground.

Emerging from the dark street, Lyra strolled across the square with a nonchalant stride, acting as if it were as normal as breathing. She passed through the keep entrance and found herself in a bailey, quiet and empty save for a single torch, shedding light on the two benches straddling a closed door.

She put her ear to the door. The dark wood felt cold and damp as she listened for movement inside. Hearing nothing, she bit her lip and turned the knob before easing the door open.

A dark hallway stretched before her with the amber light of a torch flickering

at the far end. She heard men’s voices, the mumbling sound unintelligible. After gently closing the door, she crept down the hallway. Upon reaching the end of the corridor, Lyra put her back against the wall and peeked around the corner, pulling her head back instantly and then closing her eyes to recall the image.

It was a rectangular room, perhaps ten strides across and twice the length. Three closed doors lined the wall opposite from Lyra. Another torchlit room stood at one end, filled by men seated around a table beyond an open doorway. Two dark stairwells waited at the other end, one heading upward, the other down.

Lyra thought about the citadel in Sol Limar, recalling that the jail cells were located in the basement. Expecting the same here, she picked her destination and took a deep breath, firming her resolve. Ignoring her racing pulse, she focused on her goal and slipped around the corner.

With a furtive glance toward the room with the guards, she slid along the wall, toward the stairwell. Laughter from something said sounded from the room and one man patted another on the back. Lyra turned to find the stairs two strides away and quickly crept down them, fading into the darkness.

At the landing, the stairwell turned to reveal another half-flight. Flickering light from an unseen torch illuminated the area just enough to guide her to the bottom.

She turned the corner and stopped short when she faced a man’s chest. The eyes of the guard who had almost run into her grew wide, his mouth opening.

Years of training with Elan sent Lyra into action. She lunged, throwing a hard jab into the man’s exposed throat. The guard staggered, his hand going to his neck as he choked, while his other hand latched onto Lyra’s shoulder. She kicked, slamming her knee into the man’s groin. He released her, and he doubled-over. Yanking her sword from its scabbard, she raised it high for an overhead strike and smashed the pommel against the back of his head. The guard collapsed to the dirt floor, twitching in jerks and fits.

Lyra circled around the man and glanced back at him as she passed the torch mounted to the corridor wall. His body settled, no longer moving. Dead or unconscious, either suited Lyra.

She came to another room, lit by a single torch. Three heavy doors lined the walls to each side of the narrow space, while the torch was mounted to the wall opposite from Lyra. Moving toward the nearest door, she whispered.

“Cal? Are you in there?”

A booming voice came from inside the room. “Let me out. I’ve done no wrong.”

Lyra frowned. That wasn’t Cal’s voice.

She moved on to the next door, “Cal? It’s Lyra. I’m here to help.”

A moment of silence followed.

“Lyra?”

Lyra moved to the last door on that wall, the one from where she had heard the voice.

“Cal. Is that you?”

“Lyra? What are you doing here?”

Replacing her sword in the scabbard, Lyra drew her dagger and the two bent needles she stored in the same sheath. She knelt before the lock, inserted one needle, and began to poke around for the trigger. The needle found resistance and she twisted it until she felt a click. The other needle followed, along with a similar process. It clicked, and she slid her dagger into the lock. When it didn’t turn, Lyra frowned. Her heart sank as she realized that there were three tumblers.

Cal’s voice came from the other side of the door. “Are you going to let me out?”

“I’m having trouble with the lock.”

“Did you get the keys from the guard?”

Lyra turned and looked toward the corridor, wishing she had thought of that. She sheathed the dagger and needles, retracing her steps to find the guard still lying facedown. Kneeling beside him, she used her dagger to cut the ring of keys from his belt. The man stirred, groaning. Lyra held the dagger ready if needed, but the man didn’t move again.

She stood and ran back to Cal’s jail cell, trying two keys before she found one that opened the lock. As the door swung open, the torch light ate away at the darkness within. Cal emerged into the light and Lyra’s heart soared. She darted

forward and hugged him tightly.

“Oof.” He choked. “I’m thrilled to see you, too. Would you mind freeing my hands before someone comes and locks us both up?”

Lyra released her embrace and noticed his arms shackled behind his back.

“Sorry.”

She examined the keyring and found a set of smaller keys, the second of which unlocked the shackles clamped around Cal’s wrists. With them removed, Cal stretched, working his arms and rubbing his wrists.

“If I ever have to wear those things again, it will be too soon.”

“I’m sure.”

“We need to get out of here.”

“Really? You don’t care for the accommodations?”

Cal grinned. “The room is fine. It’s the service that is lacking.”

Lyra chuckled. “If that’s the case, I agree. Let’s get out of here.”

“Just a moment. I don’t have anything to write with, so I need to borrow your dagger.”

She handed him the knife. Cal pulled his sleeve up and began tracing a rune on his arm, gritting his teeth as the shallow cuts drew blood here and there. When he was finished, he handed the dagger back to Lyra and closed his eyes.

Anxious moments passed as Lyra stared toward the corridor, expecting to see guards appear at any moment. She looked back at Cal as his eyes opened, crackling with red sparks of energy. The symbol on his arm began to glow brightly, pulsing before fading. Cal staggered, and Lyra leapt forward to grab him, holding him upright. After a moment, he nodded.

“I’m good now. Thanks.”

He turned toward the nearest cell door and grabbed the handle, pulling the door off the wall, sending splinters flying from where the lock and hinges were torn from the thick wood. The man inside cowered, blinking at the light. He was a small man, old and thin.

“You are free, Jessep,” Cal said as he helped the man from the cell.

“Free?” The old man appeared dazed, confused.

“Did you forget that I have the keys?” Lyra asked.

“Oh. Good idea. Would you please unlock the other doors?”

As Lyra approached the third cell on that side of the room, Cal broke the shackles from the old man’s wrists. She opened the cell door and found a big man inside, with thick shoulders and a shaggy brown beard, streaked with splotches of blond. The man squinted at the torchlight and gave her a grin.

“Thank you, lassie.”

Cal slid beside Lyra. “Don’t get any ideas, Hagget. She’s with me.”

“Why? Are you going to perform your witchcraft on me?”

“Do you want to escape or not?”

The big man stepped out from the cell, ducking to get through the door. “Oh, I want out of here, and I plan to take a guard or two down on my way out.”

Cal nudged the man’s shoulder, and he spun around so violently that he fell into the wall. With ease, Cal gripped one of the man’s shackles and broke it in two. A moment later, both shackles fell to the floor, and the man turned toward Cal with a strange look in his eyes.

“That’s some interesting magic you’ve got there.”

Cal smiled. “It comes in handy from time to time.” He turned to Lyra. “Open the other doors. I believe they are empty, but I want to be sure.”

As requested, Lyra opened the other three cell doors and found them empty. Cal nodded to Lyra before turning toward Jessep and Hagget.

“We’re getting out of this place. Stick together until we’re clear of the keep. After that, we split up and it’s each man for himself.”

Hagget nodded toward Lyra. “What about the girl?”

“I’m with Cal.” Cal turned toward her, and she gave him a smile. “You won’t get away so easy this time.”

He smiled in return. “You seem to have your mind set.”

“Yes. Now, let’s go.”

With Hagget in the lead, they walked into the corridor and headed toward the stairwell. The big man gave the prone guard a kick in the ribs before pulling the man’s cudgel from his belt loop. The guard groaned as Cal and Lyra stepped over him.

“Did you do that?” Cal asked, pointing toward the guard.

Lyra replied with a grin and a shrug.

They crept up the steps and slowed as they reached the room at the top. Four guards sat at the table beyond the open doorway, one of whom spotted them emerging from the stairwell. The man leapt to his feet.

“The prisoners are escaping!”

The guards scrambled for their weapons and rushed toward them. Hagget met the first guard head-on, grabbing the man’s wrist to stop his sword as Haggett’s cudgel thrust into the guard’s abdomen. Hagget then hit the man over the head as Cal darted past him.

Cal caught the next guard’s cudgel with one hand, picked the man up as if he were a doll, and tossed him into another guard. Both men flew back into the room, smashing into the table and chairs, sending chair legs spinning as the table collapsed to the floor. The fourth guard swung his sword at Cal from behind, but Lyra’s sword blocked the strike, the impact jarring her shoulders. Cal turned on the man, grabbed his shirt and lifted him off his feet, slamming him into the wall. The guard hit hard and fell to the floor, unconscious.

Hagget grinned. “That was fun.”

A horn sounded, its tone reverberating.

“What was that?” Lyra asked.

“Warning sound,” Hagget replied. “They know we’ve escaped.”

“Let’s go.”

Cal ran down the hallway to the front door with Lyra and Jessep close behind, while Hagget brought up the rear.

They passed through the bailey, into pandemonium.

The clashing of steel rang throughout the square as soldiers in plate-covered leather armor fought with city guards and sailors. Cal, Lyra, Jessep, and Hagget stopped to watch the spectacle, trying to make sense of it.

The door behind them blasted open, and a stream of guards sprang forth, dozens of them running past to join the fray. Amidst it all, Lyra spotted a pennant of white marked by a rising sun.

“I see the Kalimar flag,” Lyra shouted.

Cal nodded. “Kalimar must be attacking the city. We need to get out of here.”

He turned toward Hagget and Jessep. “You’re on your own. Good luck.”

Hagget grinned and ran off into the night. Jessep nodded.

“Thank you, sir. I’ll do right by this second chance.”

Jessep turned and left as a Kalimar soldier in front of Lyra cut down the man he was fighting. The soldier turned toward her with fiery bloodlust in his eyes. Lyra raised her sword and blocked his strike, the impact making her teeth chatter. With fury in his eyes, Cal grabbed the man by his sword arm and violently flung him toward the heart of the square. The man spun three times before crashing into Kalimar soldiers and Wayport guards alike, nearly fifty feet away, blasting through a dozen men like a heavy gust through a pile of leaves.

Lyra grabbed Cal’s sleeve, tugging it.

“Follow me.”

She darted toward the nearest street, running through the darkness with the hope of reaching The Poked Pig before the Kalimar soldiers.

42

"Darvin! It's Lyra. Let me in!" Lyra pounded on the door again. "You owe me."

"I'll not open the door 'til the soldiers are gone!" the man shouted.

"Stand aside, sir." Cal replied.

"What? Why?"

"I suggest you move aside. Now."

Cal turned to Lyra, who nodded. He lifted a leg and kicked, blasting the door off the frame and sending splinters in all directions. The door slammed into the bar across the room, knocking the bar back before the door flipped over it and broke the keg behind it. Frothy ale poured out, covering the dirt floor.

Darvin stared at the mess, wide-eyed and slack-jawed. His round face transformed from shock to anger as Lyra and Cal stepped into the room.

"What did you do to my tavern? You filthy…"

Darvin swung a meaty fist at Lyra, but Cal caught the big man's wrist, holding it firmly without any apparent effort. The man's eyes bulged and his knees buckled. Cal released his grip, and the man rubbed his wrist while kneeling on the floor.

"Didn't anyone teach you how to treat a lady?" Cal asked. "Certainly, hitting a woman is frowned upon even here in Wayport."

Darvin grimaced but remained on his knees.

Lyra turned to Cal. "I'll run upstairs to get my bag, and then we can go."

Without waiting on a response, Lyra darted up the stairs, pulled the key loop over her head, and unlocked the door. She opened her pack and stuffed her belongings inside before shouldering it, along with both water skins. When she descended, she found Darvin standing beside the cook and the waitress, both of whom appeared confused.

“You owe me for repairs, Lyra,” Darvin stated.

Lyra snorted as she reached the taproom floor. “The chunk of gold I gave you is more than enough to pay for this, and you know it. However, you still owe me five days of food, so I’m taking some from the kitchen before I leave.”

She pushed past him and opened the kitchen door. Moving quickly, she gathered anything edible that she could fit in the pack. When her pack was filled and the kitchen pilfered, she crossed the dining room, and stopped beside the open doorway.

“Good luck, Darvin. Judging by what’s happening out there, you’ll need it.”

Lyra hurried down the street with Cal following. When they came to the first intersection, they turned and took another street.

Upon reaching the opening area at the city entrance, Lyra found Kalimar soldiers occupying the area. Arranged in rows three men deep, the soldiers blocked the width of the road before the closed gate. The front row of soldiers stood ready, holding swords and shields. Behind them stood two rows of men armed with long pikes.

Moving boldly, Lyra led Cal out into the open and stopped just strides before the line of soldiers.

“We need to leave the city,” Lyra announced. “Please stand aside so nobody gets hurt.”

Cal threw his hands up, sounding exasperated. “Why must you do everything the hard way?”

“Do you have a better idea?” Lyra asked.

A tall man, with shorn hair and a short-trimmed black beard, stepped forward. His uniform marked him as a sergeant. The man laughed as his gaze flicked from Lyra to Cal.

“What are you two twerps going to do? Kill us with your sharp wit?”

Another man pointed toward Lyra. “Sarge! It’s her, one of Tallinor’s girls! I recognize her from the palace.”

The sergeant scowled, his expression becoming grim.

“Kill them.”

Cal shifted to stand before her. “Lyra, sheathe your weapons. I have a plan.”

She did as instructed and Cal scooped her up, backing away from the advancing soldiers.

Cal looked down at Lyra and gave her small smile. “You need to hold on to me tightly. I can’t because I might crush you.”

Lyra wrapped her arms around Cal’s neck and squeezed. He immediately burst into motion, running around the armed men, straight toward the wooden palisades. He leapt into the air, the two of them rising more than two stories off the ground to sail over the line of spiked poles that encircled the city.

With wide eyes, Lyra experienced a moment of weightlessness. In an oddly detached way, she noticed fire coming from the keep at the center of the city and the shadows of bodies dotting the narrow streets – some in the midst of fighting, while others lay unmoving. They then began to fall, stirring Lyra’s stomach and sending tingles throughout her body as they plummeted toward the ground. Although Cal bent his magic-powered legs to absorb the landing, the sudden impact drove the wind from Lyra’s lungs, leaving her wide-eyed and unable to breathe.

Cal set her down gently with concern reflected in his eyes. Lyra fell to her hands and knees in the long grass, begging for her lungs to relent. Finally, she gasped and sweet air returned, leaving her panting to reclaim it.

“Sorry about that.” Cal looked back toward the wall. “I didn’t think about how the landing might affect you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Lyra choked out. “I’ve often considered breathing overrated anyway.”

She looked up at Cal and found him grinning.

“My, how I’ve missed you.”

Lyra smiled, experiencing relief and joy upon hearing those sweet words. She stood and slid close to him.

“Do you remember what happened right before you left me?”

“How could I forget?” Cal’s usually glib tone was missing as he spoke. “The moment is etched in the very fiber of my being.”

She ran her hand down his bruised face. “When I saw you in the square today, my feelings took hold of me, and I realized that nothing has changed.” Lyra stared into his eyes, ignoring the shouts and screams coming from the city.

Faced with the moment she had dreamt of for three years, Lyra found herself in an internal battle, torn between an unusual lack of self-confidence and emotions that compelled her to take action. Rather than having to force herself into a decision, Cal made the decision for her.

He tilted his head and his lips brushed against hers, bringing them to life. Lyra wrapped her arms about his shoulders and sank deeper into the kiss, pouring three years of pent-up emotion into the moment, a moment that lasted forever. However, Lyra found that even forever must reach an end, an end that was actually a beginning.

Cal smiled at her, the adoration in his gaze flaming the fire Lyra felt inside. Of all the moments she could have imagined, none would ever be as perfect as this.

“Ugh!” Harman groaned. “More kissing?”

Jane frowned. “Is there something wrong with kissing?”

“Well…um…no. I guess not,” he shrugged. “But do you have to keep bringing it up and describing it?”

“You’re at the age where you’ll soon feel differently about kissing. I bet before the year is out, you’ll have kissed some lucky girl, maybe numerous lucky girls.”

Harman didn’t respond, wishing to move beyond the subject.

“Besides,” Jane continued. “This is my story. If I want to describe a bit of kissing here and there, it’s my prerogative.” Her face split into a grin. “That is, unless you’d like me to include more than just kissing. I could make it quite…”

“No.” Harman’s cheeks grew flush at the thought of his grandmother adding additional romantic details. “Never mind. Just continue on with the story, Grandma.”

Jane nodded and her grin faded. “Very well. Where was I?”

“Lyra and Cal just escaped Wayport, and they…kissed.”

“Thank you.” She resumed her tale. “A tower of flames shot into the night sky, lighting the field where the couple was standing. Screams arose, louder and closer than before…”

“We should get going.” Cal announced.

Lyra nodded in agreement. “Yes. But we leave together this time.”

He grinned and took her hand.

As they strode toward the tree line, Lyra remembered her gold.

“Wait. I need to grab something.”

She counted the trees and guided him toward the tenth one from the road, counting as she entered the shadowed woods. As the darkness began to triumph over the light coming from the city, she dug into her pack and removed the glass jar. A series of quick shakes stirred the contents and the powder inside sprang to life, lighting the area in a soft blue glow.

“Where did you get that?” he asked. “It looks like one of my light-augmented stones.”

“I fell into a cave a few days ago and found stripes of glowing stone in the walls. I scraped some off and poured it into this jar for light.”

“Smart,” Cal nodded.

Lyra stopped beside the maple and scraped her foot across the leaf-covered forest floor, clearing a patch to reveal freshly dug dirt. Squatting, she scooped the dirt aside to reveal her cache of gold chunks, some the size of her fist.

“Whoa. Where did you get the gold?”

She dusted a chunk off and slid it into her pack. “I found it in the same cave.”

After pulling out five more sizeable chunks and stowing them away, she stood and dusted off her hands.

“I’m ready. We can go now.”

Cal smiled and took her hand. “You’re an amazing woman, Lyra. I’m so happy you came back into my life.”

Lyra recited her tale as they walked. “…but two days before the wedding, Duratti experienced another prophecy. He pleaded with me to leave the Tantarri and journey to Wayport alone. His vision lacked the details of why, only that the future of the Tantarri, of everyone, was at stake.”

Lyra’s gaze shifted to the sky, finding it bright blue in the east, yet still purple to the west. Birds tweeted from the leaf-covered trees that enveloped the road, serenading the couple on their journey north.

“During the trip, I fell into the cave I mentioned earlier. That’s where I discovered the glowing stone and the gold, along with another type of rock. Appearing dark and metallic, it ignited with green flame from the slightest spark. A landslide blocked the cave entrance, but I used the flammable rock to blow a hole in the cave and escape. I made it to Wayport a few days later.”

She turned toward Cal, finding him staring at her, listening intently to her tale.

“When I saw you with Harrington and his men, I knew why I needed to go to Wayport. Whether he knew it or not, Duratti sent me there to save you.”

“I must thank the man when I see him next.” Cal grinned. “I should find a way to thank you as well.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.” Lyra gave him a sly smile, and Cal chuckled.

His laugh faded to a sigh. “I am truly sorry about Tallinor. He seemed a good man and a good king. It troubles me that this young usurper has control of the throne, of how he might abuse it.”

“I’m afraid of what type of king Donte might be. The boy I knew was sweet

and kind, but that appears to have been part of his charade." Lyra shook her head. "I guess I never really knew him."

"Betrayal is the most hurtful of crimes. I'm sorry that you had to endure it, even indirectly." Cal took her hand and looked at it as he held it. "What's with the bandage anyway?"

Lyra frowned. "A street rat cut my purse and made off with it. When I tried to grab him, he sliced my palm with his knife."

"Would you like it healed?"

"I don't think so." She shook her head. "It doesn't hurt much, and it will heal on its own soon. Save your magic for something more important."

"I find it impossible to imagine something more important than you, Lyra."

In spite of herself, Lyra blushed. "Well played. Keep it up, and you might yet have me wrapped about your finger."

"If true, it would be my greatest magic."

Lyra smiled and squeezed his hand, ignoring the soreness of her palm. The pain was a small price to pay.

"What about you, Cal? What became of you after you left me back in Sol Limar? How did you end up in a cell awaiting execution?"

Cal sighed, "The tale is long, yet is easily summed up. I left Kalimar, knowing that it would be years before Tallinor would allow Issal's teachings to return to his country. Rather than try Vinacci, I opted to head west, toward the frontier. When I arrived in Wayport, it seemed a good place to resume my research. Using the gold provided by Tallinor for my part in thwarting *The Hand*'s scheme, I bought a building. With a small apartment at the back for me to live in, I converted the main section into a temple."

"Things moved slowly, but I was eventually able to bring in followers, those who believed in Issal's teachings and the power of his healing. Unfortunately, that same healing is what got me into trouble. Last week, a man came in with a child who had been in an accident. The boy's arm had been torn off in a gear at the flourmill, and he had lost much blood. Fortunately, the man had wrapped the wound to slow the blood flow, and I was able to save the boy. However, the father brought the mangled arm in and demanded that I heal the boy back whole.

I explained that it was impossible, but the man wouldn't have it. He left unhappy, claiming that I had doomed the boy to a lesser life because of his missing limb. Three days later, the man returned with Harrington's men and charged me with witchcraft, stating that I had conspired with demons to perform black magic, that I used my power to deceive others into following a false god. The men rushed me before I could use my magic, bound me in shackles, and hauled me to a jail cell. You saw me on the platform in the square the next day, presented to the citizens of Wayport as a warning to others who might attempt to use magic within the city."

Lyra nodded. "They locked you back in the cell, and I showed up later that night."

Cal nodded in return.

"But Harrington said that you killed a number of his guards and wounded others before they captured you."

Cal shrugged. "Lies. I expect that he wanted me to appear more sinister, and the added drama of the story increased his leverage against me."

Lyra considered Cal's story, thinking about the horrible event that the boy endured. "I find it tragic that the boy's father couldn't appreciate the miracle of his son's survival, despite the loss of a limb."

"True," Cal agreed. "However, I have faith in Issal's greater plan. That series of events brought you back to me for a reason. In addition, the nature of Duratti's prophecy proves that I still have important things to accomplish." He smiled at her again. "Perhaps we are to accomplish them together."

"There you go, again," Lyra warned him. "At this rate, we'll be married before the week is out."

Lyra led Cal across the footbridge, its narrow width forcing them to cross in single file. Noise from the raging waters below drowned out all other sounds, the heavy flow over submerged rocks causing white licks of foam to appear and rapidly drift downriver. Upon reaching the far side, Lyra glanced up at the sky,

bright blue save for occasional puffy white clouds floating past, one of which eclipsed the mid-day sun. The cool mountain breeze eased the mid-summer heat, making the weather pleasant while wearing her Tantarri outfit. She had noticed Cal appreciating the way it clung to her body. After two months of wearing the tight leather garb, Lyra found that she enjoyed the way it made her feel sensual, yet appear intimidating.

Her gaze shifted to the mountains beyond the river, a towering wall between the valley and the eastern half of the continent. Dark green pines covered the lower half of the mountainside, growing increasingly more sparse at higher elevations. The white-capped peaks cut into the sky and skewered any clouds that dared to attempt passage.

Cal stepped off the bridge and took her hand, leading her along the trail that meandered along the valley floor. They soon reached a cluster of four buildings nestled beside the river: a mill, a house, a barn, and an inn. Anxious for a real bed and a hot meal, Lyra pulled Cal toward the inn.

“We’re staying the night.”

“How are you going to pay?”

“I have this gold.” She patted her pack.

“You might want to chip a bit off first. One chunk is enough to buy this entire village, and then some.”

Realizing that he made a good point, Lyra pulled the smallest chunk of gold out and pounded it against a small boulder, taking three strikes before the chunk broke into five pieces. She slid them back in her pack, save the smallest piece.

Holding the gold in her palm, she glanced toward Cal. “We’ve been traveling for almost three days. Have you decided where we are going?”

Cal shrugged, “I’m not sure yet. I still believe in what I’m doing, but I would like to reinvent the Ministry. To do that, I want to find a place of peace, someplace that corruption hasn’t touched…someplace where we can create a better tomorrow.”

She stared at him with a sense of pride. This was the Cal she had grown fond of…the man who believed in something larger than himself.

“Very well. Come along, then.”

Lyra led him into the inn and found it dark and empty. Unsure of what else to do, they entered the kitchen and found the back door open. Beyond the doorway, a woman stood in the back yard, hanging clothes on a line. Hearing them emerge from the building, the woman turned toward them.

“We’re looking for a room and a bite to eat,” Lyra said.

The woman smiled. “It’s about time.”

“You were expecting us?” Lyra thought of Duratti and his prophecy.

The woman lifted an empty wicker basket and turned toward Lyra. “Not expecting. Just hoping. Not for you, for anyone.” She stepped closer. “You see, Sar built this inn two years ago, right after he finished the mill. Other than the two men who work with him, nobody ever comes here.”

“Sar?”

“My husband.” The woman held out her hand and Lyra grasped it, finding it firm and calloused. “I’m Ruth. Sar and I run this place.”

Ruth led them inside and Lyra gave her the small chunk of gold in return for a room, dinner, breakfast, and food for the road. Explaining that the inn was empty, Ruth told them to make their way upstairs and choose any room.

Lyra climbed the stairs with Cal a step behind. Turning down the hallway, she opened the first door and found that it contained a bed large enough for two. Her mouth grew dry as she stared at the bed, her stomach twisting as she considered what to say, what to do.

“I’ll take one of the other rooms,” Cal said.

She grabbed his arm, swallowing hard as she fought her nerves. “You don’t have to do that…unless you want to.”

“Are you sure?”

Lyra shrugged. “We’ve slept together in the forest for the past two nights. I dare say that this is a sizeable improvement.”

“True.”

“Besides…I enjoy having you beside me.”

He smiled and slid close to her, his hand sweeping stray black strands of hair aside as he caressed her cheek.

“I like being with you, too.”

Lyra knew that the kiss was coming. Her pounding heart warned her of it and demanded that she respond. He leaned close, his breath tickling her neck and causing her pulse to quicken. The tension increased as his lips brushed across her cheek, holding a hair's width from her lips for a moment. Unable to resist any longer, she pressed her lips into his and was overcome by a warm rush, beginning at her head and rapidly expanding until even her toes tingled. His hands gently gripped her hips and eased toward the small of her back, pulling her body against his. Lyra lost herself in the moment, deciding that she'd happily have it last forever.

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Lyra moved past the tree line and stopped to stare at the scene before her. The glass-like surface of the lake reflected the snow-capped mountains and clouds above – a mirror of beauty reflecting beauty. She kicked a small stone into the water, sending a series of ripples across the surface, moving outward in a circle until they collided with land or faded into the distance.

"This is perfect." Cal announced. "This is where we need to be. I know it."

"This place is certainly pristine. We haven't even seen a trail for two days. Not much corruption happening here."

"Exactly."

He took her hand, and they walked along the western shoreline that was covered in long grass and forest undergrowth. Lyra's boots were wet, as they had been for days. Dew on the shrubs, grass, and ferns that covered the forest floor remained for most of the day, unable to dry with the canopy above blocking the sun. Lyra's attempts to avoid it ceased days ago.

She spotted something dark in the woods to the north, her eyes narrowing as she tried to discern its nature.

"There's something ahead."

Cal turned from the lake, facing toward where she pointed. "Let's check it out."

As they drew closer, she realized that it was a building, set in a small clearing just west of the lake. Built from logs, aged and gray, the cabin appeared

long-abandoned by the way the forest undergrowth surrounded it. A windowless door faced the lake, the wood weathered to match the logs. The window beside the door was intact, but caked in splotches of dirt and forest debris. Heavy green moss covered the north side of the roof and clung to the wall on that side.

Cal pushed his way through the undergrowth and approached the door, his knock echoing in the glade.

“Why did you knock?”

“It never hurts to be polite.”

“I’m not so sure. I’ve always considered politeness overrated.”

“Really? I’ve never noticed.” Cal grinned at his own sarcasm.

Lyra hit him in the shoulder.

“Ouch.”

“Stop your bellyaching and open the door.”

As instructed, Cal turned the knob and opened the door. A drawn-out creak from the hinges reverberated in the peaceful setting, protesting the interruption of a dormant existence. Morning sunlight streamed into the cabin, a beam of light that revealed a sitting room with a sofa, a table, and a rocking chair. A thick layer of dust covered everything, marked by tracks from rodents that had recently occupied the space. However, what drew Lyra’s attention was the rocker, or more specifically, the cobweb-covered skeleton that rested in it.

Old and tattered clothing clung to the dead man, his tunic gray and colorless; his trousers might be black beneath the dust. The man’s crusty skull was tilted to the side.

Cal set his pack down beside the door, along with the axe he had purchased from Sar. He approached the skeleton and gently took the man’s bony hand in his.

“I don’t see any weapons or wounds. It looks like he just fell asleep in the chair and never woke.”

A nod was Lyra’s only response. She turned from the dead man and surveyed the rest of the building.

Perhaps six strides across and twice the length, the cabin consisted of a single room, its only walls those that separated the interior from the exterior. The

ceiling was open, vaulted at the apex with rounded beams running the width of the cabin to support it. A fireplace stood at one end of the room, built of rounded stones mortared together, its arched opening black with soot. An iron poker leaned against the fireplace. On the hearth beside the poker, stood a black kettle, empty save for a layer of dust. Tall shelving ran along the wall to one side of the fireplace, filled with plates, bowls, towels, and various tools. A table with two chairs occupied the space before the shelves. Pots and pans dangled above the table, hanging from hooks secured to the beam that ran overhead.

A bed and a nightstand stood to the other side of the fireplace. Despite the dust coating the, it was pulled tight and clear of wrinkles, as if the owner had expected company. A chest stood at the foot of the bed. Built from dark red wood panels held together with copper brackets, now tarnished to a milky green.

“I think this man has been dead for a long time,” Lyra noted.

“Yes, but the place appears to be in good shape. I think we can make it work.”

She turned toward him. “You want to live here?”

He smiled. “Its good place for a new start.”

Exhausted, Lyra sat on the front step and dried her brow with the back of her arm. She felt thankful for the clothing Ruth had allowed her to purchase. Despite the loose fit, it enabled her to work without dirtying her Tantarri outfit, which sorely needed washing anyway.

She surveyed her work, the glade surrounding the cabin now clear of brush, replaced by rows of churned earth. It had taken two days, but she had finally planted every seed they had purchased from Ruth. It being mid-summer, Lyra just hoped that the vegetables had enough time to grow before the first frost. At their elevation, it would get cold in the fall, and snow in the winter. The thought of snow excited her, having never lived with it. At the same time, she knew that cold weather made life difficult, sure to slow any travel and forever laced with the danger of freezing to death.

Cal approached, carrying a dead crowster by the feet, the large bird swaying to the beat of his stride.

“The trap worked. I caught us dinner and then some.”

Lyra stood. “Good. I welcome the idea of a hot meal.”

He passed her, entering the cabin. She followed, closing the door behind them. Her gaze swept around the room, recalling how it had looked four days past.

They had buried the man’s skeleton, marking his grave with a pile of stones. The dust was now absent, the cobwebs as well. Even the window had been cleaned, exposing the amazing view of the lake and mountains beyond. Lyra had washed the bedding using a bar of soap and cold lake water, while Cal cleared away the foliage that had filled the glade surrounding the cabin. Within two days, it began to seem like a home.

“I’ll get the fire started, and we can fashion a spit to cook the bird.”

Lyra thought back to the conveniences of her previous life with Cal. “When are you going to make a magic oven, like the one we had at Mystic Manor?”

He glanced toward her as he set the bird down and shoved some bark beneath the wood stacked in the fireplace.

“I’m not.”

“What? Why?”

“No more *Infusion*.” Cal pulled the flint out and struck it twice before a spark ignited and the bark began to smolder. “Think about what happened with *The Hand*. Look at the monsters they created with it.” He blew on the bark and a flame appeared, flickering as it grew larger. “I don’t think the world is ready for the responsibility of permanent augmentations.” He stood and turned toward her. “Everyone else who knew how to perform them is either dead or banished. Perhaps things will be different one day, but for now, it seems best to allow the knowledge to fade from existence.”

“Wait. So no cold box to keep food fresh? No floating pack to help carry heavy goods?”

He shook his head, appearing quite serious. “Nope.”

Lyra sat on the sofa, collapsing in defeat. “Fine. You might be right, but

those things made life…easier.”

“That’s why I made them in the first place. Things are different now, so we’ll just have to live with the same daily difficulties as everyone else.”

A sigh escaped as she resigned herself to his plan. *However, what other plans does he have? What is he not telling me?*

“Cal.”

“Yes, Lyra.”

“I need to know. What’s next? This place is livable now, but that doesn’t address the bigger picture.”

He sat in the chair, facing her.

“I’ve been thinking about that. I’d like to start a school, where I can teach others magic and share Issal’s message. I just need to figure out how to make it happen.”

Lyra nodded. “You need gold. I have gold, remember.”

“You’re right, but I’ll need more. I need to pull a lot of people here. We need enough gold to build a village. And with the village, I’ll build the school.”

Lyra smiled. “I know where we can get more. Lots more.”

“The cave?”

She nodded. “Yes. I can find it. I know it. There, we’ll have enough gold to pay for anything you need.”

He sat back, rubbing his chin in thought. “That might work. If we get started this summer, we can add a few buildings before winter hits. Next year, we can bring more people and begin on building the school.”

“And, while we’re at the cave, we can gather more of this glowing stone. With it, we can make and sell glowing lamps…lamps that shed light without the need for fire.” Lyra thought of her own home burning down after tipping a candle. “No more home fires from candles. No more torches. No more smoke.”

Cal laughed. “Glowing lamps.” He nodded. “That’s good. That’s the kind of thing we need to make the world a better place.”

He stood and took two steps, kneeling before her. “I can’t do any of this on my own. Even while we were apart, your memory was a source of stability and strength for me. You are my foundation, Lyra. I would collapse without you.”

Lyra's heart quickened as she stared into Cal's eyes, sensing the direction of his words.

"Despite my abilities, I find that your beauty, your wit, and your spirit are the things that make my life magical. Lyra, I would consider myself blessed by Issal himself if you would agree to be my wife."

Lyra bit her lip, trying to contain the emotions stirring inside. A tear tracked down her face and a giggle slipped out before she could form words.

"I would be honored to be your wife, Cal."

His eyes lit up and he hugged her tightly while she returned his embrace. Relaxing his grip, he gave her a tender kiss and stood, extending his hand toward her.

"Before Issal, I pledge myself to you, to love you and to support you, for as long as we live."

He pulled her to her feet.

"What's happening?" she asked.

"As a minister of Issal, I'm marrying us."

"You can do that?"

He shrugged. "The Ministry is gone. I'm about to start it anew, but as its only member, nobody can tell me that I can't declare us married."

A smile spread across her face. "I'll play along." She dropped the smile, donning a serious expression. "I, Lyra Jane Tascalli, pledge my love and support to you for as long as we live."

Cal held her face and gave her a tender kiss, smiling as he pulled back and stared into her eyes. Lyra had never been happier. Despite the loss of her father, the deaths of Garrett and Tallinor, and numerous trials along the way, her path had led her to this. To spend the rest of her life with Cal and help him make the world a better place, she would have traded anything in the world. His dreams inspired her and had become her own dreams as well.

He took her hands in his and stood tall and proud. "As a minister of Issal, I formally declare us Mister and Misses Pascal Harman Fallbrandt."

“Wait,” Harman interjected, leaning forward. “Mother told me that I’m named after Grandpa Harman. Is he named after this Pascal guy?”

Jane laughed. “Sort of. Your grandfather *is* this Pascal guy.”

“What? But I thought his name is Harman.”

“His middle name is Harman. I started calling him that shortly after we were married. At the same time, he began calling me Jane.” She shrugged. “Cal and Lyra were a bit too famous, and we feared that trouble might follow them. When your grandpa founded the Academy and restarted the church of Issal, he told others that he was Pascal’s brother, since the name held sufficient notoriety to help gather Issal’s followers. He told everyone that Pascal was the founder, and that he was helping him. Despite never actually seeing this mythical brother, nobody suspected that Pascal and Harman were actually the same person.”

“You’re telling me that this entire story was about you, Grandma?”

Jane smiled and stood, gathering the empty plates. “I never said it wasn’t about me.”

Harman stared at his grandmother, thinking back on the story. He began to see her in a new light, noticing her wit, her youthful attitude, tempered by wisdom. It finally clicked. She *was* Lyra.

Breaking from his reverie, he turned toward her. “So, what happened next?”

She glanced up as she rinsed the plates in a pot of water. “We soon made a trip south and found Wayport under Kalimar’s rule. Other than having a different man in charge and finding armored soldiers patrolling the streets, not much had changed. It took little convincing to gather a handful of families to journey north with us. We soon had six buildings built beside the little cabin we called home.”

Using a towel, she dried the plates and set them on a shelf. “The following spring, I convinced Cal to visit the Tantarri with me. Gar, now called Garamon as some sort of vaunted title, offered us two horses as a wedding gift. It took us some time to become proficient riders, but the added speed completely changed our ability to travel and greatly expanded our range. Over the next few years, we made trips to Vinacci, Kalimar, and even Hurnsdom, recruiting families to join us in Fallbrandt. Soon, the village grew to a town, and the pace of construction at the Academy increased. Even so, the building that stands now is the result of

decades of work. I believe it is large enough for hundreds of students and faculty to live there. Someday, we hope to fill those rooms, but progress remains slow."

"I'm to move into one of those rooms next week."

"Yes, but only if you pass the exam." Jane stared hard at Harman, her expression serious "An education at the Academy will expand your possible paths in life. You might even exhibit skill with magic, like your grandfather. There might be a few Ministry members who can do the things he can, but I have yet to see anyone who is his equal."

Harman grinned. "Perhaps he'll teach me?"

"He'll be back soon. You can ask him. But don't expect much unless you're a student at the Academy first."

"But my father cannot do many of the things from your story."

Jane shrugged. "Your father is a healer, but he never exhibited the knack for other magic. He eventually left the Academy and agreed to start a temple in Nor Torin. That's where he met your mother."

"Yes, that's a story I have heard numerous times." Harman stood. "Excuse me, ma'am. I want to study a bit more before tomorrow's test."

She nodded. "Very well."

Harman turned toward the stairs, stopping after a step.

"I'm curious. You know the song you taught me when I was little? The one children sing when playing knucklebones?"

Jane smiled. "Yes."

"I find it odd that so little information about Tallinor and the Emblem Throne can be found in my history books, yet people sing of him every day."

"I wrote that song hoping that people would remember him, remember that he was a good king and a man of integrity."

"You wrote the song?"

She shrugged. "Yes. Perhaps you will teach it to your own grandchildren someday."

Harman grunted at the thought before darting up the stairs. He closed the door behind him and shook the glowlamp, adding blue light to the sunlight streaming through the window. Rather than setting the glowlamp down, he stared

at it, recalling that Lyra… that his grandmother had invented the first glowlamp. It seemed something so simple, yet everyone he had ever known owned one and used it daily.

He set the lamp on the desk and sat in the chair, opening a book. Thoughts of magic teased his imagination, stirring all sorts of new possibilities. Harman wondered what his future might hold, what discoveries awaited him, and what legacy he might leave behind.

The End

For more adventures in Issalia, check out The Buried Symbol, the first book in the Runes of Issalia trilogy.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

If you enjoyed reading this boxed set, your adventure need not end here. **Runes of Issalia** is an epic trilogy featuring the return of a long lost magic…and an ancient evil. The story begins with **The Buried Symbol**.

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Best Wishes,
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