

Chapter 20

The group packed up to continue with their journey, Sheba just coming back when Rayza had mounted. She got introduced to the newcomer and then got up on Prancer in a flawless graceful move, that didn't go unnoticed by either Nuri or Aris. Both watched her fascinated; the Fire Elementar praising her command of her body, the Wind Elementar envious of it given his size and his consequently often clumsy appearance.

Sheba was entirely unimpressed by the attention she received, being more concerned with staying unrecognized. Nuri was a threat as he had yet to prove he could be trusted. If he found her out, it could very well mean her end, she thought. She had felt the man approach, which was why she had left to disguise herself once more. She had put on her ordinary servant clothes, and had put on her black riding robe which left only her eyes and the upper part of her face visible. The last step had been changing her eye color into an even more innocuous brown than usual – she had gotten careless in the last days, she realized. Nia had taught her that trick early on after Rayza had advised his mate to make sure that Sheba stayed under the radar. It allowed her to freely move about without being betrayed by her outstanding cerulean eyes.

It was a pity that the Behemoth had already seen them, but he would chalk it up to the use of her power; the newcomer though would instantly make the connection to the Royal House of Pyr. So back to the maid routine it was. Thanks to the oath bond she had a safety line in place; yet another proof that everything happened for a reason.

The train moved at a steady pace, conversation flowing easily between the men. Even Rayza participated actively, enjoying the company for once. It hadn't escaped his notice that Sheba had changed her appearance again, and he was glad that she was cautious of Nuri. He didn't think that the boy or his family were sympathizers of the Traitor, but one careless word could bring massive danger at their door step. So her disguise would be crucial. Thank Nyx, nobody ever gave a second thought to a servant.

In the evening, the group set up camp on a somewhat secluded clearing off the road, the carts hidden by the trees that separated them from curious eyes. The Guard took up their watch after enjoying a short meal, leaving the Princes and the Fire Elementars to themselves. After choosing a strategic site that offered a good view of the whole clearing as their resting place, Sheba prepared a simple stew as was her duty by Rayza's and her travelling agreement.

Ever since they had first left Altahir Rayza had gladly left all the 'household' chores to her – cooking, laundry, supplies, even weapon cleaning, and making ointments were part of her duties. Presumably for her own good as it would help her in her marriage, or so he had argued; but secretly Sheba thought that her uncle was just looking for a way to hand off the more unpopular stuff coming with his life style. So not cool, but at least she had learned to care for herself – if she ever had to run for her life, she would be able to survive on her own.

Sheba was happy to see that her ruse had worked. The second she had started to set up their sleeping arrangements and put the pot on the fire, Nuri had dismissed her as unimportant. Any interest in her had vanished and was replaced by ignorance as was custom in Pyr. Esendri had no place in a world defined by strength and power. Lucky her. Now, if the Behemoth would just follow Nuri's example.

When the food was ready, she brought some to her uncle and was surprised when Aris asked her for a helping of his own. She complied, though wondering why he didn't eat his own food seeing that they had carted it through all of Aro; but if he wanted some, he would get it. It earned her a rather sincere "thanks", and then she ate her own a few yards away, leaving Rayza, Nuri and Aris in peace – Osric was under the care of Danis in a special tent to avoid any betrayal of their status. And like the good servant she presumably was, she made sure to stay out of the way, but so that she was still able to listen in on their conversation – which proved to be a smart move.

Aris had enjoyed the girl's stew, although it had a different and to him uncommon taste, and evaluated the day. The newcomer was an agreeable person, nothing like what you would expect from a Fire Elementar; but as he had learned in the last few weeks, they were a lot better than their reputation led you to believe. If you didn't rouse their anger, they were quite amicable people, he thought. The only thing he didn't understand was the recent change in Shea. After leaving Hardvell she had mostly kept her silence, answering in short, not very encouraging sentences, and it had gotten worse since the arrival of Nuri. It was as if she had a split personality: instead of the quiet but bold Fire sprite, now there was a docile, submissive, and apparently timid girl that aimed to please. One would never think her capable of an unkind word, or worse, throwing someone in a river because said someone would have tried and touched her.

There had to be a reason for that, he thought pensively; and one most likely connected to her need of a guardian. Maybe she needed to stay incognito, the same way the three brothers had donned somewhat ordinary clothes, letting people think they were a kind of lower nobility instead of royalty. Too bad they couldn't take a leaf out of the girl's book and pretend to be commoners, but that would mean that Osric needed to keep his mouth shut for once – which he couldn't do even if his life depended on it. But that was his brother for you. At least the Peacock had agreed to a less formal sort of address, dropping the 'your Highness' for a reverent 'gracious Master'. Aris shook his head in slightly amused exasperation.

"Why do you want to try out for the Hashisin? Wouldn't it be better for you, prestige-wise, to join the Royal Guard?" Nuri asked him then. "With you being nobility and all? It's what I would do in your stead – but being working class, the only way for me to get some standing is become a Hashisin as commoners are not accepted in the Guard."

"Yeah, well, it's custom in our family that every male suitable attends the tryouts. It doesn't really matter if you make it or not, it's the idea that counts. But if you make it, then you will be an asset to the family and can get high up in the chain of command of Aro's army, but you have to have a certain level of power and excellent command of it. No one wants someone to lose control over a blizzard, now do you?"

"Ugh, no. That would be like losing oneself in a wildfire and burn your home down in the process." Nuri shuddered in horror. "Thank Nyx, those are rare. I think it takes a very

special person with a strong personality to master that kind of power, though. Is it the same with Aro that people that strong are mostly members of the Royal House?"

"Sure, they are the protectors of the kingdom and their leaders – they have to be the strongest. That's why every prince or princess has to marry another of royal descent. It wouldn't do to water the blood lines with weak offspring. Or so my father told me."

"Nice," Nuri drawled. "But wouldn't you know it, I can top that. In Pyr, every Royal odd one out is married off to some desperate prince or other in the hopes of producing at least powerful children, or, if that's not an option, this person is cast out of the family."

Aris raised his brows at that. "Really? Isn't that somewhat cold and...cruel?"

"I'm sorry to say that this is true," Onyx joined the conversation. "But there's a very good reason for it: in order to survive at court you have to be at least as strong as the majority there, and usually courtiers are only second to the royal family. You know the spiel; it's the same in Aro and every other kingdom. You are wrong in one thing, though, Nuri An-Inis: Esendri royals, as rare as they are, are not cast out – they are given the right to live their life the way they want to without protocol, pressure or restricting roles. Most find it rather great, especially after a lifetime of ridicule and backstabbing."

Rayza had hoped that that would apply to Sheba, too, but that hope was dwindling rapidly. Even if she were powerless for real, Kara and Tarek would still try their best to find someone willing to marry her. And they would succeed, because the only time Fire was not the dominating element of a mixed pair was if a strong Elementar of Sol mated with an

Esendri Fire person. At least Sheba had the right to veto her family's decision on reasonable terms. And his niece could be very cunning if she didn't want to do something.

"So," Nuri said tentatively, but with a certain excited undertone, "they would be free to marry whom they wanted to?"

"That's part of it, yes," Rayza answered, wary of the boy's satisfaction. "Why?"

"Well, perhaps I would have a legitimate chance of marrying the Princess then, wouldn't I?"

"What?" Rayza asked, dumbfounded. "Why would she take you in the first place?"

"Huh? How so?" Aris sputtered in confusion. "And what princess? I thought Pyr had an Heir? To ascend the throne the day he is of age?"

He had thought he knew about the major players of every Royal House; to suddenly hear about a princess left him stunned.

“The Princess of Pyr, the Heir’s sister? You’ve never heard of her?” Nuri replied, astonished.

“Um no, apparently not. What’s the deal with her?”

“Nothing, really. The Heir’s sister is said to be Esendri and has disappeared about five or six years ago; not that she ever was high profile, but at least everyone knew where to find her. I’d say the risk got too high to let both Prince and Princess remain in one location, and given her lack of power she would be a tempting target. Although she might not be important in terms of strength, her death would have been devastating for morale. No one has ever seen her since, but there are rather persistent rumors that she is living somewhere in Ter as a farmer’s daughter.”

Aris blinked at that piece of information. He knew about Benali the Traitor and the brutal death of Maris and Diarsa An-Pyr of course, but the Princess was news to him. His teachers had only ever mentioned Tarek, the Heir and sole survivor of the direct line, and the two brothers of the King: Kara, the Regent, and Rayza, a high ranking Warrior of the King’s Guard. The Regent was residing in Altahir, reigning over Pyr until the Heir would be of age in a few years – in Pyr, you were considered an adult at twenty-one instead of Aro’s twenty-five; and the Warrior brother was still a member of the Guard that now protected the empty fortress in Pyras. But no word about a princess however weak – why would crucial information like that be hidden from him, he thought, suspicious.

“I have never heard of a Princess of Pyr, which is strange because our Erudites were anal about the royal lines.” He shook his head in disbelief. “So, what’s her name then?”

“That I don’t exactly know. Everyone has only ever spoken of her as “the girl” or “her Highness,” but I think I remember her nurse calling her something like ‘Tamris’.”

At Nuri’s words Rayza stiffened slightly. That hit too close to home for his taste and brought back memories of times long ago. Although he had wanted Sheba out of sight, he had never intended to let her totally disappear. He hadn’t realized that her name was already a weak memory in the minds of her people.

“I think the name was Timaris, Nuri,” he said quietly.

The young man regarded him thoughtfully and finally nodded. "Yes, of course. Timaris makes sense. So, you know of her then?"

"What does that name mean?" Aris piped up, curious.

"Timaris means daughter of Maris. Which she is." Another thought bothered Rayza and he turned to Nuri. "How come you heard a nurse call the princess by that name?"

"I once saw her in the streets of Pyras when my father took me with him for buying supplies. The royal family was making a tour through the city, visiting the market and shops in the vendors' quarter. By Nyx, they were all looking so beautiful in their scarlet robes! I remember that I was stunned by their appearance; the Queen and the Heir with their chestnut hair and eyes reminded me of the rich soils of Ter.

But the King with his impressive height, jet-black hair, and blue eyes and the Princess looking just like him simply were awe inspiring. They looked every inch the proud leaders of our land. I had never seen anything like that before, and I have never seen the same since.

The Princess must have been about five or six then, but she was the most beautiful girl I had ever laid my eyes on. I decided then and there that if I ever was to mate it would be with someone like her. And she proved me right when she went and picked up a little girl's doll that the Heir had carelessly thrown into the dirt. Her Highness wiped off the grime and gave it back to her, telling her that her doll was special and amazing and that she would be proud to own a treasure like that. She told the girl to take good care of the toy and cherish it. Then the Princess apologized for the Heir's action, saying something like that he was a boy and didn't know any better.

Her kindness was so unexpected but just so...right. I don't know any other word for it. Timaris An-Pyr was everything you could wish for in a princess. So, if I ever get the chance to court her, I will seize the opportunity with both hands, Esendri or not. As Hashisin I'd be strong enough to protect her, and the Guild and its network will hopefully help me finding her."

He paused a moment, taking in the stunned faces of Rayza and Aris.

"And before you say anything, I know the chances of that happening are close to nil and that there's no guarantee that she would even accept me; and maybe she isn't the same person anymore, *but* if she was and if I happened to be to her liking, I would go for her. Wouldn't it be better for her to be mated to a Fire Elementar than sold to some idiot prince of a foreign kingdom with foreign customs?"

“One would think so, Nuri; unfortunately, politics and peace are often held in much more regard than personal happiness, especially when it comes to royalty,” Rayza replied very calm and collected, though a bit sad at the truth of Nuri’s words. “However, you will have to succeed in the tryouts and finish your apprenticeship if you’ll ever want to get the chance to court her. Plus, you’ll not only have to find her, but you will have to find her in time. Wouldn’t do you any good to track her down only to realize that she has already been married off to someone.”

Aris had said nothing to the story, still digesting the fact that there was a princess around he didn’t know of. He couldn’t shake the feeling that his father was behind all that. The Esendri Princess of Pyr would make the perfect candidate for his future mate, he thought with dread. He knew that his unusual hot temper was a great deterrent for every family to give a daughter to him; he wasn’t particularly thrilled by it, but so far the advantages had outweighed. No responsibility for anyone but himself, and the freedom to do as he liked. It was a good deal in his book. Except for the Osric thing though – a somewhat necessary evil – but that wouldn’t change so long as he stayed at Isburg. He would always have to take the blame and punishment for the Heir; but when his brother would become King, that personal aspect would disappear and Aris would be free to protect Osric by wiping the floor with everyone stupid enough to offend the House of Aro.

So, an Esendri princess who wouldn’t challenge him or his temper would be the perfect fit in his father’s kingly eyes: her family happy to eventually have her handed off in style to someone who could protect her and would be lucky to get someone of royal descent. If Nuri’s rumors were true, then she was already used to a climate other than the desert – the transition to the cold of Aro would be an easy one for her then.

“Sol, no,” he screamed in his head, that couldn’t be true. With his nineteen years, he wasn’t even of age, not for another six years, and shouldn’t be thinking about mating in any way. Seeing as he was second to the throne of Aro and one of the kingdom’s best Warriors, he had been taught early on the importance of beneficial relations as well as his duty to contribute to the prosperity of Aro.

What a thought, the scary Warrior taking a meek mate. He knew it was sensible everything considered, but he had always been attracted to strength, hoping for someone

taking him on fearlessly. There had to be a compromise between the timid mouse and the preying cat for a mate, he desperately prayed to the Gods; but as much as he rejected the whole idea of mating with a weak female, Aris realized that this was exactly where his future lay. He suddenly got a chill, feeling as if someone was walking over his grave.

But he had time yet, he thought, so he concentrated on something else – like his surroundings. He decided to take a short walk around to clear his head and soak up the familiar scenery, scents, and sounds of his homeland. He got up and excused himself pleading a call of nature; no one needed to know that he meant it quite literally.

Rayza used his mental connection to ask Sheba if she had any memory of the incident Nuri was talking about.

“Always rooting for the underdog, Amadri, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, well. She was such an elfin little girl; so in awe of us, but heartbroken when her favorite doll ended up on the ground.”

She sent Rayza an image of the three- or four-year-old girl standing forlorn and disillusioned in the streets, trying to get to her toy.

“She died a few years back in an accident; apparently she wasn’t strong enough to handle a spreading Fire and got consumed by it.”

“Did you keep tabs on her?” he asked, once more astounded of her knowledge.

“I picked it up on a market some time ago. You know how people are, always gossiping. She was An-Inis’ daughter. I think that’s part of why Nuri decided to go to Aliaenar. Take care that you consider that in your decision; he will make a fine Hashisin, but he comes with baggage. And guilt can lead straight into hell pretty fast.” She paused in an effort to deal with the sudden heavy feeling the memory had brought.

“You should have told me, Amadri. You are so much like your father sometimes, always keeping things close,” Rayza told her dismayed. “How did you know I was interested in Nuri?”

“You know I can read you like a book,” she answered smugly, then warned him in a serious tone. “Don’t underestimate the situation, Rayza. You know how that might turn out.”

“Yeah, I do; and I have to live with that knowledge every day. How come you are so astute? Shouldn’t you be fretting over clothes, boys, or whatever it is girls your age fret over?” he asked her with a sigh.

“Well, I wouldn’t know given my life so far,” came her sarcastic reply. “I might be young yet, but I’ve seen too much to be still so carefree and naïve. Too long darkness has been a part of my life for that; maybe that’s why.”

“Sometimes you make me forget the reason why you are with me, Sheba. I apologize if I have inadvertently hurt your feelings,” he said, sincere.

“Nah, I’m good. If you don’t need me anymore, then I’ll go for a walk. Riding all day was nice and all, but I need to stretch out my legs a bit. Call if need be.”

“Be careful, Sheba. The roads aren’t safe at night, so make sure to stay away from them. I don’t want anything happen to you.”

Rayza meant what he said; she was the only connection to his brother he had left and he had come to care for her like a daughter. The only person more important to him was his Nia, the one person alive he loved in the true sense of the word. A delighted smile showed on his face at the thought of his mate.

Rolling her eyes at him, Sheba said, “You know me; I’m much fonder of the outback than the roads. I’ll be all right; you go and talk to your would-be apprentices.”

Turning to make sure his niece had got his point, he found her already gone. She was getting exceptionally good at sneaking off, he thought. Good thing that she wasn’t interested in men yet. It would be hell to track her down if she decided to leave for a tryst.

Shuddering at the thought, he focused on the Fire Elementar in front of him, briefly wondering about Aris’ prolonged absence but deciding that the prince was more than capable to look after himself. It was time to test Sheba’s assessment of An-Inis.

“So, Nuri, I think now would be a good time to tell me about your sister and how much her death played into your decision to go for the tryouts,” he said, fixing the boy with a hard stare.

Nuri balled his fists and tried to swallow the sudden lump in his throat.

“How did you know?” he whispered in pain.

A single tear fell down his cheek as he reluctantly complied and began to tell his story. “Her name was Iosemini, but I called her Semi. She was the kindest, gentlest person in

the world and the best sister a man could have. And she died because I wasn't there to help her."

Chapter 21

Aris had left the camp, motioning the sentry to stay back; he needed to be alone. Used to his solitary tendencies, the guard complied and went back to work. The Prince wandered through the woods for some time, deliberately staying out of sight and away from the road. Finally he reached a clearing, a cliff really, below him a steep with a small lake at its bottom. It was beautiful: the autumn moon sent its glittering rays across the quiet water, creating a magical atmosphere full of promises.

He just stood there, thanking Sol for guiding him to this wonderful place, and soaked up the beauty of it. Slowly Aris felt the peace and content filling him that he had been looking for. His body and mind got in sync with nature around him, earth's heartbeat mirrored by his own. He let his power spread on its own, sensing it merge with the elemental power in the air surrounding him; his Wind power happy to join its source and be free of its human leashes for a while, free of control.

Because of his bliss he didn't notice the lonely figure nearing the pond below him. Alerted by a disturbance in the air, he looked for the intruder. If it was a bandit, he would gladly send him on his way minus a few body parts; if it was one of the guards, then he might let him keep the body parts but send him on his way nevertheless, he mused in a gracious mood – they knew the rules. However, it was none of the above.

Aris watched fascinated as the cloaked human turned out to be his favorite servant. The little Fire sprite apparently had decided to take a bath, he thought and contemplated if he should make himself known. Nah, he would take this as compensation for the river thing; she had seen him wet too, after all. Eye for an eye and all that, he reasoned.

Happy to get to see a little show, he was a tad disappointed that she didn't seem to undress any further. But in the end what he got was something even better. For a long moment she just stood there looking over the pond, but then he felt the air change. What was a soft cool breeze before, now began to warm, began to become hot and dry like in the midst of summer; then he smelled the distinct scent of fire. Perplexed, he looked down and

what he saw filled him with wonder – though he wasn't entirely sure if this vision was true or if it was a mirage created by the mysterious atmosphere of the place. Starting out as a little flame on the tip of her left index finger, the Fire grew in size and intensity more and more until the girl resembled a human torch, the blaze now totally encasing her. If he focused hard enough, he could make out her shape in the golden flames, but suddenly the red-golden hue of the flames changed into a brilliant blue-white that blazed with pure power.

Around the girl the world grew dark and even darker yet as if her Fire extracted every single particle of light to feed its blaze. He had heard about the phenomenon, but had dismissed it as an old wives' tale. Wind Elementars could show their power in a blizzard or hurricane encasing them; Water Elementars were able to create a large whirlpool, and Earth Elementars could move mountains – quite literally. But none of them was ever totally consumed by their power, the lines between wielder and element not only blurred but non-existent.

Amazing.

But he wondered what had gotten her so out of whack that she would resort to something like that.

Sheba had followed her power's guidance searching for a place where she could decompress; she wasn't too surprised that she was led to a place of incomparable beauty, with perfect balance of all four elements: a little pool enclosed by mountains, with a nice breeze to ensure fresh air and a bit of warmth keeping the temperature in the ideal range. It was perfect and Sheba thanked the Goddess for revealing it to her, because she was close to the point of no return, her power accumulating steadily.

The memory of Iosemini An-Inis had brought back other memories of that day too, and none of them were pleasurable. Because of helping the little girl, she had lost the others, and no one had bothered to look out for her. So she had had to make her way back to the fortress by herself – quite a feat for a five-year-old on her first trip into the city.

In the end, she had managed by asking every man or woman for directions, only to be denied access at the gates due to her deranged appearance. Her clothes had been ripped and soiled, her face streaked with dirt from where she had climbed fences and walls. It had taken three hours and Master Barin's intervention for her to get in.

The Hashisin had seen her waiting forlorn at the sides and asked a suddenly anxious guard why exactly the Princess was standing outside alone looking like a beggar. Then he had taken her up on his arms and carried her inside, providing food and shelter after washing off the grime. Master Barin had been kind to her that day, and she had never forgotten it. As she hadn't forgotten that her parents had never noticed her gone – not even her nurse – although she had stayed the night at the Warrior's.

The whole thing still served as a reminder that those who should love and protect you didn't necessarily do so. So far, those who had taken care of her had been strangers and most often Warriors; not because they liked her – no one in Pyras really did – but because it was the right thing to do; something her family couldn't be bothered to do, it seemed. It had been the last straw for her to never again put her trust and hope into someone other than herself. If anyone helped her, it was appreciated; but she never expected it anymore. It had made her self-sufficient though, and independent.

Contrary to her brother and others her age, she had learned to do things by herself; her teacher had been nature, since she apparently didn't rate a human one. When she came to live with Rayza, the only thing he was able to teach her had been more control, thus; it was amazing what you could learn just by observing the environment around you.

Now she applied something of what she had learned in those years; since no one had ever practiced it with her, she had had to learn it on her own. Like nature that decompressed by erupting when the pressure got too much, she dropped her tight leash on her power and simply let go. The little spark on her fingertip spread and continued to grow the more power poured out of her. She concentrated on her connection to the earth, something she had formed instinctively at a very young age without ever being taught; she found her center and allowed her power to take over. She knew that the second she started to think about the process she would die in the very real flames created by her element, so she put her trust and faith in the Goddess to keep her unharmed. She was aware of turning into what was called a Flame, felt the fiery blaze consume her, and let her awareness become one with her Fire.

Sheba didn't know how long it took, but when she felt the heat drop she let her mind float back into her body and took control once more. She ordered her power back inside, literally wrenching it back; she struggled for authority but never let go, finally winning that

battle of wills. She exhaled relieved and firmly leashed her power once again. After some additional wrangling, the last of the flames eventually vanished.

It amazed her every time how her body could be unharmed, no blister or burn to be found; all that remained was a sense of renewal she always thought must be what earth felt like after a wildfire.

Suddenly her power told her about another presence in the vicinity, the air speaking of a powerful Wind; her attention immediately went to what she recognized as an Elemental now somewhere above her. The Behemoth, she thought, resigned; surely he had seen her from up there. How would she explain that to him? And why had her power not warned her? She had trusted the oath bond to keep her from unconsciously exposing herself; what a mistake, she thought bitterly. Rayza sure as hell would not be pleased. But what was done was done.

Anyway, it was time for a bath, the sweat and grime of the day had to go. Figuring that he would already have harmed her if he had wanted to, she shrugged, refusing to let the peeping Tom ruin her precious alone time – and took off her tunic and pants. Ensuring that she stayed in the shadows – her body was only hers to know –, she went into the pond after opening her braid and thoroughly cleaned herself. Ducking under, she washed her enormous mass of her hair, enjoying the sensation of the cool water all over her. Feeling clean and refreshed she used her long black strands to cover most of her upper body and eventually got out of her little piece of heaven. Drying herself off with the some Fire, she even took the time to apply the same treatment to her tresses and dressed again. Her clothes had been cleansed by her Fire before – a very useful side effect in her opinion – so she was as close to being spick and span as she was likely to get these days. She sent a wave of heat in her uninvited guest's direction and left with a small smile on her face.

Aris was standing rooted to the spot, watching the vision below him in wonder. He felt a bit guilty for not turning away, but...how could he? The Fire sprite looked incredible. Dipped in light and shadow as she was, it was a tantalizing show, mesmerizing in the way her movements were in sync with the playful Tug-of-War Night and Moon engaged in. He was quite disappointed when she got out of the water, the drops glittering on her body – not

that he could see much of it due to her long silky hair and her managing to keep in the shadows – then slowly vanishing with the growing shine around her.

He felt a bit like a cradle-robbing bastard remembering her tender age, but she was smart and strong and she didn't seem to be afraid of him. It was the most powerful aphrodisiac there was for him. He had to watch out for her, he thought; if she continued to be so appealing, there was a high possibility that he would fall for her when she was all grown up – inappropriate as it was. That increasing attraction towards her could become a problem if he indeed ended up with Onyx; she would play a major part in his life the next years then.

The idea was as scaring as it was exhilarating. Focusing on Shea again, he figured she must have used her Fire in lieu of a towel to get dry again. Cool thing, he thought slightly disgruntled. Envious he remembered all those times he had been soaked, the water instantly turning to ice because of his cooler body temperature. It sure had to be nice to be warm and dry all the times.

On her leave he sensed the air change from cool autumn to a warm, promising spring breeze, and he flinched. *Busted.*

Feeling guilty but calm and energized nevertheless, despite or because of the sprite's little show, he turned to go back.

After some minutes, half way down the hill and about fifteen minutes from their camp, he was caught totally unawares by sudden company. Somehow the girl had managed to sneak up on him.

"Anything I can do for you, little sprite?" he asked her nonchalantly, secretly trying to figure out if he would be called on his poor behavior or not. However, first rule in war: never admit to anything without hard proof.

"No, why would you think so? Did you see anything on your round?" she calmly asked back, not betraying the slightest misgiving on her part.

"I was just trying to clear my mind. We do have guards for keeping watch, you know," he said warily, still waiting.

Not for a minute was he fooled into thinking she didn't recognize him up there – his power was simply too distinct for her not to.

"What are you doing here in the woods alone at this time of night, by the way?"

"I answered a call of nature, so to speak. And like you pointed out, there are guards. So no need to be afraid of the bogey man or someone watching me from afar, now is there?" she said innocently, even batting her lashes at him.

"Um, well no, I don't think so," he stammered with heated cheeks, thinking that he was developing a new habit here; quite funny considering he had a reputation of being as cold and cruel as his icy wind. "Oh, let's cut the crap, little Fire sprite, I'm sorry I watched you, but I was totally mesmerized by your blaze."

"That's what I thought. I would appreciate it if you keep that to yourself, not only because of me –it was a very private moment you witnessed – but also because Onyx would eradicate you if he ever heard about it." She paused and added, "Do you understand what I'm saying, you oversized sleigh dog?"

"Again with the name calling, sprite?" he drawled. "And I don't think that your Guardian will raise a finger because I accidentally saw you taking a bath, given that you knew I was there." That should shut her up, he thought, satisfied; time to show her who was the stronger one here. "Don't try and threaten me, little girl; you aren't going to win here," Aris spit at her, straightening and, thus, suddenly looming over her. "It's you, who wants something from me, not the other way around; so maybe you want to try a more friendly approach to get me to consider your request."

He supported his argument with some of his power, sure that it would intimidate her the same way it had so many others.

"Oh, you fool!" she scoffed. "You don't scare me with your Wind or your rank; both mean nothing to me. Intimidation only works on those who have something to lose, Big Guy. And you have certainly more on the line than me; if you want to have the best mentor possible, that is."

"Beg your pardon? What's one got to do with the other? Onyx will never base his decision solely on your opinion!"

"No, of course he won't do that. However, he appreciates his peace and won't do something to jeopardize it; not if he can avoid it," she said smugly.

"Oh, but I'd think it would be you who would have to go, not me. You don't really believe you, an underage female, can stay in Aliaenar with a bunch of Warriors? He wouldn't do that. I'm sure he has already found a place for you where you won't interfere with his work. You are too old to follow him around like a toddler and you are going to be a liability

he can't afford. Sorry, but that's the truth; the Guild always comes first – meaning the apprentice ending up with him comes first!”

“I am very much aware of that fact, your Highness; and what you say has certainly merit. However, there's no other place for me to go, no one who would or could keep me for that length of time; so, Aliaenar it is. And like I said he likes his peace and will choose accordingly, meaning that he will go for an apprentice who won't clash with me at every opportunity. So, *you* might want to rethink your attitude – especially with your competition sitting at your very own campfire regaling Onyx with stories about *home!*”

Aris had stopped during her little speech and stared at her unabashedly. “You've got nowhere else to go? But...Why? And since when is a little-more-than-average Fire Warrior competition?”

“No, I don't. I know that I would have to go if there was a place for me; like I said, I have nothing to lose here.” Sheba swallowed the lump that had formed at her words and concentrated on answering his second, more important, question. “And Nuri is competition because despite having not your strength or power, he does have something you do not: purpose and confidence. Contrary to you, he isn't trying to escape his shitty life but hoping for a chance to be *more*; be the best he can be for himself, his family, and for everyone else in need of his help. Simply put: he has the heart of a Hashisin.”

“What makes you think I don't have that? And from what would I be running?” Aris asked, taken aback.

“You aren't going to Aliaenar primarily to become a Hashisin, but to get away from your life – even if it is just for five measly years. You are running from yourself, my Prince; and I know because I'd be doing the same – I simply don't have a place to run to.” She took a deep breath and said, “A piece of advice though: you need to come to terms with your life eventually – whatever it is.”

“I don't know what it is that put you in your current situation, but whatever it is you think I'm running from– I'm not! I'm a Prince of Aro, for Sol's sake; so keep your unwanted advice to yourself!”

He shot her a look of barely concealed hostility.

“A prince you may be, but one with no friends and no life beyond duty,” she exclaimed, pointing her finger at him. “And to top it off, you are the whipping boy for an irresponsible, careless megalomaniac!” she shouted at him, her anger palpable. “Yeah, why

would you run from such an empty, cold life? Why would anyone? Lie to me all you like, Ascaris Cyn-Aro, but don't lie to yourself!"

"You have no idea what my life is or isn't like! It's certainly not perfect, but it isn't bad either. How dare you criticizing something you have no knowledge of?" A pause. "And who are you to throw stones? At least I have a home and a family who loves me. At least people respect me instead of ignoring me!" Another pause. "Unlike you, I have a purpose in life!"

Shea just stared at him, hurt by the truth in his words, then her face went blank and she ignored him and went back to the camp without another word.

Aris followed her at some distance, contemplating their discussion. He could admit to himself that she hit the nail on the head with her assessment of him: he *was* running, hoping for a reprieve of his responsibilities, hoping for a chance to just be himself.

He was tired of being Osric's stand-in, shielding him from the repercussions of his foolish actions; of being Danis' guardian angel, saving him again and again from the yet another pit his brother found himself in by his own recklessness on a regular basis. It would be great to just be responsible for his own actions, perfecting his skills and follow his nature wherever it may lead him. The Hashisin training was his time of freedom before he had to go back to do his duty for his brother and Aro. No matter what she had said, it was a good reason for joining the Guild – not the same as Nuri's, apparently, but legit all the same.

The little sprite could suck her advice and unneeded words and choke on them for all he cared. So what if he had been harsh with his last words, so what if he had hurt her with them – they were the ugly truth.

When he entered the camp, he was none too pleased to find Nuri deeply in conversation with the usually tight-lipped Onyx. He would have to step up his game if he wanted to win against the young Fire Elementar. But since Onyx came with the sprite, maybe he should settle for someone else; five years of constant emotional battle was not how he had envisioned his time in Aliaenar.

He bid everyone a good night and went to his tent, purposely ignoring the area where the Hashisin and the pest had set up their pallets, only to find Danis waiting for him inside lying on his cot.

What now, he wondered morosely.

He raised a brow and motioned with his hand for his brother to speak.

“What’s up, big bro? That look does nothing for you, you know?” the irreverent brat said, looking at him questioningly.

Knowing that he was running straight into that one, he asked nevertheless. “What look?”

“The sourpuss one! What, are you already regretting your decision to let the Fire Elementar stay?”

“Something like that,” he answered with a sigh. “What do you want, Danis? I’m tired.”

“I just wanted to talk to you for a while; I’m fed up with Osric’s idea of conversation. You know, the one where every sentence begins with ‘me, myself and I’? But I got him under control – he wouldn’t risk his hide for nothing. Small mercies, but mercies all the same.” Danis sighed and went on in his musings, neglecting his brother’s tired state. “Do you think Kerissa is all right? We are gone for a day yet, but I can’t seem to stop thinking about her. And in your opinion, do you really believe I can make the tryouts? I wouldn’t want to come back to her with nothing to show for my absence, you know?”

Aris changed his clothes, got comfortable on his bed, and settled for a longer conversation. In his own way, Danis was as self-centered as Osric though less careless in his words – mostly.

He thought about his little brother’s questions, slightly envious of his relationship to Master Ham’s daughter. At times, he wished for a mate too, imagining the comfort of a loving caress and the intimacy that came with knowing someone that well.

He was aware of women, no surprise there, but either he didn’t have the time to pursue anything or they shied away because of his fear-inducing appearance. And those who didn’t were only interested in a quick lay to brag about later; he was simply a dare to most as he had found out. It stung, but that was what Hareems were for. Not that he had ever visited one, the thought not really appealing seeing that what he was in search for was a connection to someone; but beggars can’t be choosers and all that, so that was where he would end up. If he thought about it, his father’s plans went in the right direction; if he only could choose his mate for himself – and if she would have him, of course.

Dreams, he thought deflated, nothing but idle dreams.

“Your future mate is likely to be in bed by now, fast asleep after a day of mooning over you. And...”

“You really think so? ‘Cause that would be awesome, you know. And romantic. Don’t forget romantic.” Another sigh, this time love-struck, though.

“And, as I wanted to say before you so rudely interrupted me, I’m sure you will make the tryouts – you are the same level as our newcomer and he will do well enough in my opinion. Even if you failed, you wouldn’t come with empty hands to Kerissa – you *are* a Prince of Aro, after all; that should count for something, don’t you think?” Aris didn’t think that Danis would like that, but it was true.

“Uh, usually it would; but in case of Master Ham I think he is more interested in who I am as a person than in my status; the same goes for Eadraed. She even went as far as to threaten my privates if I so much as set a foot in her village without having accomplished something of worth.” His face showing his desperation and fear, he added, “So not a commendable conversation, let me tell you!”

Aris winced at his brother’s words and muttered in male commiseration, “Yeah, I can imagine.” A pause, then, “And you do have personality, Danis. If you love someone then you hold nothing back and will give everything you have to ensure your mate’s happiness. Don’t forget that.”

Seeing his brother nod, he said, “And now please be a good brother and leave me be.” Getting no reply he just got up, grabbed Danis’ scruff, and simply thrust him out. “Good night!”

Dusting off his hands, he returned to his bed and lost himself in dreams about a beautiful sprite bathed in moonlight.

Sheba had watched Danis being thrown out of Aris’ tent and smiled evilly. If she was lucky, he would go out of his way from now on to keep his distance until they reached Aliaenar. It wasn’t that she didn’t like him per se, but something about him rubbed her the wrong way – even as his build and strength appealed to her. Strange world, she thought, taking a last look at her uncle and Nuri, wondering why the young Fire Elementar left her cold, even without considering his openly professed affection for her.

Strange world, indeed.

Chapter 22

The next days of their journey followed the course set by the first: getting up before dawn, riding for about four hours, breakfast, riding again, a late lunch in the afternoon, some more riding, and finally setting up camp somewhere. Although getting along faster every day due to the rapidly dwindling supplies, the ride got harder on the last stage because they had to cross the mountain pass connecting Aro with Aliaenar. It was one of the steepest and most challenging routes to the Hashisin fortress, the other Kingdoms having easy or at least easier access due to their plain or undulating grounds. Sheba had never travelled this road and took in every nook and cranny with eagle eyes. It amazed her every time how the people of Aro had managed to build a path through the rocky lands.

Up on the mountain it was the three Fire Elementars' task to keep the train warm; Sheba was – surprise, surprise – in charge of kitchen duty, Onyx and Nuri were responsible for the camp fire, and the Wind people kept the ice and heavy snow at bay. Or at least tried to, she thought disgruntled, as she wiped her face clean for the tenth time in fifteen minutes. She was cold, cranky, and to top it off, wet; her coat and cloak not really made for such weather. But she never said a word, aware that it would reflect poorly on Rayza who took the whole situation with his usual stoic acceptance.

Nuri, on the other hand, expressed his opinion quite frequently and loud at that. It was fun to watch the Wind Elementars secretly rolling their eyes at him if they were not outright laughing at his rather creative and innovative cursing. Even Osric seemed impressed, for once silent since he had to concentrate on the weather; so maybe the snow was at least good for one thing.

Thank Nyx, they would reach their destination tomorrow and things were going back to normal then: only Rayza and her co-existing in peaceful silence. Sheba knew that most of her cranky mood was caused by the constant company with no way to escape for even a small amount of time. They had to stay close the higher they went; the risk of something happening was just too great to allow for anyone to wander about alone. Even a call of

nature had to be answered within the immediate vicinity of the camp – talk about uncomfortable and embarrassing.

And Danis with his constant chatter of either Kerissa or Aliaenar was starting to grate on her nerves, too. Nuri had been quite astounded when the Prince had come up to her and began engaging her in a conversation; asked about it, Danis had answered equally astounded that she was a friend of sorts. Giving him a strange look, the Fire Elementar had shaken his head while mumbling something about weird nobility conferring with servants. Danis didn't care and just went on to pester her with yet another round of questions about his future mate. The only ones never seeking her presence were Nuri and the Behemoth, which she was tremendously grateful for because she was likely to attack the big guy in her less than stellar mood. One more day, she thought, one more day.

After dinner, when everyone who didn't have night duty started to get ready for bed, Nuri contemplated the last few days of his journey. He had the first watch with a soldier of the Guard and, thus, time at his hands while keeping the fire going despite the brutal wind, the icy temperature, and the wet logs – good thing his Fire wasn't of the natural kind.

Having left his father near Isburg with a heavy heart and trying to find his way on his own, he had found the train at the perfect time; no way in hell would he have survived this ice storm otherwise. He could warm himself just fine, but the snow was getting him cold faster than his Fire was heating him up. And nobility or not, the Wind Elementars were fine people – except for Osric that was – so the snow had turned out to be a blessing in disguise since it had shut the twerp up.

Why that one would attend the tryouts when he so clearly didn't have even the slightest chance of making it was anyone's guess. Danis had said something about it being a family tradition or something and had added that it would be entertaining at least. He had had to laugh at that, even the silent Giant had cracked a smile. Nuri liked Danis with his carefree attitude and courage to try anything; the jury was still out on the Giant though, seeing as the man had most likely set his eyes on Master Onyx for a mentor judging by their frequent discussions.

Nuri had thanked Nyx more than once since the day they started out together for leading him straight to the only two Fire Elementars he had seen in Aro in a whole month.

He didn't really believe the guardian/warden story the Hashisin had dished him; taking the girl's sash-less clothing and her silent nature into consideration, he had quickly marked her as the Hashisin's secret servant. But it was nice of him to elevate her status by his little lie.

He had to admit that she had an attractive face though, which would explain Danis' interest; even the Giant didn't seem to be immune against her, judging by the unobtrusive looks he threw her from time to time. However, Danis had informed him that it wasn't interest but wary attention – whatever that meant.

The only downside of the situation was Onyx grilling him about his sister, asking question after question about her; it had disturbed him at first, and then angered him, and then he had been lost in the memories of their good times, ending his story with tears in his eyes. In their native tongue the Warrior had told him that there was no shame in those tears as they were signs of love and cherish. It soothed his heart to hear the familiar sounds of Pyriant'ha, steering his thoughts towards happier times.

Nuri had enjoyed the talk in the end and was sure that he had passed whatever test the Hashisin had put him through, seeing that the man still talked to him. Sometimes, even the girl used their native language and he was awed every single time by the somewhat smoky tone of her voice adding a unique but melodic quality to the words that was mesmerizing. He thought her a weak charmer after that; a special kind of Muse that could charm, or rather manipulate, people and animals alike. And since it seemed to work on the horses as well, he decided that if it quacked like a duck and walked like a duck... not that she was one of course – but still.

The most important thing though was that he could deal with her and she with him, which would facilitate his apprenticeship if he could win Master Onyx for his mentor – it was his greatest advantage over the Giant, apart from being a Fire Elementar of course. But seeing that he wasn't anywhere as strong as Aris, neither Talent-wise nor physically, he would take what he got. So he decided to continue to treat the girl with respect and ignore her when alone, hoping the pale-haired man would make a mistake.

After that, Nuri thought about the coming tryouts and the apprenticeship throughout his watch until Onyx touched his shoulder and told him to go to bed. Exhausted, Nuri complied and was fast asleep within two minutes.

Rayza and Aris had the second watch, followed by Danis and Sheba; because they were an early rise and a night owl, respectively, both didn't really mind the late night shift. At two o'clock in the morning, they replaced the Hashisin and the Behemoth then. Both concentrated on their assignment at first, Sheba having less trouble since she was used to that kind of task – it being Rayza's favorite method to teach her control –, whereas Danis struggled to get his power to form a circular protective wall around them strong enough to keep the ice at bay.

In the end, Sheba assisted Danis without his knowledge, infusing his Windy wall with a little heat to facilitate his defense against the cold. It kind of astounded her that the prince didn't seem to have gotten the knack of performing that trick – she had thought it a rather basic ability to acquire. At least in Pyr that was what you started with: using your power to protect yourself; maybe they did things differently in Aro though. Power-wise, she had more than enough to share and was able to hold the campfire the whole night if she had to, even in her sleep; something she had done more than once, albeit without Rayza noticing.

To keep Danis' mind from her assistance, Sheba had struck up a conversation about Isburg – useful to her and easy for him. She had visited the Wind capital once a few years ago when Rayza had met there with Kara. It had been kind of funny, the Regent never noticing her although she had stood right next to him. The Hashisin had been a tad bit miffed at his older brother though, and had called him an oblivious twit on their parting, pointing out the danger of being ignorant to one's surroundings. It had taken Kara over fifteen minutes to get the reference and another fifteen minutes to acknowledge her; but he had seemed pleased that she was still alive and turning out to be “beautiful if not powerful,” earning him another shake of Rayza's head and a resigned “you are an idiot; a kind one, but still an idiot!” He had profusely apologized for the Regent's blunder and careless words afterwards, but she had waved the concern away. Kara's opinion of her had ceased to be of any importance a very long time ago – and rightfully so, it seemed.

However, Isburg had been stunning, hewn in the mountains as it was, and coated with ice glittering in the sun in every shade of the rainbow. It was regal, all right; but she had never gained any knowledge of the inner workings of the court due to Rayza's refusal to take her with him to his asking permission of stay.

That was a common courtesy amongst the Royals of every persuasion; who wanted to have a powerful Elementar in his realm unbeknownst to the leadership? If it weren't for

the death sentence imposed on those neglecting said courtesy, no one would ever bother to do so, Sheba thought sniffy. And they called Pyr barbaric. At least the Fire people didn't hide behind flowery words and kind gestures only to stab you in the back at the first opportunity. Pyrians explained the rules to you with sword in hand at first sight and then let you be; what you saw was what you got – and Fire Elementars always followed through with their promises. No empty threats there. Theirs was a clear-cut society, making it easy to navigate it, thank Nyx; Sheba didn't think that she would ever understand the need for cunning or sneaky manoeuvres the other Kingdoms seemed so fond of.

But she was digressing, so she turned her focus back to Danis.

“So chatterbox, how about you telling me about Aro and the shining jewel you call home to keep me from falling asleep and causing us to die of hypothermia in the process?”

“Oh, do I have to? I'd rather talk about Kerissa,” came the moaning reply.

“Come on, you whiner! I've answered most of your repetitive, love-struck questions for the last ten days, and I can't hear it anymore. So, please, give me something else to talk about or I have to deck you.”

“Hey, hey, no need for violence. All right, I'll do it, but only if you'll fully answer three more questions of mine. Do we have a deal?” he asked her expectantly.

“Damn boy, you drive a hard bargain! I'm not entirely sure that your tale is worth that much. But if you would go for two questions that I will answer as fully as I can, and explain why Osric is the way he is, it certainly would make my decision easier,” she replied looking at him guileless, but with steel in her voice. Two could play that game, she thought.

“A hard bargain? Really?” he scowled. “Says the girl who pumps me for information on my hoity-toity brother for fun! Do you know how that pains me after having to spend the last five days with him and his megalomaniac view of the world? That answer alone is worth five questions!”

“It's not and you had, what, sixteen years to get used to him? So suck it up; it's worth one question max, and only because I like you and I'm feeling generous. The same goes for Isburg.” She shot him a knowing glare. “What do you say? I can easily occupy myself otherwise, or I can even pretend to sleep and ignore you for the rest of the shift. Which shall it be?”

“Cruelty thy name is Shea! Poor me. But since I don’t want to spend the next few hours in total silence, which I know you would follow through with,” he said, shooting her a dirty look, “I will comply. But beware that I’ll get back at you for this!”

“Sure you will,” she said off-handedly. “Start with your questions then! I want to get that over with, so we can get to the good stuff!”

“Good stuff? By Sol, you’re really one strange girl, you know that? And would you let me think about it, please? I don’t want to waste them with something I already know!”

He thought about it for some time and exclaimed, “Ha, I have it! My first question will be one I’m sure not even Kerissa knows the answer to: Why did you freak out when Aris tried to touch you at the river?”

Sheba blinked, not sure how she should answer this without giving away too much; but a promise was a promise, so she had to do this somehow without frying them all. Thus, she opted for playing dumb. “Duh, because he tried to touch me as a diversion for an attack?” she said, pointing out the obvious.

“That’s not what I meant and you know it. Kerissa warned me about your evasive tendencies, so let me rephrase that: why are you afraid of touch? Who hurt you that deeply?”

“I’m not *afraid*, Danis,” she said softly, “it goes much, much further than this.” Sheba struggled to stay calm and collected in an effort to not let her power spill over at this particular memory. “Someone in my past has hurt me, just because he could. He was an evil man with a preference for inflicting pain, especially on vulnerable ones.” Sheba exhaled heavily, and tried to change the direction of her thoughts to something more positive. “Does that answer your question?”

“Um, well, yes. We imagined something along those lines when we discussed the topic. Nice to know that we were right. But why do you have a Hashisin guardian if the man is dead?”

Tilting her head, she stared at him in surprise. “But he isn’t, Danis. He disappeared before anyone could catch him.”

“Oh. That’s...inconvenient. So that’s why you don’t trust anyone?”

“Again, no – it isn’t. That was your second question, so it’s my turn now. Tell me about Osric!” she demanded, happy to concentrate on other, less painful things for a change.

“Um, no. Those two are related, aren’t they? I get that others must have broken your trust too, but I do think that it all started with the asshole who hurt you; which doesn’t surprise me in the least.”

Sheba looked at him solemnly as she pondered his naivety. She decided to do him a favor and explain it to him, as she took in his lack of understanding.

“Danis, don’t equate these feelings. For all their similarities and common ground, fear of bodily harm and distrust are not the same thing. Though one might be the consequence of the other and most often is, I assure you that’s not the case here. Those who broke my trust were not the same as the one who hurt me. If it were that easy, I would be comfortable with people touching me I do trust to a certain extent – like Kerissa or Master Ham –, wouldn’t I?”

“But you are; I’ve seen you hug Kerissa a few times!”

“Again, endurance and being comfortable is not the same; they are worlds apart, actually.”

“But, but...shit, that’s not good. It will break her heart if she finds out that you think her capable of harming you – however unintentional on your part, Shea!”

“But she already knows, Danis, and she understands; she just doesn’t know why, exactly. So no need for your worry.”

“So, just to sum it up and see if I got it right: someone hurt you, so you fear physical contact; some people broke your trust and that’s why you have issues – that’s about it?”

“Yep, that’s it in a nutshell.”

“But I’m not totally wrong in saying that your fear of touch has a strong component of distrust in general – since you don’t even give those trying to earn your trust the benefit of the doubt.” He harrumphed at that, certain that he had hit the nail on the head with that one.

He wasn’t the most emphatic person in the world, but he knew something about pain and trust; he had grown up watching Aris getting punished every time Osric had opened his mouth without thinking.

“Yeah, well, I’d like to, but my experience is telling a different story.”

“Oh, come on. There must have been some people in your past that you could have trusted wholeheartedly. Your family for one; I’m sure your parents loved you unconditionally and never did something to warrant your distrust, did they?”

Sheba just stared at him expressionlessly, refusing to outright answer his question. So she countered with her own. In a clear but gentle tone she asked him, “You mean the same way your father has protected Ascaris by sparing him unjust punishments over the years?”

That served to shut him up. Paling at the reminder, he averted his gaze in shame. “Well, you wanted to know about Isburg and why our moron is the way he is,” he said, deliberately changing the topic. “I’ll start with the second, since it’s easier. Osrice apparently was a nice little boy, as Aris tells me; but after our mother’s death our father decided to take his Heir— Osrice being a dead ringer for him — under his wings to teach him all the necessary things in an effort to forget the loss. Anyway, out of fear that something could happen to his precious boy too, my father shielded Osrice from anything — even the consequences of poor behavior. Since the offended parties insisted on punishment nevertheless, he had to find an equal stand-in for the Heir. He chose Aris, arguing that his build would enable him to take the punishments almost without noticing; and it was good for his morals, since he would never make Osrice’s mistakes then.” He sighed, and took a deep breath. “What my father failed to realize though, was that, thus, Osrice had never learned though to fight for himself or act wisely and deliberate in matters of human relations. I don’t blame my brother for his behavior, you know, because he is as much a product of his experiences as everyone else. So take that into consideration the next time you call him an oblivious peacock or you attempt to throw Aris into a river; both are good people at heart.”

“I never doubted that, Danis. It was the reason why I asked the question in the first place. But cutting Osrice some slack isn’t going to happen. He might have believed your father’s justification for Aris’ being his whipping boy when he was a child, but sometime during the last ten years he should have realized that his behavior affects and hurts Ascaris. And shouldn’t the bond between brothers be stronger than the desire of going scot-free? Or at least lead to him thinking about his actions and their consequences?”

“Put that way, I have to admit you have a point. I’ve never seen it that way before. Hmm, I’ll have to think about that for a while; in the meantime let me tell you about Isburg. As you know, it is built of stone and covered in ice, originally for defensive reasons, but nowadays it is simply decorative. Growing up there had been fun, you know, skating on the iced ponds, throwing snowballs at the Guard, and creating havoc everywhere we went...”

On and on went his tale, informing Shea about the fortress’ layout, the important players at court and gave her insight to the princes’ childhood — which had been a good one

even though they had lost their mother at an early age. She could relate to that, she thought.

Dawn came faster than she had anticipated with their easy flowing conversation and the occasional banter. It was a time well spent and she had enjoyed it more than she had thought she would. Perhaps because of the change in topic Danis hadn't even once uttered Kerissa's name, showing the playful, engaging, and friendly personality of him that had been somewhat lost in the last weeks. She sincerely hoped that it would stay that way.

When the others began to rise, she went to pack Rayza's and her things. She spent some extra time with Prancer rewarding him for his reliable services with two carrots and cube of sugar – his favorite treats. She was glad to reach Aliaenar today and Prancer whinnied happily when she told him so. He wasn't particularly impressed with the cold weather and longed for warmer lands and a comfortable stable. Even Rayza seemed antsy to get to the heart of his Guild, the place where he had learned and trained himself. Sheba wondered if the fortress would still be as awe-inspiring as it was to her four-year-old self more than a decade ago. She couldn't wait to find out.

Chapter 23

They arrived at Aliaenar in the late afternoon, all of them cheering at the sight of the fortress. At their entry gate, known as the Wind or Northern gate, they had to identify themselves and were consequently assigned a place of accommodation.

Rayza and Sheba said goodbye for the time being, their quarters located inside the fortress with the other Hashisins. They followed the main road up to the fortress, where it circled around the enormous building and went on to the Southern or Fire gate. The same system went for the Water or Eastern gate, which led to the Earth or Western gate. Aliaenar was the heart of Quiliaris, created as a safe haven and the center of command in times of war or crisis, and was designed accordingly. Right in the middle of Quiliaris, it had four gates to ensure entrance from and to every single kingdom to prevent calamities. Thus, Aliaenar was a mixture of several landscapes: mountains in the north, rivers in the east, the remnants of the desert in the south and small, green hills in the west.

The fortress itself was built out of huge stones at the beginnings of time and could give shelter to most of the people of Quiliaris, seeing as the land had been under constant attack from Maretiz in the North and the huge country of Tortaris in the East in its formational years. A few years later the Fire people had then seized the northern part of Imbra's desert in a brutal but short war, leading to new tensions between the countries. And after what was known as the Great Wars had ended, the Hashisin had taken ownership of Aliaenar, keeping the fortress in working order, just in case. It consisted of four parts – no surprise there – with their own entrances connected through the Throne Hall and the Audience chambers; each part was designed in the respective element's style and kept the often warring parties from each other's throat. Surprisingly, it worked. Everyone strictly followed the code of conduct, stating that disputes were to be solved with words not swords, and that prejudices had no place in Aliaenar. It was the one neutral place in the whole of Quiliaris and no one dared to violate the sacred haven and ruin the only chance of

peace they had. The Fire people had even designed Pyras in its like – as a reminder that there was neither place nor reason for outcasts in Quiliaris.

Sheba followed Rayza to the stables several yards from the fortress' Fire entrance. There they rubbed down a happy Prancer, providing him with food, water, and a blanket, and left him munching on some hay. Both shouldered their belongings once more and then went to their quarters, a two room suite not far from the Throne Hall. It was a sign of rank to be located that near to the center of power; the second room was of course for the apprentice who would have to live there with his mentor.

Sheba took in the sparse interior consisting of a bed, a chest and a table and sighed. At least the décor was gorgeous – Fire artwork at its finest. Another thought crossed her mind then: certainly she wouldn't have to share the second room with the apprentice, would she? No way in hell, she thought gloomily.

“Uncle, where am I going to sleep? With you or in the second room?”

“Um, in the second room?”

“Because I take it this room is meant for the apprentice, and I don't want to intrude nor do I want to live with a male not my mate for the next five years. I'm not a little child anymore and I don't think it will do anything for my reputation. Plus, I don't think your future apprentice is going to appreciate a roommate, especially one of the female persuasion; not in this exclusive gentlemen's club here. Isn't there at least a closet somewhere else for me?”

Rayza looked at her with a stunned expression and blinked a few times to lose his stupor.

“Well, shit. I didn't think about that. Sorry. And no, that certainly won't do; but you will have to wait for later for your own room, at the moment every single space is occupied. So take the spare room for now, and I will ask the Captain for proper accommodations after the tryouts.”

He turned and unpacked his things, muttering another choice word under his breath. “If you are ready, I'll show you around for a bit, but I have a meeting with the Captain later this evening, so please go to bed early. I don't want anyone to see you right now. Okay?”

Sheba rolled her eyes at him and said, “Yeah, sure. I'm tired from last night anyway. But I would appreciate some food in my near future. Don't you?”

“Now that you mention it... I think we will make a stop at the kitchens on our round.”

He had a very impish expression on his face suddenly, as if remembering something funny. Knowing him, Sheba guessed he had been a rascal in his time here and had raided the supplies on a regular basis; she wouldn't even be surprised if he was the unofficial King of Pranks here.

"Yo, baby girl, get cracking. We don't have all day!"

"Nice, Uncle, really nice. And I'm waiting for you not the other way round."

"You irreverent little shit, out with you!"

They left their suite and Rayza showed her the Fire quarter and the Audience chambers. The Throne Hall he left out since he wasn't in the mood for gut-wrenching memories.

"What do you think so far?" he wanted to know of her, after begging the cook for an early dinner which they were devouring now on a little field behind the stables while watching the sun going down.

"It reminds me of home, you know; back when everything was still okay. The atmosphere, the people, the fortress brimming with life..."

She almost choked to hold back a sob. Seeing all this, the beauty of it, the familiar layout, the familiar smell of slightly damp stone walls, the stables – she had known she missed Pyr and the desert, but she hadn't realized how much; or how much she grieved for Pyras, the only place she had ever called home.

"How can you stand it?" she asked.

He stared at her with pain in his eyes and said so softly she almost didn't hear him, "I don't."

They shared a look full of misery and grief; after some time Rayza said at last, "But I'm going to make the best of it, Amadri. There are enough good memories here to balance the ugly ones. Don't worry too much about that."

"I'll try," Sheba answered, thinking that she didn't have that much good memories to begin with and certainly not in a place she had visited only once.

In regard to her and her life, her uncle tended to whitewash her less than stellar childhood. Though she had been physically cared for – mostly – the emotional neglect had left more and deeper scars than anyone would ever know. It was like she had told Danis: her trust issues didn't come from fear of bodily harm but from being constantly let down by those close to her. What she hadn't told him was that a large part of her refusal to let

anyone close was simply self-preservation. Sheba knew instinctively that she wouldn't be able to survive another betrayal; it would drive her over the edge for good, cutting the last bonds to humanity she had left. There would be nothing left for her to believe in, to live for.

However, there still remained hope that one day she would find someone who would know her and love her just the way she was, someone that would neither look down on her or need her help. A mate in the truest sense of the word, someone her equal – it was all she had ever wanted: someone who wanted her, just her, faults and all. She hadn't given up on that yet; but with every proof to the contrary, she felt her will to hold on weaken to the point where she almost didn't care anymore which way her life was taking.

Still, she had promised to herself that she wouldn't leave this world without having lived at all; it was the only thing she was really, truly scared of, and for now it was enough to let her hang on. But because of all that, trust and reliance were commodities she couldn't afford if she wanted to find that one special someone – a vicious circle, indeed. But enough with the gloomy thoughts; there was a fortress to explore.

Sensing that Rayza was getting antsy, she told him to go to his meeting already; she was very much able to find her way back to their quarters on her own. She didn't need to be taken by the hand like a toddler, thank you very much. If she had one thing going for her, it was her extraordinary sense of orientation. Even as a little child she had always known which way to go and how to find back to where she had started.

Somewhat relieved, Rayza wished her a good day and went his way; guessing from the few words he had dropped, the private meeting was held in the Captain's quarters which originally were the chambers of the High King's general – or so she had heard. She vaguely remembered the huge three bedroom suite from her former visit, her father simply having taken her with him to every meeting regardless of its agenda. No one had ever said a word about it, as her father had been an imposing figure not to be crossed in any circumstance and he certainly had never been denied any of his wishes after he was King. And although his belief of utter invulnerability had cost him his life in the end, it had worked exceptionally well the rest of the time.

She had recognized the same attitude in Osric and even Tarek at times, and it let her fear for their future. There would come a time when someone with nothing to lose would refuse to back down and act in desperate anger towards them, and it would mark their end – because they had never expected or imagined such behavior. Their teachers hadn't done

them a favor in shielding them from real life and the consequences of their actions; more like they had unintentionally signed their death warrants with it.

After finishing her meal alone, she made her way back lost in thoughts – always keeping to the shadows, her face hidden by her cloak’s hood, as was Fire custom. She unconsciously sidestepped everyone coming her way, leaving them unaware of her presence. Sheba reached her room without incident and immediately went to bed to catch up on the sleep she lost the night before.

It never crossed her mind, nor had it Rayza’s for that matter, that her ability to merge so completely with the shadows even the best trained Warriors couldn’t detect her anymore was something exceptional – and an ability that she shouldn’t have. What was as natural as breathing for her, her power unconsciously executing her demand of going unnoticed, was a skill others had to hone for years and most never achieved her level. There was only one kind of people equal to her in that respect: Idris Warriors and *Shadow Walking* was their specialty. All of the three or four there were, were under the command of her uncle – the best spy master the Guild had.

Rayza’s meeting with the Captain of the Guard went well. Though not the same man as the one he had practiced under, the current one was as ornery and strong-willed as any of them. Somehow that seemed to be a job requirement; which made sense considering you had to keep four different factions with more or less volatile tempers in line. After reporting of his last assignment and getting a run-down of the tryouts’ procedures starting the day after tomorrow, they finally discussed his companion. If there was one man who would know what to do, it was the Captain.

“So, Rayza, how is she taking it, being here?” the man said pensively.

“As could be expected: she misses home.”

Rayza shrugged, not surprised in the least. But he didn’t think the man needed to know how painful it was for her. It had been a very private moment they had shared at dinner; his niece not one for a public display of emotion – or any display, really. It must have broken her heart all over again to ask him how he dealt with the reminder. But what he had told her was true: there were a lot of good memories to be found in this place, too.

“Are you sure she can’t go back yet?” the Captain asked.

“Yes, I am,” Rayza answered annoyed. “For whatever reason, the bastard is still searching for her and even put a warrant out on her head. The Heir is safe though – which I don’t really get. Why would he leave Tarek alone if he is the one standing between him and the crown?” he wondered. “Anyway, I had to make her swear that she would be careful and never reveal her power to anyone, as it has grown considerably over the years. You might want to imagine how that went over!” he said, his anger about the whole situation showing in a growing shine of his eyes.

If he could, he would tear the Traitor to pieces for everything he had done to his family. Not enough that he had killed his brother; no, the asshole had to go and make the girl’s life as close to hell as you could get. For that the man would pay too – with interest.

“All right, that’s what I thought, too. So, what do you propose we do with her? You are right that she can’t live in the same suite as you and the apprentice, but I can’t just put her in the servants’ quarter nor can I put her in a guest room. Both options aren’t safe. You know how the men are, especially Warriors in training: they would take every woman – willing or not – they could get their hands on. She would betray herself the second she had to defend herself. But I agree that she is the safest here under the protection of the Guild; I’ll need to think about the details, though. So, we’ll leave her where she is for now.

To come back to Benali – I think I can answer this question for you. His plan is quite simple, actually, if you think about it. Tarek is safe for now, because killing the Heir won’t bring the Traitor any points with the people; moreover, if he was king, he would still need a regent. Who would be better than a member of the Royal House for that purpose? It would be a statement of support and the boy would be easy to keep in line, from what I’ve heard. The Princess on the other hand has no such value. He can’t marry her – for obvious reasons – and of the twins she is the stronger personality; she would fight him all the way and most certainly sabotage everything he ever does. He has never underestimated her, you know, not with her being immune to his charming power. Well, that and his inexplicable but absolute hatred of the girl only allow for her death.

She was the smartest of us all, you know. The night of the murder when I told her what had happened she wasn’t the least bit surprised – she shot me a ‘I told you so’ look; and I had to agree with her. Ever since, I’ve never made the mistake of dismissing information based on someone’s intuition again. It was a vital but brutal lesson to learn, let me tell you.

“She could see through him? Even I was blind to his ways and I wasn’t as close to him as Maris. And though I did notice some of his not so favorable traits, I would never have guessed the extent of his deception!”

Rayza was shocked. For Sheba to know the bastard’s true nature she had either to be more powerful than him to neutralize his charm – and Benali was one of the strongest charmers in the whole of Quiliaris – or she had for whatever reason taken a dislike to him and simply refused to be charmed. That was the catch of being an illusionist: success depended on the compliance of the target.

“How that is possible? You know the answer to that - no bewitching someone who doesn’t want to be. What was it she said when I asked her why she would think Benali was a bad man? Ah, yes, she said, and I quote, ‘because he looks at the Queen in the wrong way, like Uncle Kara; but he looks at father with anger when he thinks no one is looking.’ She has always been perceptive, that girl. She put the whole drama at court in a single sentence years before anyone else noticed, us included.” The Captain gave a sad smile and went back to the matter at hand. “The only thing I can imagine doing about her is to give you the room adjacent to your suite and label her as an assignment; which she is, in a way. But you’ll have to make sure she keeps to her room after training and find her some work to do. I don’t know, like in the kitchens?”

“If you agree, I’ll put her in the stables. She is amazing with the horses – better than most charmers I’ve seen so far. I’d even say that’s a secondary Talent; too bad that isn’t her major one – it would make things considerably easier. She has that amazing power at her disposal, more than enough actually – always had had – but no outlet for it. But I’ll take the extra room. And every once in a while she can go visit with friends in Ter Sentra or Hardvell, which will get her out of our hair, too.”

“Still no Talent? Are you sure? I always thought she was a... Anyway, what is she called nowadays? You certainly didn’t let her keep her real name, did you?”

“She goes by Shea Onyx these days,” Rayza informed him, amused. “From ‘Little Shadow of Onyx’. Kind of funny if you ask me; but it has a certain ring to it, don’t you think? And no – still no Talent that I can see. Perhaps you can take a look at her at some time; you might find something the rest of us have overlooked. I would appreciate any help you are willing to give – maybe she would get a new perspective and view of herself if she could actually use that power of hers for its intended purpose.”

“Hm. I’ll see what I can do for her – after the tryouts, though. Now go and get some sleep; I need you well rested. Good night, your Highness,” the Captain said, his last words spoken with mock reverence.

“Good night, Chairman of the Council,” Rayza replied in the same manner and left for his suite.

Falling face first into bed, he slept soundly for the next thirty hours.

Chapter 24

Sheba awakened twenty-five hours after she had gone to bed. Finding Rayza sleeping like a stone, she decided to get something to eat and explore Aliaenar to get a feel for the place that would be her home for the foreseeable future; her last five years in freedom. She wouldn't waste them for nothing, would try to live them to the fullest – the memories would have to suffice for the rest of her life.

She went down to the kitchens' quarter, asking the cook for a light meal – some stew, two apples, Samani, and water – and put her provisions in her new black leather satchel to eat them somewhere outside under the moonlight. She found a place near the stables, a little hill with an apple tree to lean on for comfort, and enjoyed the silence and almost mystical atmosphere created by the moon's soft glow covering her surroundings in an ethereal light only heard of in fairy tales.

Feeling balanced and well-rested, she decided to go for a walk, the mountain range at the back of Aliaenar piquing her interest. Part of the Calae Mountains, its three highest peaks, God's Eye, King's Sword, and Queen's Throne, stood proudly guard over the fortress and heart of Quiliaris; sometimes they appeared looming though on a misty day, evoking a threatening feeling in the more faint-hearted people.

Sheba walked along the main road to the Northern gate, feeling a strange pull toward the mountains as if a treasure awaited her at the end of her journey. She was curious if the serenity she sensed would be as majestic and special as she hoped. Shortly before the gate she stopped and looked for a path – something, *anything* – to lead her in the right direction; she already knew that there was no path on the road they had come from.

She asked her Goddess for assistance and reached out to get a feel for her surroundings, thinking that maybe her power would pick up on a trail she had failed to discover. And, alas, there it was: to her left, a few yards from the gate, a small, seemingly overgrown goat's track wound its way up through the massive rocks and stones. Aware of

the divine power leading her in the right direction, she bowed her head in gratefulness to Nyx and continued on with her exploration.

Like a mountain lioness she followed the unused and steep trail with feline grace, executing jumps with flawless ease, climbing rocks with steady and sure movements only ever seen in four-legged beasts. Her power heated the air around her to facilitate her ascend and enhanced her night vision enabling her to see as clear as in bright daylight. It was another Idris thing, a very well-kept secret, that Nyx's children were given the sight to navigate the dark in which they were born.

After a few hours, Sheba stopped to take a breath at last, finding herself two thirds up the way in front of a makeshift crossroads. Instinctively she knew that she had to choose carefully which path to take; suddenly a sense of doom, or rather fate, filled her body.

She contemplated what she knew about the peaks above her and instantly ruled out the highest, God's Eye. It didn't seem fitting to climb up there and pretend to be godlike. Sheba had heard that it took exceptional strength both physical and power-wise to reach the top; thus, the reference to the Gods and the reason why every would-be apprentice who attempted the climb failed.

She felt deep inside her soul that she wasn't ready yet to ascend to that level of greatness – if ever. To stand side by side with the Gods, you needed to be free of the emotions chaining you to this human world; your focus had to be that of the big picture of the greater good instead of everyday skirmishes and the feelings of a single person. There was still too much humanity inside her to forget about those she loved; too much emotion tying her to this plane of existence which she wasn't willing to leave behind yet. So, God's Eye was out, leaving either King's Sword or Queen's Throne.

Both peaks were difficult to reach, King's Sword named for its sharp tip rising in the sky ground by eons of erosion, dangerous and lethal like a Hashisin's expertly wielded weapon. Protecting Aliaenar and, thus the old High King, it was obvious where it got its name from; next to the Kri-Amra, the sacred sword branding of the Hashisin, it was an unspoken requirement for the elite Warriors to climb it at least once in their life. Seeing that she had neither the Talent nor strength to become a Hashisin, she ruled out King's Sword too; she would not dishonor a tradition so sacred for those protecting Quiliaris.

So, Queen's Throne it was. Sheba sighed, looking up at the mountain to her left. Whereas King's Sword was at least approachable from both sides, brutal as it was though,

Queen's Throne had the shape of a chair: a plateau resembling the seating with a steep rising at one end like a back rest or the sharpest blade imaginable, which was impossible to conquer due to its precipitous face. Since there had never been a High Queen of Quiliaris, nor was it likely that there ever would be, the name was apt in a roundabout way; there was no throne, thus nothing to reach.

Because of the futility of the climb and its allusion to femininity, no one but the most ambitious mountaineers ever attempted to reach the top – and found their death. In living memory, there was no knowledge of anyone ever achieving this feat; there was only an old prophecy saying that once in a time of dire need, a Blessed One would claim the Throne and thus save Quiliaris.

Yeah, well, that also ruled out Queen's Throne, then. But since it was late and Sheba wasn't in the mood for a challenge, she figured that it would be okay if she just went as far as she could.

So she took the left path, secretly amused about the irony of it, or inherent truth – depending on how you looked at it: the Talent-less Fire Princess who would never be a queen of any kind trying to reach for the stars; the whole thing was set for failure from the beginning. She chuckled, slightly bitter, but all in all resigned to the fact that she was who she was and always would be.

After her argument with the Behemoth, she had thought hard about what she had told him and his replies. Though hurtful, his words had been true: in the end, he had accepted his lot way easier than she had hers. So she had set down and tried to come to terms with her life. For real, this time.

She had realized that a part of her had still hoped that she could change her future, decide her life on her own; but it was futile. She knew where her life was going and the best she could hope for was an amiable mate. Damn, that still smarted, she thought. But if Aris could accept a life as a whipping boy, then she could accept being a trophy wife. Life had a tendency to give you a shitty hand, but even so, you had to play it to the best of your abilities. Yeah, well, she would bet her life that the idiot who had come up with this particular piece of shitty wisdom had never had a poor hand in his life. By Nyx, she hated crappy lines like that.

Going on, Sheba felt Rayza searching for her and sent him an "I'm all right" vibe through their bond. She was pleased that he hadn't forgotten her in all that hustle and

bustle, aware that he had to check out the contestants and help with the organizational side of things. Because of his shielding talent he had to contribute to the erection and maintenance of the 'dome' as the protective bubble over the battle arena was called; without it, Aliaenar would have been in ruins long ago. A part of her longed to fight there just once; another futile wish – it was Hashisins only.

Lost in her thoughts, she didn't realize that she had reached the plateau already. As she stood there, pausing, she let her eyes roam, taking in the stunning view. Before her, the moonlight illuminated the fortress and the surrounding landscape in the most beautiful way; Sheba could even see the desert from here. With a mixture of deepest longing and ecstatic joy, she looked upon her homeland: the glittering, bright dunes called to her, sang of the day's heat and fire; of the night's bitter cold; of the animals born of sand; and of the people who called it home. Her body and soul responded in kind, mourned the loss of her heartbeat that was the pulse of the desert, told the tale of exile and of her longing to feel whole again.

In her lament, a single tear ran down her cheeks and dropped onto the ground below her; she never noticed though, captured as she was in the pain and desperation that had welled up in her soul and refused to be pushed down and away again. Her last wall of resistance finally crumbled, allowing her emotions to take over and spill out of her. A scream, full of despair and anger, made its way up her vocal chords, its painful echo heard all over the mountain. As the piercing sound faded, she suddenly heard an unfamiliar soft voice in her head.

"Never fear, my child," the voice consoled her gently. "You will see your home again and it will recognize you as its own: your land has never forgotten the child of its heart and never will. You might still have a long way to go, Daughter of Fire, but you've proven yourself and, thus, you will be rewarded. There will come a time, your heart purged of all its human thoughts, when you will rise to power and fulfill your destiny – but it isn't now. Let the Flames of Light guide you and keep you unharmed. I bless you, Princess of Pyr, because you filled my soul with joy."

The divine presence left with a sweet, soft caress of Sheba's soul.

She was stunned; she, the Esendri Elementar, blessed? Certainly not for climbing up a plateau on a mountain? She couldn't wrap her head around what happened here a moment ago; not wanting to dismiss the Goddess' words as craziness, she nevertheless refused to deal with the content of the little speech. Sheba wasn't ready yet to lose her humanity even

if it meant to do what she was here for. And the bit about rising to power? *Laughable*. She would never rule – would never be allowed to. No one wanted a weak Queen.

She fell to her knees, digging her hands into the rough ground beneath her and tried to thwart the panic attack that attempted to take hold of her. Finally she succeeded, taking deep strong breaths, and willed her body and mind to calm down. Whatever that had been, Sheba decided to visit the Goddess' altar in the fortress and thank her for her protection and guidance this night, because without her assistance she would have never found her way up here and would have never seen the sandy beauty of her homeland.

Looking down at her hands, she saw something glitter in the dark, reminding her of her power's colors – an image of the night sky, an obsidian canvas inwrought with sparkling stars. Sheba tried to pick it up, but realized that it was still confined in the ground. But stubbornness had always been her Achilles heel, and because she really wanted to have that particular stone – partly to serve as a reminder of her humanity, partly because she needed to get her mind away from all the commotion in her head – Sheba looked for a way to excavate the gem.

Examining the ground, she realized that it was ferruginous soil. She smiled at that, and immediately she created enormous heat and applied it to the area around her treasure. It would take a while for the iron to melt but it should work. Due to her experimenting with her power, she had accidentally discovered that she could use the same amount of power she needed for a wildfire to melt metal, even steel, if she concentrated her power enough to generate a certain kind of pressure. She had known it would come in handy someday, she thought, smug.

Intensifying the pressure to speed up the whole process, she noticed the desired effect. The gem's confinement was melting away, creating enough leeway for her to take it out of the ground. She thanked the mountain for its gift, being a firm believer that the earth she walked on was sentient and in direct line with the Gods, and began her long journey back.

Meanwhile the moon had begun to set; dawn was already on its way making itself known with streaks of grey on the horizon. She took a last look at the desert in the far and, clutching her precious gem in her fist, she concentrated on the track and started to run. Exhilarated by the flight down the massive mountain, she whooped in joy, letting her power lead her and became one with the nature around her. She connected with the mountain's

heartbeat, felt its contentment and unfazed existence; that trip of hers had certainly been one of the best in a very long time.

Less than three hours later, Sheba was back in Aliaenar, pumped up by her exertion. She felt alive and totally at ease, all her culminated excess energy spent. She made her way back to her quarters where she cleaned up and put on a fresh set of clothing – scarlet this time, covering it with yet another black robe and hid her face under her hood. She still couldn't dispense with the royal colors though it was dangerous at times. But...it was the only proof of who she was in times of lies and disguise.

Shaking off her glum thoughts, she took some time to examine her gem in daylight, thinking it even more beautiful than before; with the sun highlighting the white sparkles, the opaqueness of the stone was even more enhanced. Sheba sighed contently and left the chamber in search of Rayza, hoping he would give her something productive to do.

On her way outside, she passed the open door to the Throne Hall and noticed the altar at the eastern wall. Though reluctant to step into the room because she feared its impact on her state of mind because of its resemblance to Pyras, she went in nonetheless to fulfill her promise to Nyx. Thankfully, she was the only person present, and without looking around too much she went over to the place of worship.

Taking in the altar's intricate design, she admired the superb craftsmanship. Four different segments, each in its element's color, formed a half circle which was overseen by representations of the Gods: a sun disk for Sol and a crescent for Nyx; both were engraved with beautiful ancient designs that Sheba recognized as Elhrasin letters and adorned with filigree ornaments that displayed the respect and deference of their creator.

Sheba stood in front of the Fire altar, and, as was custom, she illuminated it with her power until it blazed like a bonfire. She bowed her head in deference and let all her gratitude, her joy, and her pleasure flow into her Fire thanking the Goddess for her invaluable gift of letting her see her homeland for the first time in over four years. It had pacified some of her longing and gone a long way to heal the deeply hidden hurt over the enforced separation, and for that she was immeasurably grateful.

Realizing that a mere "thank you" wouldn't be enough in that case, she thought of something to give in return, balancing the debt; but the only thing of value in her possession was the gem she had taken tonight, the rest of her meager belongings were simple necessities.

Easy come, easy go, Sheba though, disappointed but without any real resentment; the memory of that night would remain with her for the rest of her life. She took the stone out of her pocket and with a last goodbye laid it on the altar nearest to the crescent.

“One gift for another. The debt is paid.”

Expressing her gratitude once again, Sheba drew her power back into her body and went to leave the Throne Hall, rubbing her fist over her breast. With her back turned, she failed to notice that her gift suddenly lit up nor did she realize that part of her queasy feeling was due to the faint crescent-shaped mark that appeared on top of her heart: the Goddess’ blessing for her Chosen Ones.

Having finished the last of the judgment tents, Rayza made his way over to the battle arena to look if they were ready for the dome yet. Part of his duties was to ensure the shield stayed in place to protect Aliaenar by constantly feeding said shield with his power along with three others. Used to dividing his power and attention, it was easy for him to provide an incessant flow of his Fire and concentrate on other things in the meantime. Yep, he sure was the King of Multitasking, he thought wryly.

Finally having completed all the tasks on his ludicrous to-do list provided by a less-than-happy Chairman of the Council, Rayza looked for Sheba. He figured she had gone for one of her ‘walks’, seeking solitude after the enforced company of the journey to Aliaenar; he hoped she was back already since his beloved Prancer needed some TLC. Searching for her through their bond, he was a bit surprised to find her a few yards away observing him from the shadows at the edge of the main meadow where the trials would be announced.

Rayza went over to her and looked her up and down.

“You look fine; you’ve been on a walk?”

“Yes, Uncle. It was good to be for myself for some time. The journey from Aro had had me all out of whack. And it’s beautiful here, like you said.”

“Ah, I figured as much; that’s why I let you be. But I wanted to remind you to stay inside the gates. You won’t be safe, otherwise. And when I spoke to the Chairman, he strongly advised me to keep you on the premises. That was an order, so follow it! Understood?” After her nod he asked, curios, “Anyway, where have you been?”

“I went in the direction of the mountains – you know, for burning excess energy.” A pause. “So, do you have something to do for me before the whole ruckus starts? I decided that if I’m here anyway, I’m going to enjoy the show and assist you with input on contenders.”

She looked at him expectantly and playfully batted her eyelashes at him with the last piece.

Rayza chuckled at her antics, glad to see her in high spirits again. Although he would never admit it out loud, her morose state of mind had grated on him as much as the constant chatter of the Aro people during their ride. He could take the company if he had to, but he much preferred the solitude of riding with Sheba alone. Being Idris herself, she understood and respected his need for the quiet and never disturbed it. If she was happy – or content at least.

All in all, if he had to take a companion again, he would go for someone like her, he thought; she had proven to be considerate and had to be told things only once, her agile mind needing no further instruction. And it sure was awesome to have someone for the day-to-day chores at hand. He would miss her when their time came to an end. But until then, he and his new apprentice would be able to enjoy the luxury of having her at their back and call, so to speak.

Quickly suppressing his last thought to keep his niece from picking up on it – a somewhat disconcerting side-effect of their bond: the ability to hear the other’s thoughts at times – he went on to ask his favor.

“You mind looking after Prancer and taking him out for a ride? He’s getting cranky confined to the stables and one measly meadow as he is, and he is upsetting the other horses; or so the head groom tells me. Afterwards you can come and watch the Chairman giving his ‘Fire and Brimstone Sermon’, er, the introductory speech.” A bit embarrassed by his thoughtless blunder, he thought to save the discussion but eventually admitted defeat and remarked, “Ah, hell, you know what I mean; you’ve got enough experience with those types of lectures already.”

Rayza willed his reddened face back to normal, hoping that no one had heard his less than respectful description of the sacred speech that opened the tryouts. Though everyone called it that. For eons now.

“Of course I’ll do it. I’ve missed the ornery horse already and I always enjoy a good ride. Enjoy yourself, Uncle.”

“You are the best, Amadri. Give him an extra carrot and tell him that I’ll come tomorrow to show him Aliaenar. Maybe that will pacify him a bit.” Turning on his heels, he added over his shoulder, “But I’ve got to hurry now. I have to change before the dig starts – apparently dusty robes do nothing for our supposed dangerous and awe-inspiring image!”

Chuckling, he disappeared.

“Men!” Sheba muttered and went to take care of Prancer.

Chapter 25

Aris had slept away the last two days since their arrival, interrupting his well-deserved rest only for some food and to check on his brothers. Now the time had finally come for him to break free of his duties with the tryouts commencing at noon – half an hour and his life would finally change. It marked the beginning of a new chapter of his life and he vowed to do everything it would take to make it. Dressed in his simplest clothes, all white with no embroidery, he waited for Danis and Osric in front of his tent. Whereas Osric was up to his normal antics again, Danis was strangely subdued as if the importance of making the tryouts eventually had hit home.

He thought about the upcoming trials, being as in the dark as anyone else since no one ever talked about the trials except in general; but what he knew was that it would take all of his skills and even a few he hadn't had acquired yet. And if he was weary of the outcome, how was Danis feeling with being weaker and not as trained? Aris hoped that his brother was in on his plan to team up when possible to ensure that they both would come out winners in the end. Osric on the other hand would be lucky to even pass the first challenge, which he was fortunately well aware of. He had said himself that he would never have come here if it wasn't custom. Thank Sol for small mercies, was all Aris had to say to that.

The last few hours as Aris had gotten ready, he had let his thoughts linger on his travel companions. Having pondered the impact of his newly acquired competition on his preferred choice of mentor, he had come to the conclusion that he would have to sweet talk the Fire sprite for further information on Master Onyx; perhaps she would be forthcoming if he found something to bribe her with. If you can't beat your opponent in open battle, you had to lay out a trap – maybe this kind of approach held more merit in regard to his dealings with her. And he sincerely hoped that she wouldn't play favorites, because then he was totally screwed. Shea had been right about her influence on the Hashisin's choice, however

unfair it was; he still had to come up with a strategy to show her that they could get along just fine. Aris had even asked Sol for assistance in this endeavor.

In the worst case though, he would have to check out the other available mentors in more detail, instead of only getting a comprehensive overview; maybe he would find someone else like the strong and powerful Onyx that could take him on. Though he had a feeling that there wasn't anyone except maybe for the Captain himself; now *that* was a terrifying idea. He pitied the poor individual that would end up with that one. The man's last apprentice hadn't even made it through his first year, turning his back on the Guild without ever looking back once. But he would cross that bridge when he stood before it. Somehow what he had thought was a clear-cut plan of action had turned into something that was threatening to fall apart by decisions of others. Low prospects, he thought bleakly.

"Yo Bro, going for understatement today?" Danis startled him out of his thoughts.

"Huh?"

"Your clothes, big Brother – how long did you have to look to find something as bland as that? And how come you even possess something like that in the first place? Even I wouldn't touch something like that with a ten foot pole and I'm not a stickler for fashion like someone else we know!"

"Well, little Brother, I own that stuff because it's appropriate for a Warrior? How fast do you think I would be surrounded by enemies of the murderous persuasion if my clothes stick out like a beacon? Didn't your instructors teach you anything at all?"

"I'm sure they did, but that still doesn't mean that I have listened!" Danis quipped back. "It has never been of importance so far. Change of topic, though: what is your plan for the trials and does it include Osric?"

"Um, how do you figure that I have a plan up my sleeve? Seeing as I was busy catching up on sleep?"

"Duh, you always have a plan; that's a given. But I want to know the details and if it includes Osric?" Danis actually wailed the last part about Osric, getting Aris to flinch.

"No, it doesn't, except for making sure he stays alive," he sighed in answer, hoping his older brother would take an escort with him so that Danis and he could fully concentrate on their tasks. And for once, Osric was on the same page as them, it seemed.

"No need for that, Brothers. The Captain of our Guard has agreed to accompany me," Osric suddenly told them. "Contrary to the two of you, I'm not here to actually become an

elite Warrior; additionally, it will further Aro's strength if at least two of the princes are full-fledged Hashisins. It surely will facilitate your future task of keeping me safe and sound, don't you think?"

Without waiting for a reply he started off in the direction of the trial meadow and shouted over his shoulder, "Hurry, would you? It won't do to be late, will it?"

Aris and Danis shared a look at that but complied and hurried to catch up with their self-absorbed oldest sibling.

The three of them plus a hand full of Osric's guards arrived just in time to take their assigned places in the row of contestants, which were divided into their elements. Aris looked around innocuously and counted about fifty people. Quite a mass, he thought surprised, but already trying to figure out the dropout rate.

Suddenly a hush fell over the crowd, the applicants and the audience of parents and guards focusing on the figures appearing on the meadow. Twelve black-clad men formed a row in front of the fifty waiting expectantly, and stoically regarded this year's new roll of contenders. After two more minutes the Chairman of the Council, who was always the last to appear, took his place in the middle of his fellow Warriors, his eyes kept firmly ahead.

The tension in the air rose, but nobody moved or dared say a word. Aris felt Danis stiffen beside him and sent him a wave of encouragement down their brother bond, receiving an almost unperceivable nod in return. Even Osric stood still, captured in the general atmosphere. Aris managed to make out Onyx in the row, next to the Chairman, his posture familiar now after the weeks spent together.

Looking firmly at the Warrior, he almost missed the leader of the Hashisins stepping forward to begin his customary speech.

"Welcome everybody to the Tryouts of the Hashisins. Every four years we, the Guild, hold tryouts for new members to our ranks. You will have the honor to join the Warriors that will protect our precious Quiliaris against all threats, inside or out, and some of you will bring justice to those who were wronged and are without a chance to gain retribution. Because of this, every member of the Guild must have certain standards of skill and ethics far above the ordinary. Because of this, the tryouts are the hardest challenge most of you will ever face.

We firmly believe in weeding out the weak in the beginnings to ensure that those capable get the training and instruction they need to serve this country and its people right.

Though I'm sure everyone is aware of it, I will state the entry rules again and every one of you has to confirm his understanding afterwards. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir!" the crowd loudly acknowledged his words in unison.

"Rules of entry for the tryouts are as following: first, every applicant has to be sixteen years of age or older.

Second, he must be of sound mind and body, that is, he has to have a basic understanding of military hierarchy and an able, well-kept body, because these two are our greatest assets.

Third, you have to prove a certain level of control over your power.

Fourth and last, every one of you has to vow to keep the Code of Conduct in all circumstances; that is, to behave in a way befitting for a Hashisin, and not to intentionally harm your fellow competitors and in general behave in an appropriate, kind manner towards other people.

Furthermore, everyone is to fulfill the given task to the best of his abilities, no help from outsiders allowed. Any violation of these rules leads to an immediate and permanent exclusion from this or any future tryouts. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Now I'll explain the procedure and rules of the tryouts to you, so listen closely! There are going to be six different trials you have to master. After each challenge, your performance will be judged by the Council members in charge, who will decide on your consequent participation. If you fail, you go home; no exceptions.

All of the challenges will test a different part of your abilities, but nevertheless will require you to use all of them at certain times. And each trial will be more challenging than the last one.

The first trial will be about your control of your power; the second tests your wit; the third will focus on weaponry leading to the fourth, which will be a judgment of your battle skills; the fifth will test your basic survival skills; and the final step, the sixth, for everyone who came that far, will be the Choosing."

Making a pause, the Chairman let his words sink in.

Aris thought that so far he hadn't heard anything discouraging, but who knew how the trials actually turned out in the end. Well, he would have to wait and see.

“As you can see,” the Hashisin went on, “there are fifty of you and thirteen of us. Since we believe that a mentor has to bring a certain amount of experience to the table, all of the men in front of you have been an active part of the Guild for at least twenty years to give you the best, most comprehensive training you can get. All of these men behind me have survived situations time and time again that none of you could ever hope to, simply by using their minds – outsmarting their opponents by knowing their own strengths and weaknesses and how to apply them best.

If you ask them, they would tell you that their five years of apprenticeship was the hardest, most brutal, and most cruel time in their life; but well worth it since it kept them alive. Every punishment you will get, every extra round of drill, every harsh word – and there will be plenty of them, I assure you – is handed out for your own good. Every less than perfect move has the potential to get you killed in battle, every slack cut can equal your death, and then you would be of no use to this land and its inhabitants. We are the best for a reason and we intend to keep it that way.

Anyone who is not willing to leave his rank, his standing, his former life behind should reconsider now and not attempt the tryouts. There is no shame in admitting that you want something different from your life. Better to leave now than to waste our time.

As I said, there are thirteen mentors this year and fifty of you. In the end, I would be surprised if every Hashisin will leave with an apprentice. The last time every place had been filled was two hundred years ago – do the math! And I’ll even give you some numbers to back up my claim: experience says that best case scenario only twenty of you will reach the second trial.”

He took in the shocked faces with an evil, satisfied smile and went on.

“You will be approached by one of the men behind me with instructions, groups staying as they are for now.” A pause. “With that being said, let the tryouts commence!”

The Chairman stepped back under the deafening cheers of the noisy crowd.

Aris looked into Danis’ and Osric’s faces to gauge their reaction and was greeted with grins.

“Oh, that’s going to be fun! What did he say – the first trial is about control of your power? Now that we will certainly nail! Even Osric might have a chance to reach the second trial, don’t you think?” Danis said, excited.

Osric joined in, stating, “Finally all those stupid lessons on how to hone your power are going to pay off! Who would have thought it?”

Aris just watched them in silence and then sighed, hating to destroy their illusions. “Sorry to be a spoilsport, but I don’t think it’s going to be something akin to commanding our element. What would be the purpose of it? That’s basic training. I guess it’ll be more along the lines of staying calm in a threatening situation or so. It’s the Hashisins’ tryouts we are talking about here, after all. And it will have to be fair for everyone – how would someone at mid-level create a storm or quake or whatever if he doesn’t have that kind of power?”

Silence.

“By Sol, I hate it when you are right,” Danis scowled after a short time of contemplation, Osric agreeing with him for once.

“Well, at least I have my guard who can assist me in case anything dangerous occurs,” his oldest brother said, sighing at the potential prospect of adventure.

Aris could only shake his head at so much ignorance and self-regard. Osric had always thought of himself as the sun around which everything revolved and Aris didn’t see that changing anytime soon; but perhaps this trial would achieve what nothing else had managed so far. Nah, Osric would never leave the safe bubble he had created for himself, he thought.

A few minutes later, an unknown Hashisin approached the Wind Elementars, introducing himself as Cliro, a Water Elementar by the looks of it, the dark blue edge of his tunic a dead giveaway.

“All right, men. Here it goes. The first trial is all about control: control of your power, control of your body and control of your mind. And since we had to come up with something that weeds out those who don’t have yet reached a certain level of that and haven’t been able to find something better than what we were put through twenty-something years ago, we agreed on honoring that age old tradition and let you prove yourself in the very same way the first apprentices had to.”

The man chuckled evilly, eliciting goose bumps on most of the soldiers in front of him. It didn’t bode well for them if one of the persons responsible regarded those before him with open glee, Aris thought dreadfully. He looked at the other groups who seemed as warily as the Wind Elementars; even the cockiest man slowly replaced his confident grin with a cautious expression. What in Sol’s name could be that bad?

“Your task is quite simple, boys. You will have to find your Searach, your Warrior stone that will adopt your power’s color once you claimed ownership. Every Hashisin has one; it is a sign of identification like the Kri-Amra.”

“Where’s the catch?” a young soldier from Isburg asked whom Aris knew from his training.

“Hm, the catch,” Cliro drawled. “You are right of course, there is one – we do have a reputation to maintain after all...” Clearing his throat, likely because he had to suppress a laugh, he went on, “Well, the Searach is only to be found on certain mountains and since it has to be pure – that is, untouched by human hands – you’ll have to excavate it.”

“Up on the mountains? Awesome! At least we are going to have some advantage over the other Elementars!” Danis stage whispered, excited.

“Somehow I don’t think it will be this easy, Danis,” Aris raised his concern.

“Oh yes, the mountains,” came their instructor’s suddenly cold voice, “Since it would be an unfair advantage to the Wind Elementars with them surrounded by mountains, the ones in question will be new to everyone.” He turned around and pointed to the three peaks watching over Aliaenar. “You will have to choose one of these to gain your Searach. It doesn’t matter which one of them – either God’s Eye, King’s Sword or Queen’s Throne are fine – but keep in mind that your choice will reflect on you and that you make sure your choice is according to your abilities; if you don’t, you won’t be able to finish in time.

Rules are such: you have three days to complete your mission – one for climbing up, one to find your Searach, and one to get down again. At sunset of the third day anyone not standing here ready for judgment or coming back empty handed will have failed. The only things you’ll have at your disposal are the clothes you wear, a bag with food provided by the kitchens and your power – nothing else. You take anything else with you or cheat in any other manner, you are out. Any questions?”

“Is teaming up against the rules?” a youngling resembling a willow asked.

“Well, no. How you make it up and down that huge rock is of no importance, but take care that you retrieve your Searach on your own – it will only recognize the first human it gets into contact with as its master. No cheating possible. Anything else?”

“Surely we are allowed some climbing gear? How else are we supposed to get to the top?” one of Aro’s nobles, known for his dislike of anything related to verticality, asked.

“You might want to listen more carefully, lad. I meant what I said: no additional gear, no tools, no anything except for your clothes, food, and power. This isn’t a leisurely trip, gentlemen; it’s a test about control and it’s meant to be hard and sweat-inducing. An enemy won’t wait for you to get your gear either. Plus, the way this challenge is designed ensures that those incapable or unwilling are immediately sorted out, because they wouldn’t have a chance in hell to succeed in the upcoming trials.”

Cliro sighed, thinking that though the faces changed, the questions always stayed the same each tryout, no matter their element. The two morons that had piped up wouldn’t make it, that he was sure of. They didn’t have what it took if they already looked for a way to make it easier. However, the group still held potential, even though he would likely end up with either an Earth Elementar or a Water Elementar for an apprentice if anyone of them would make it – which was not too likely given what he had seen so far. And Wind and Fire were too different and entirely too volatile for his liking.

“The trial starts at dusk here and ends in front of the judgment tent at dusk in three days. Make sure to be ready then or you will lose your place in the competition. And take this time to say goodbye to your family, because once you’ve started they have to go; the tryouts are not for outsiders to know. Your only company for the next few months are your fellow soldiers. And this applies to any and every guard in your service: no outsiders! Did I make myself clear?”

He looked around, confronted with expressions of various degrees of shock. Only the huge, pensive blond man standing at the back and the slightly smaller red-haired lad next to him were returning his probing gaze stoically. At least some seemed to have a modicum of sense. If he wasn’t mistaken, those two were Princes of Aro.

According to rumors, the giant’s build matched his strength, so he was likely to end up with the Captain, Onyx, or Blade, the man’s right hands. The former was one of the strongest Fire Elementars he had ever encountered and one of the most controlled too, and the other was his Earth counterpart. Cliro was powerful in his own right, but he lacked the strength of will, that unmovable focus, these two had. His Water power simply didn’t work that way, always taking the path of least resistance but reaching its goal nevertheless. Anyway, it was time to get moving.

"I'll leave you to yourself now, gentlemen. Remember, meeting point is right here at dusk." With that he left the group and went to report to his leader.

Aris and Danis looked at Osric who had taken on an interesting shade of green after the announcement.

"Are you well?" Danis asked, concerned.

"Everything considered...no, I am not! What am I going to do now?" Helplessly Osric shrugged, his confident air suddenly absent. "But I cannot *not* go up there. What will people at home think about that?"

Aris pondered the possibilities and came up with a plan of sorts. "I can get you up and down, no problem, Osric – but the Searach you will have to do on your own. What to do, what to do?" he murmured. "All right, Brother: you just have to copy what Danis and I are doing and you will be fine. I won't leave you behind, Os. You know I won't."

"Thanks, Aris. I knew I could count on you!" Osric sighed and assumed his high and mighty attitude once again.

"Alas, we should get moving if we want to secure the best food, and dress with care. Hurry up, boys!" He was gone even before he had finished his sentence.

"Some things never change, do they?" Danis asked, dumbfounded at his brother's one-eighty turn in attitude.

"Some things are apparently set in stone," Aris gave back with a sigh.

"Do you really think you can drag him up there?"

"I have to. I might be half-dead by the time we come back, but at least I could put my strength to good use."

"I sincerely hope you are right. I don't want to spend the next five years here all alone."

"You won't, Danis. I'll make sure of it."