

Sword of Fire

By Caris McRae

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To my daughters.

My greatest pleasure is watching you come into your own, step by step, every day.

You are my heart.

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GLOSSARY

Aliaenar: Old Court of the High King; secluded fortress of the Hashisins in the Calae Mountains between Pyr and Aro.

Element: metaphysical energy of Earth, Fire, Wind and Water, created by Sol and Nyx;

Elementar: person with an elemental power, i.e. a Wind Elementar; channels the energy of his or her element through his soul from the metaphysical to the physical in order to use it. According to the respective soul's capacity to hold energy (weak and strong souls) the energy prolongs the Elementar's life; if the Elementar holds too much energy, the soul will burst leading to death.

Elhrasin: old language of the High Court; nowadays only used by the Hashisins as their secret language.

Erudite: person with the Talent of Knowledge; highly intelligent, curious and focused; are teachers and historians; magenta/orange/yellow sash according to rank; determine a person's Talent and strength and are in charge of the law.

Esendri: caste of the 'Vulnerable' (literal meaning: 'prey'), i.e. those without a Talent or those with little to no amount of power; are sacrosanct and not to be harmed; usually servants and salespersons; color: violet.

Hareem: quarter of pleasure for Warriors and unmated men.

Hashisins: elite order of Warriors; the best Warriors of every element; guards of the High King of Quiliaris; non-guard members form the Guild, bringing justice for those who were wronged; leadership: Council of Masters led by the elected Chairman; attributes: Kri-Amra (brand of a sword), use of Elhrasin; possession of Searach, color: black.

Healer: person with the Talent of Healing; bronze /silver/ gold sash according to rank; can heal every physical injury short of death, as well as injuries of the soul.

High King of Quiliaris: elected in times of need by representatives of all four kingdoms to protect Quiliaris and its people; usually the leader of the Hashisins; the last High King was King Damiar An-Pyr 350 years ago.

House of Aro: royal family of the Kingdom of Wind; most powerful Wind Elementars; name: Cyn-Aro.

House of Iquis: royal family of the Kingdom of Water; most powerful Water Elementars; name: Iquis-ta.

House of Pyr: royal family of the Kingdom of Fire; most powerful Fire Elementars; name: An-Pyr.

House of Ter: royal family of the Kingdom of Earth, most powerful Earth Elementars; name: Di-Tera.

Idris: very rare; people born at midnight under a blue moon; also called Nightwalker, Shadow Walker, or Children of Nyx; favor food with low 'solar energy', i.e. edibles growing in umbra that don't need a lot of sunshine; normal food holds no nutritional value for them and can make them ill; highly independent individuals; said to be gifted by Nyx with the ability to merge with the shadows and have an affinity for animals;

Kingdom of Earth: Ter, rural kingdom in the East; kingdom of farmers and craftsmen; Capital: Ter Sentra; color: green.

Kingdom of Fire: Pyr, desert Kingdom of the South; kingdom of nomads and travelling merchants; consists of several wide-spread camps or minor settlements; the biggest being Altahir, the Regent's camp; Capital: Pyras, seat of the King's court and only fortified city. Founded by outcasts and rogues of the other Kingdoms after being gifted with Fire by Nyx; color: red.

Kingdom of Water: Iquis, Kingdom of the West; kingdom of fishermen and sailors; provide the only access to the Great Ocean; Capital: Limenis; color: blue.

Kingdom of Wind: Aro, mountain Kingdom of the North; kingdom of miners and hunters; consists like Pyr mainly of scattered dwellings; Capital: Isburg, color: white.

Muse: person with the Talent of Fine Arts; bright, creative people, enjoy pleasing an audience; cyan/azure/petrol sash according to rank; muses are dancers, singers, literary writers, story tellers, artists and acrobats, as well as Charmers and Illusionists.

Naru: 'ordinary' people, opposite of Idris; Children of Sol.

Nyx: Goddess of Night; she is the source of death and rebirth and the patron of fall and winter; her energy is piercing, forceful and intensive; her element is Fire, her children are Idris.

Quiliaris: Peninsula in the West of the Great Lands consisting of four elemental Kingdoms; surrounded by Maretiz in the North, Tortaris in the East and Imbra in the South; Treaty of Concord ensures a fragile peace between the four lands.

Sol: God of the Sun; he is the source of life and the patron of the spring and summer. His energy is warm, generous and fertile; his elements are earth and water and wind; his children are called Naru.

Talent: area of an Elementar's greatest aptitude; divided in four classes: knowledge, fine arts, healing, protection; every Elementar with a certain amount of power has a Talent.

Warrior: person with the Talent of Protection; highly protective instincts, excels in all things martial; crimson/indigo/ black sash according to rank; the best Warriors are allowed to try for the Hashisin at the age of 16.

This Side of the Truth

Dylan Thomas

This side of the truth,
You may not see, my son,
King of your blue eyes
In the blinding country of youth,
That all is undone,
Under the unminding skies,
Of innocence and guilt
Before you move to make
One gesture of the heart or head,
Is gathered and spilt
Into the winding dark
Like the dust of the dead.

Good and bad, two ways
Of moving about your death
By the grinding sea,
King of your heart in the blind days,
Blow away like breath,
Go crying through you and me
And the souls of all men
Into the innocent
Dark, and the guilty dark, and good
Death, and bad death, and then
In the last element
Fly like the stars' blood

Like the sun's tears,
Like the moon's seed, rubbish
And fire, the flying rant
Of the sky, king of your six years.
And the wicked wish,
Down the beginning of plants
And animals and birds,
Water and Light, the earth and sky,
Is cast before you move,
And all your deeds and words,
Each truth, each lie,
Die in unjudging love

Prologue

“She is in Aliaenar,” Benali An-Imdhabra said, a cruel expression contorting his handsome face.

“In Aliaenar?” his taller companion repeated, disbelieving. He thought about this new development for a moment, then said, “Ah, but that does make sense in a twisted way. It *is* the safest place in all of Quiliaris, after all.”

“It poses a problem though, Master. Any suggestions how we can get to her now?”

“Not yet. They’ve taken great pains to keep her out of sight, but it seems the warrant on her head has shown results. It’s no coincidence that we get this clue so soon after raising the bounty. That was a brilliant move, indeed.”

“Yes, but I hoped it’d get us a lead on her or, in the best case, take care of the situation all together. I never thought they would put her under lock and key behind the best guarded walls they could find.”

“But it did get us results, pet. More than anything else we’ve tried in the last years,” the big man drawled.

“Which are? That we don’t have a chance in hell to get to her now?” Benali snapped back, petulant.

“No. You see, in their endeavor to keep her safe, they unintentionally confirmed that she is actually alive and well. And we know her exact location. No need for you to search for her anymore. Meaning you have a lot more time for other things now.”

“How do we proceed then?”

“For the moment, just monitor the gates of Aliaenar and follow her when she leaves,” his leader told him, arrogance dripping from his every word. “Which she eventually will. No one was ever able to keep that child in, even when she was little. You know that better than anyone. When we have information on her life and contacts, we’ll act. They wouldn’t have been able to hide her for so long without the help of some very influential people. If we get the name of just one of them, she’ll be ours. These people might be honorable, but not one would give his life for a Fire girl, Princess or not. And the best part?

Her own people would hand her over within a heartbeat. Esendri aren't worth the hassle, after all."

"Do you believe your own lies now? That menace is most definitely no Esendri," the man answered with palpable hatred.

"Of course not. But she isn't powerful either – even newborns here in Imbra are stronger than her. However, it never fails to amuse me to see you getting all riled up over a mediocre little girl that has little more than emotional value."

"She might not be powerful in terms of elemental strength, but she is *immune* against my Talent. And that makes her a threat. A huge one. When we take over Pyr, she will know who is standing in front of her. And if she finds just one single person who believes her, we are screwed. That's the downside of her being in Aliaenar – ever thought about that?"

A pause.

"There is that. But no one would have believed her then and they won't do so now. People see what they want to see. And in her case that's an Esendri who is spouting lies to gain attention. At which point, her life will be forfeited. The codex is very clear on that. So don't go and credit her with more power or influence than she actually has!"

Benali closed his eyes and sighed.

"All right, all right. I concede this point. Still, I don't think it's as easy as you make it out to be. We have no idea what she did all those years, how much training and knowledge she gained. You know as well as I do that even little power can be more dangerous than the greatest if expertly used. And I should know."

"People might learn a lot of things over the course of their lives and they acquire certain knowledge, but in the end they can't change who they are. They might wear a mask for others, but with the right incentive they will show their true colors. *Always.*"

"That's what I'm afraid of," the Traitor said as he rubbed his fist over his chest where a big, ugly scar marred his otherwise flawless skin.

Later that night a servant left the heavily guarded castle located deep in the deserts of Imbra and met with a dark clad man.

“They know where she is. And they are going to watch and wait and learn. If they find the tiniest of leverage – contacts or someone dear to her – they will act. They figure no one is going to want to lose his life over *her*.”

“You did good,” the man said and gave the servant a satchel of coins. “Your reward.”

“May the Gods bless you,” the informant replied, relieved that he could now feed his children by helping to save another one’s life.

As the man returned to the castle, the dark clad Warrior thought about the information he had acquired. Even after so many years it still amazed him every time to see how blind people were to their surroundings. No one ever noticed a servant in the shadows. Which was a good thing. Because without this piece of knowledge, the girl would be dead pretty soon. The servant had been right: if push came to shove, people would think about saving their own hides first.

However, something else had become clear too, even if the servant hadn’t realized it: for the Traitor to know the girl’s whereabouts, the Hashisins had to have a traitor of their own in their rows.

PART ONE: Change

Chapter 1

Year One

Crack.

Sheba rubbed her arm where her broomstick aka the staff aka *not her sword* had hit her – again – because she didn't seem to get how to twirl that damn piece of wood over her head without hurting herself in the process. From the feel of it she had done some real damage now. She sighed, ignored the pain, and continued with the infernal exercise. Her mentor, Chairman of the Council and Captain of the Guard, Barin Cyr-Arais, had told her that she had to ace that particular exercise by tomorrow morning or he would let her go. Which translated into a dull existence filled with kitchen and stables duty here at Aliaenar without any chance of finally getting the Warrior training she needed and craved.

Great.

As she stubbornly repeated the single move over and over again, she thought about the last five months. Her apprenticeship had begun well: Master Barin had thoroughly examined her abilities, knowledge, and physical capability. He had seemed pleased – seemed being the key word – but after he had tested her sword fighting skills in the arena, he had forbidden her to touch her scimitar until he deemed her ready. When she had asked how she should learn to fight then, he had pointed at a wooden staff and calmly told her to make one like that and use it.

How embarrassing, especially for a Guild's apprentice.

Sheba had to believe the man knew what he was doing, but did he have to do it in front of the others? Her fellows hadn't known where to look, because laughing at another apprentice was considered bad style, but every time they saw her practicing she was the target of mirth, ridicule and laughter. They managed to keep their ribbing somewhat 'friendly,' always skirting the edge of what was still acceptable, but she could see the satisfaction in their eyes. As could everyone else.

Barin had told her to tell him if they ever went too far, but since that wasn't likely she had no choice but to take it. Like a Warrior.

Apparently not everyone was happy when they saw a Hashisin, so it was certainly a good exercise in learning how to deal with the animosity and hatred of those who wronged others. What the man had conveniently forgotten about was that her fellows at least had the love, friendship, and respect of their comrades – she didn't.

Two hours later, with sore muscles and a bruised body, she finally mastered the task. Utterly exhausted, she left the Field of Doom that served as their practice ground now and went to her room. She cleaned herself, brushed her hair and put it back in a braid, changed her clothes and went to the common dining hall, hoping the others had left her at least one plate of food.

Whereas the other apprentices had finished practice three hours ago, enjoying some well-deserved, if short, down time, she had been occupied with her staff, as usual. On the upside, she didn't have to spend more time than absolutely necessary in the company of those arrogant dimwits.

When she entered the hall, she found it completely empty – not a crumb of food to be found. She wasn't sure if what she felt was anger or just plain desperation, but she resigned herself to the situation and made her way to the kitchens against better judgment asking for some left-overs.

When that turned out a fruitless endeavor again – because dinner time was over and maybe she should learn to be punctual if she wanted to eat – the last remnants of any desperation she might have felt vanished and left only deep and hot ire behind.

Fuming, she got her leather bag, took out her last slice of Samani, and visited her four-legged companion Chari, who was calmly munching on some grass in the southern meadow.

She plopped down next to him and started on her meager dinner.

“So they didn't leave you anything, *again*? Are they trying to starve you into submission?” the stallion asked her through their connection.

“No, not really. How did the cook put it? ‘Those who come late will be punished by life.’ That about sums it up, don't you think?”

“Well, he certainly has a point here. On the other hand, it’s his duty to feed all of you and he refused to do so. You should go and tell that mentor of yours. I thought he is ultimately responsible for your well-being?”

“In theory, yes. But I do that and he has to intervene, the others will respect me even less. So every which way you slice it, I’m screwed. At the moment, a somewhat quiet life is more important than a healthy meal.” Sheba sighed loudly and rolled her shoulders in an effort to lose some of her tension.

“Do you want to go on a ride, Princess? It would lift your spirits a bit, don’t you think?” Chari asked her.

She contemplated that for a minute and said, “I’m sorry, Chari. I’d very much like to, but I’m sore all over. I don’t think I’m up to it. I just came by to say hello and see if you need something. My peace of mind will have to wait for tomorrow or whenever my body is back to normal. But thank you for your kind offer. At least someone is interested in my well-being.”

Sheba wasn’t one for self-pity, but after such a gruesome day – one in a long row of gruesome days – she figured she was entitled to it. All the more so because no one else seemed to care. She wasn’t quite sure what she had expected from her apprenticeship, but it sure had been more than sore muscles, exhaustion of body and mind, and meager meals. She didn’t need to be pampered, never had to, but she didn’t think that enough food to keep her properly functioning was too much to ask for. But maybe she was totally wrong and that was all part of Barin’s plan to make her the best Warrior she could be.

By Nyx, she couldn’t even properly lie to herself.

Anyway it was time to turn in.

“My friend, I’ll say goodnight now. I still have to apply some ointment, so that I’m able to move tomorrow and I am in dire need of some rest. But feel free to visit home, Lord of the Desert; I know you miss it.”

She stood up and kissed the surprised stallion on his nose in a very rare show of affection. She loved the cantankerous beast and at times like these when he showed her consideration, it felt only right to reciprocate in kind.

“Well, you go to sleep now and I go for a run. I do miss my home. And take care of yourself, Princess – I want to ride with you tomorrow.”

As his friend went back to the fortress, Chari thought about her situation on his way to the desert. He used his innate connection to the elements of the world to cloak his presence and pass the Fire gate undetected – not without a great deal of satisfaction that those human guards were blind to his whereabouts.

He was as angry with the men here as he was with his Princess. He didn't understand why she allowed them to walk all over her, why she allowed them to treat her that badly when she was so much more powerful and worthy than any of them.

It wasn't that he couldn't see her point – which was a valid one, if you regarded the opinion of others higher than your own – but still...there had to be a different place somewhere with different, more tolerant people to teach her come into her own.

It hurt him to see her exhaustion, her pain and frequent injuries. She tried to hide it with glamour and charm – which he could see through, because he had seen *her*. He knew the truth.

She cared for him and looked after him even though he didn't need it, showing her innate kindness, but she had no one. Except for him, but he was no human and thus not well-equipped to care for her physical injuries appropriately. All he could do was keeping her mind balanced, if not happy, and he did well if he dared say so.

But he wasn't sure how long she could go on like this without her breaking at some point. From what he had seen of her past through their connection, she had always managed to find herself at least one human to talk to, to establish some sort of relationship with, however short the encounter. He came to realize that that was what had kept her sane over the years.

But here, at the Heart of the Land, she had no one. Her mentor was only interested in teaching her, as she had wanted, Onyx was occupied with his own apprentice and secretly relieved that someone else was now responsible for the Princess for a change, and the other apprentices were all cold towards he, if not downright hostile.

The only reason she was left in relative peace was because they feared her Fire – and rightfully so. If she ever lost control and decided to push back, they would lose their lives in the process; and somewhere in their soul their animalistic survival instinct recognized this very real danger and kept them from crossing the line. For now.

Chari just hoped that Sheba's desire to learn wouldn't get her killed in the end.

Barin Cyr-Arais stood on the outlook of Aliaenar's main tower and looked over the lands below.

"You need to do something, Lightning," Rayza An-Pyr aka Onyx said, appearing quietly out of the shadows.

"I can't."

"You can't? Why the hell not? You do realize that you have a responsibility for her well-being?"

"I am damn well aware of my duties, Onyx", Barin replied in a cold voice. "But like I said I can't interfere. It would be seen as weakness on her part and make her prey. Plus, she has yet to utter a word about the whole situation."

"Stubborn little girl," Onyx muttered. "So what is your plan then? You can't let her starve."

"Starve?" Barin asked, perplexed.

"From what I hear, she hasn't taken a meal with the others for at least three weeks and the cook refuses to feed her when she is late. So if she isn't eating horse food where exactly do you think she gets any?"

Barin closed his eyes, exhausted. He had known that taking on a female apprentice would take some getting used to and that the circumstances were less than stellar, but he hadn't thought it would turn out that bad.

He had a lot on his plate lately with the recent change of leadership in Imbra and the uproars in Tortaris – both situations needing supervision, because both had all the ingredients for a war that could threaten the precarious peace between the four countries. So he really didn't need or want to think about the physical well-being of his latest acquisition.

Furthermore, he could do nothing to help her until she asked for his assistance. Which she wouldn't do, because she knew it would make things worse and, of course, because she didn't trust him yet.

No surprise there. The little girl he remembered from Pyras was no more; in her stead there was now a young female who had learned not to trust anybody but herself. Again, no surprise.

She hadn't been the most trustful person, to begin with, even as a child, and from what Onyx had told him over the years, she had constantly been proven right in her decision to keep herself apart from others.

He still had difficulties to believe she had been subjected to the Bite in Altahir. It had been the only reason he had agreed to his spy master's ludicrous plan of keeping the girl with him.

But how did he get the girl to trust him not only with her training but with her well-being as well? It seemed that his original plan of keeping her safe by hampering her progress in the tryouts was coming back to bite him now. Perhaps it was time to concede defeat – what a terrifying thought, but it happened to the best of men – and ask for advice, if not outright help.

“What do you suggest what I do now? I can't seem to find a way to get her to open up to me, so some pointers in the right direction by someone who has ample knowledge about her would be appreciated.”

Silence. *Go figure.*

“You, the mighty Lightning and badass Captain of our Guard, asks me for help – in dealing with a little girl?” Onyx said in mock astonishment that barely concealed his mirth. “Will wonders never cease?”

The spy master chuckled, but then deigned to answer Barin's question at last. Hopefully, he wouldn't rub it in too bad, the Captain thought morosely. He sure wasn't used to being at the end of his wisdom, considering he was the one everyone else asked for help. It had been a very long time since he had to ask for advice, if ever.

“Well, although I do have the most experience with her, I can't answer that question. I've never been in a situation where I had to actually earn her trust. I had the advantage of being her knight in shining armor. But my best guess as how to win her over would be to show that you trust her first. From what I've seen over the years, she is the most susceptible to people who treat her with respect and make a genuine effort to get to know her. She would never refuse to talk to someone who was honestly interested in what she has to say. But the most important advice I can give you is that despite her often unapproachable appearance, she is an intrinsically gentle and kind person deep down. She will always try and help others if she can and she won't ever turn her back on someone in need. She can be hard if she feels she needs to be, but, if given the choice, she will always strive for peace.”

“Good to know she hasn’t lost compassion yet,” Barin murmured absentmindedly.

If even a small part of the little girl he had first gotten to know all those years ago was still there, then he had a starting point to work with.

“I know it isn’t much for you to work with, but the only adults apart from me that she ever let somewhat come close are Nia and Master Ham. And both always treated her as an equal; one with lesser experience and knowledge, but an equal nonetheless. Everyone else didn’t stand a chance in hell to even get a name out of her.”

“Don’t lessen your advice, my friend. It’s an excellent one. I treated her like I would do every other one of my men or even apprentices – I failed to realize that she is neither. So thank you for that. However, as it is, I needed to speak to you about a different matter. Do you have any news on Imbra?”

“Yes, I do. Torec reported that they re-erected the old temples in every fiefdom – the new leadership decreed a return to the old ways. Once a week the people of the Golden Land are now ordered to worship Uruis and rumors say that they are rebuilding the Golden Arena,” Onyx reported, disgusted. “That doesn’t bode well, don’t you think? It seems you have been spot on with your assessment, as usual.”

“You are right, it doesn’t. But to get the Royal Houses to even acknowledge that there might be a situation, we’ll need hard proof. So get me as much information as you can get your hands on, my friend; I’ll ask Cliro to organize additional reconnaissance teams to gather what you deem important. You will have to work together on this one. By the way, how is the situation in Tortaris?”

“Not as bad as we thought, yet. The people of Tortaris don’t like cuts in their bottom line, so they refrained from open violence so far and keep quiet. But if the Tribune doesn’t change his plans soon, they’ll cease to care about that; life always trumps money in the end. And the ensuing revolts will be bloody from what we already know of the Tribune’s past reactions to any kind of opposition.”

“Great, just great.” The Captain wiped his face and sighed.

“What is it you fear, exactly, Lightning? Somehow I fail to see how a civil war in Tortaris, which will for the most part concentrate on the area around the Capital in the far east, will affect Quiliaris?”

“Because there is a real possibility that the opposition will turn to Imbra for martial assistance and somehow I don’t think that that help will come for free or that the Sun

Warriors will quietly return home without further rewards. Plus, there are too many people in Tortaris crying for the old days for my liking. Combined with Imbra's new leadership, the situation could easily turn into a clusterfuck of epic proportions. I'm pretty sure there are those who would want to re-establish the old borders too – which would annihilate Quiliaris in the end."

"Fuck."

"My sentiments exactly. And though it might not come that far, we have to be prepared for the worst case. I call a meeting of the Council in three days from tomorrow – would you get the word out?"

"Of course."

Onyx left the same way he had come – like a ghost, silent and undetectable.

Barin contemplated the disturbing news for some time and then shared his thoughts with the Gods. According to rumor, he was looked upon favorably by them, which helped his reputation and ensured that his opinion was heard by even the most powerful Elementars. In that regard his Blessing was indeed a blessing, however, being a Chosen One included absolute obedience, which tended to be a massive challenge at times. Or always, really. He was used to doing things alone, to be ahead of things, and he was an alpha and a leader, always had been. But since he had felt the backlash of disobedience and because he valued his life far too much to risk it for something like independence, he made sure to keep in line with the will of those two beings that were capable of ending his existence with merely a thought.

Then Sol invaded his thoughts and told him to carefully monitor the situation – and left again. Always a pleasure, Barin thought sarcastically. The Gods weren't ones for many words. But he was used to it and he would do as his god commanded.

Anyway, he had to focus on his apprentice for the time being. Gaining her trust was one thing, getting her in shape and ready for battle something else entirely. She was good, real good – which was amazing given that her skill came from watching only – but she had yet to find her own style. At the moment she was just copying whatever moves and strategies she had seen. Even with the staff he had ordered her to use. But she had neither the figure of the Warriors in her family nor did she have their physical strength, which meant she tried to fight like a giant when she really was *not*. She was by no means vertically challenged, but she resembled more a cat than anything else. Lean, graceful, fast and able to

dodge whatever he had thrown at her so far. But not once had she attacked or even retaliated. He was curious as to why she acted that way – he had to change that. Fast.

He needed to ask her about that, he thought, then made his way back to his quarters that he shared with a female now. He who had never been interested in such companionship outside of a Harem. It wasn't that she was a bad roommate but it had taken some getting used to. No more sleeping naked and no more walking into his chamber without knocking. The rules of decency had to be kept. He did not want to see the girl anything less than properly dressed.

But come to think of it, it was time that she showed him her face – without the glamour that was second nature to her. Another thing they needed to discuss. He really needed to know what his apprentice looked like for real. He was interested how she had turned out. If he could see his best friend in her or if she had inherited the looks of her mother. *That bitch*. Barin balled his hands to fists at the memory of Diarsa Di-Tera. That one sure as hell was the queen of deceit. And the shittiest mother there was. At least for her daughter.

He took a deep breath and pushed his angry thoughts away when he reached his door. He knocked once and when he got no reply he entered, relieved that his apprentice was already asleep. Twenty questions could wait till tomorrow.

Chapter 2

“Oh little one, there is no need to thrash – the chains won’t give. And I don’t recommend melting them either. They are made of weapons steel, they would only hurt you. And I so want to do that myself!” the monster said mockingly.

“You are going to pay for that. They will notice I’m gone,” she spit, trembling. Her show of courage was just that – a show. She was scared and feared for her life.

“Ah, but you know that they won’t. And even if, why would they care? You are worthless.”

“But then why?” she cried.

“Because you know. You are the only one my charm doesn’t work on. You should have known better than go tattle that I wasn’t manning by post.”

“But I didn’t,” she said, tears running over her cheeks. She didn’t understand what the monster wanted from her – she was nothing but a five-year-old girl. Why, oh why, had she wandered the gardens alone? Stupid. But then, she always wandered around them alone. She had known that the monster was cruel and not what he seemed, but she had never thought that he would snatch her away in the midst of day and chain her, hands above her head, her body spread like an X, in some underground dungeon. She was a child – and children were to be protected.

A desperate scream escaped her, eliciting nothing but cruel laughter from the monster.

“That won’t do you any good either. No one will hear you. They never do. Come on, give in already. After all, it’s your time to die today.”

“Why?” she sobbed, brokenhearted. “Why do you hate me so much?”

“Because however weak you are, you are still a threat. And threats need to be eradicated.”

Suddenly the monster had a blade in hand and carefully, ever so carefully drew it over her cheek. “Wouldn’t do to mar your face. Can’t have someone questioning your ‘accident’, can I?” He stepped back and with a rip her robe was no more.

She was trembling now. She knew then what was about to come. She had seen it before. Desperately she closed her eyes and tried to withdraw deep within herself. She refused to show him how scared she was. She was an An-Pyr after all.

“Oh no, you don’t,” he hissed and backhanded her. “You will stay with me, little one.”

Her head hurt. His fist had broken her cheekbone. It hurt. Badly. Still, she refused to utter a cry. If she had to die, then she would do so proudly. Somewhere deep down, she refused to give him the pleasure he was seeking with his cruel actions.

“Ah, ever the stubborn one. But I promise you, I’ll break you just the same as I did the others.”

He punched her in her kidneys. When that didn’t help, he started to hit everything else in his reach: stomach, breast, her face again. By the time he took a pause, she was on the verge of slipping into blessed unconsciousness. But then a cruel shimmer appeared in his eyes.

“Still standing, huh? Really impressive for a wimpy little girl. But then, that was just warming up.”

Suddenly the chains were gone and she was free. When the monster tried to grip her, she kicked and bucked with all her strength. But to no avail. A minute later she was chained again, but this time she faced the wall with her back at the monster. Luckily he wasn’t interested in her naked body. For that she was grateful. His hits she could take; they hurt, but whatever bone was broken could be healed. Even then, she knew a broken soul wasn’t so easily mended.

Then she heard the telltale swish and snap of a whip. She closed her eyes in despair. She had seen what it could do on the naked back of an adult Warrior more than once. She suppressed the need to vomit. That was not good. Her skin and body didn’t have the strength to take that punishment – she was nothing but a child. She trembled again.

“So you recognize the sound; I’m impressed. But no, of course you do – you have watched the punishments often enough. Hm, that’s unfortunate – it’s no fun when you know what’s coming,” he said pensively. “Ah, do you know my Fire specialty, little one? No? I think it’s best to experience it first hand, since it’s so hard to explain...”

Swish.

The whip again. But this time she felt Fire enhancing the sound. She swallowed and closed her eyes. This wasn’t real, she thought. He was a charmer. A strong one. And he liked

mind plays. This wasn't real. She withdrew deeper into herself, to the place where everything was calm and peaceful. If she managed to stay there, his illusion wouldn't affect her. So she concentrated, hard.

"It's nothing but an illusion," she whispered almost inaudible.

"I promise you, it's not."

She heard the swish of the whip again. And then felt the Fire slash into the delicate skin of her back.

The last thing she heard before her mind refused to acknowledge reality was the cruel laughter of the monster as her back was sliced into pieces. Inside her mind, she screamed and screamed and screamed. But no one heard, not even the monster.

She refused to utter a sound. There was no one there to help her.

Sheba woke up with a start. She was drenched in sweat and her hands were trembling. Ever since the Bite of the Guardian, the dreams were back. It was like the venom had burned away whatever block Serabi had placed in her after she had first stayed with Nia. Thank Nyx she didn't set anything on fire this time. It was as if she had to relive that day over and over again, and each time she remembered more.

The painful part was done now, but she was afraid of what was coming next. She didn't know exactly how she had survived - there was only a hazy memory of the woman who had found her just outside the great walls of her home and had applied some ointment on her back. Sheba had gone back a day later and tried to tell someone, but when she had found her parents eating and laughing with the monster in the dining hall the words had refused to come. As she found out later that day, no one had ever missed her. Not even her nurse.

Sheba snorted bitterly. She had stolen some ointment from the healers and applied it as good as she had been able to her back. It had *hurt*. So much. But after a while she had numbed to the pain and just endured the healing process. Thanks to her amateurish efforts, her whole back was a mess of scars. They had gotten finer over the years and had paled, but they were still clearly visible, clearly sensible.

She had always wondered why the Healer in Altahir hadn't noticed them, but then the woman had never thought to examine her properly. Maybe it was for the best. It was over and done with and she concealed them with her glamor now. Rayza certainly wouldn't

take such a discovery lightly, she thought, and as angry as her uncle still was, he would run after the monster and get himself killed. And Barin... well, Barin would send her away, if he knew, because he would doubt the soundness of her mind after such an experience. And said soundness was a requirement for the apprenticeship. He would be right of course, because that day had left even deeper scars than he could imagine. Ever since that day, she had held everything in, had cut herself from the world and only ever kept to the shadows, where no one could see her. She had consciously sought to hide herself even before it had become a necessity.

An idea crossed her mind. Maybe this was why Benali was so hung up on killing her instead of Tarek. She was his only mistake. The one that got away.

She pushed the depressing thoughts away and silently got up and dressed. It was still dark outside, maybe three in the morning. As she made her way to Chari's meadow, she was thankful for the quiet of the night. She was definitely in need of some peace. Like every damn night since she had woken up in Sir Aman'ti during the tryouts. Hopefully her companion was up for a ride. She needed to forget. If only for a while.

Aris had woken early and had decided to practice in solitude for a while. Sure, he was used to a noisy crowd, but he needed some alone time every now and then. In that regard he had the perfect mentor, since Onyx wasn't one for constant company either. Their living together had taken some getting used to though for both of them. Apparently Aris was a lot more intrusive and noisier than the Hashisin's former companion. How the sprite had been able to stand the man's mood swings he didn't know. The spy master was as likely to lash out as praise him. Not that his mentor praised him often; Aris wasn't entirely sure that the man even knew what proper praise – an encouraging 'good work' would be enough every now and then – sounded like.

But at least he got a nod when he did exceptionally well, not like the Fire sprite who only ever got a disappointed head shake and an exasperated 'repeat' or 'again' from the Captain. She must hate that staff by now. Every single one of the other apprentices was allowed to train with his weapon of choice, but she? To have to start with a staff of all things must hurt. However, he had to admire her discipline. Without a single complaint, she did what she was told and followed every of her mentor's order, gruff as they were. But she still

was on the outside, ate her meals apart from the rest of them – yes, they weren't exactly nice and welcoming, but they were men, so what – and never joined any of their discussions.

To him, this was a sure sign that she didn't belong here. He often wondered why she was still here. She could have led an easier life anywhere else, Warrior or not. Someone who didn't once lift her weapon in a battle trial didn't have what it took to be a soldier, lest a Hashisin.

How her proud mentor could stand the apparent disgrace that was his apprentice he didn't know. Maybe Onyx had cashed in a favor – who knew.

As he started to go through his drill sets on the stable meadow to avoid any early risers – Onyx was as merciless as the Captain himself and only accepted flawless executions of tasks – he saw the Fire sprite coming back from the Southern Gate on her black beast. Which was another puzzle. She was the only individual the mighty stallion tolerated in his vicinity. Onyx had told him that this Wild Breed was special, said to be the Lord of the Desert, and he had seemed impressed that his former warden had managed to gain his trust. However it was she had done that, because she had never told anyone.

As he watched her jumping down from her horse, he got a glimpse of her face. She looked tired and weary and exhausted. What was wrong with her? A moment later her face had the same blank expression as usual and it left him wondering if he had just imagined it.

Barin got up at sunrise and went over his to-do list for the day: telling the kitchen about the Council meeting; the usual morning discussion with his fellow mentors; the rest of the day was for his apprentice. He hoped so at least.

Thank Sol she could do the drills on her own, because as often as he had to leave to take care of something or other, she wouldn't learn anything. But whatever happened today, he would take some time to ask her what he needed to know and get to see her without her glamour.

And work on her trust. He sighed. Maybe Onyx had been right and he should have lowered his standards years ago. But he had always opted for the most challenging way of doing something. And Sheba *was* special. He understood her trust issues and he was happy enough that she had proven to be exceptionally smart in all things combat, but her lone wolf attitude had to go.

Anyway, first things first.

On his way out he looked into her room to check up on her but found an empty bed. Again. He had to ask her about that, too. If she had trouble sleeping, then he needed to know. Lack of rest could bring you to your knees the same as an injury.

By Sol, her list of secrets got longer by the second.

Three hours later, after he had accomplished his various tasks, he met his apprentice at the Field of Doom. Funny that every single group of apprentices came up with the same name for their gathering place; but then, the name was apt.

“So, apprentice, did you manage the task I’ve set you?”

At her nod, he motioned her to show him. And once again she surprised him with three sets of perfectly executed drills with the infernal broomstick. He would have thought that she would object to the staff three days ago after she had mastered the advanced drills, but no. Not a single complaint. She dutifully did what he told her to, stupid or not. This was exactly why he had taken her on. *Apprentice must be able to follow orders without thought: check.*

“All right. I see you’ve practiced. I want you to implement this drill into your daily routine until it is second nature.”

He watched her stoic expression at his words, fully aware that he had burdened her with an additional half hour of practice every day. He thought he detected a light glow in her eyes, but she closed them for a moment and looked as innocuous as usual. What would it take for her to break, he wondered as he admired her strength of will. Another point on the ever growing list of questions, he thought with a sigh. There had to be a reason for her acceptance – she was a Fire Elementar for Sol’s sake and they weren’t exactly known for their patience.

“I’ve got some things to do for the next few hours; important, pressing matters that need my attention. Until I’m back, you will practice the whole of your drills until it’s time for your afternoon classes.”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied calmly.

“Commence!” he ordered and left her to her training.

Sheba was fuming. Classes started at two in the afternoon and it was only half past eight now. She would be exhausted from the exertion by then. And no word about lunch either. Thank Nyx she had refilled her satchel. Important matters he'd said; yeah, conferring with the gate guards and a three hour nap were really important and pressing. She wondered if he really thought she didn't know.

She sighed and shoved the bitterness out of her mind. He would get what he wanted, she thought stubbornly; she sure wouldn't give him any reason to throw her out. She knew that no one else would ever train her – not that there had been much training yet, but the staff drills were still better than chores – which was the reason why she hadn't objected to any of the ludicrous orders or drills her mentor was so fond of. She was aware that he was still testing and assessing her value as an apprentice and thus, she steeled her spine, shoved her emotions aside, and went on stubbornly tackling every task he had set her. She just hoped the outcome was worth it.

She took her staff, centered her stance, and went to work.

"Look at her!" Sireu scoffed, pointing at Shea and her staff, when he and the other six apprentices made their way from the battle arena to the dining hall at noon. The others snickered.

"You'd have thought she got the hang of it by now. But I believe her talent with the broomstick would be better used inside the fortress. Since we are trained to the best of our abilities, maybe we should suggest she does maid duties. Someone has to keep the Heart of Quiliaris in working order and presentable after all," Tabaro commented.

"By Sol, she is a disgrace for the Guild. That's why females are no Warriors. What the hell did the Gods think when choosing her for the tryouts?" Danis joined the ridicule. "All she'll ever be is nice arm candy, but that's about it." Sireu and Tabaro nodded in agreement.

"Let her be, Danis. It can't be easy for her. It's not her fault she is less strong than we are," Nuri said, unsurprisingly defending his fellow Fire Elementar. Not that he liked her, but Fire people had to stick together. And of course, she had helped him with Master Tertios' history lessons every now and then. Being the warden of one of the Guild's best spies had definitely paid off for her.

“Yeah, yeah. But you know I’m right,” the Wind prince muttered. As they went on, he couldn’t resist though.

“Yo, Fire witch!” Shea didn’t turn around, but she stilled. “Was it you I saw riding around on a broomstick at night? Oh, wait. That can’t be. You would need actual power to do that!”

Except for Nuri and Aris everyone laughed at the jibe. Nuri wisely kept his silence, knowing the danger of taunting a female Fire Elementar. Aris on the other hand stayed silent because kicking someone already down wasn’t honorable. Plus, he wasn’t up for a tongue-lashing of his mentor. The man got riled by lesser things than poor behavior towards his former warden. Just because she was someone else’s responsibility now didn’t erase years of taking care of her.

“I wish she would lash out some time. Maybe then they would respect her,” he murmured under his breath.

“Forget it, Ice man. Lashing out would mean a loss of control, which is seen as dishonor in our kingdom. Something I’ve already explained to you, more than once,” Nuri whispered back.

“All right, all right. I keep forgetting your ludicrous codex. Where’s the honor in fighting a senseless battle? For people so concerned with survival, you really try your best to get yourself killed.”

Nuri shook his head and sighed, exasperated. “Dude, best you listen closely to Master Tertios’ lessons on the Fire kingdom next week. Maybe you get it then.” With an eye roll he made his way into the fortress and left an annoyed Aris behind.

He watched the Fire sprite for another moment, shook his head, and went to get something to eat. All the while wondering if she would show up for lunch today.

An hour after lunch, Sheba took a short break. She sat down and ate some of her Samani and tried to fight the persistent memory of the taunts. It hurt that her easy friendship with Danis hadn’t survived here the tryouts. She’d have never thought that he would treat her like shit as soon as he thought he had something to prove. But that just showed how gullible she was.

Another friend gone.

She knew she wasn't the most easygoing, sociable person there was – what with her trust issues and keeping secrets and all – but she hadn't expected this outright demeaning behavior from him.

Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me.

If it weren't for the promise to watch over him she had foolishly given Kerissa, she would ignore his very existence.

Angrily she asked herself if she would ever learn. Every time she acted on that streak of kindness in her, she had to pay for it. With interest. Maybe the Fire people had been right to focus on strength and honor instead of warmer emotions like love, generosity, and kindness of the heart. At least this approach spared you constant disappointments.

Sheba looked at the stand of the sun and was relieved to find that it was almost time for history class with Tertios. She smiled. Danis' mentor had a secondary Erudite Talent, so he was predestined for lecturing them on all things concerning Quiliaris and the four kingdoms. And since they had finished the creation of the Wind, Water, and Earth kingdoms, it was now time for Fire. She was looking forward to gain deeper knowledge about her land, as she was certain that Tertios was going to be as thorough in his lecture on Pyr as he had been on the other kingdoms.

She got up and went to her chamber to wash up a bit and change. Looking at herself in the mirror, she sighed. Without the glamour that disguised her natural appearance she looked tired, pale, and way too thin. Thank Nyx no one would ever see her weakness. They would use it to throw her out.

She reinforced her glamour and immediately a young woman with a chestnut braid and chocolate eyes stared back at her. Someone who looked healthy and fit to take on the world.

Seeing that she had another few minutes until class, she made a detour to check up on Chari on her way to the study room in the Earth wing of Aliaenar. Which proved fruitless, because her companion seemed to have gone for a ride. Alone. By Nyx, that stallion was a fount of endless energy.

Rolling her eyes at her thoughts, she left him some treats and ran over to her class. Being late wouldn't do; Tertios would refuse her entry.

Having him for a mentor must be a wake-up call for Danis, she thought smugly.

Sheba entered the classroom a minute before Tertios appeared and took her place in the back, away from the others, who ignored her as usual. Thank Nyx for small mercies.

She hoped that the Hashisin's lecture would be interesting enough for her to stay awake. Now that she was sitting down, her lack of sleep and her emotional exhaustion made themselves known with a vengeance. On the upside though, she might be so beat tonight that not even her nightmares had a chance to disturb her, which would get her a full night of sleep.

Chapter 3

“Good afternoon, Warriors. I hope everyone memorized the history of the Light Kingdoms. Since you will need it for the Night Kingdom and its history.”

At the dutiful nods of his disciples, Tertios got comfortable on his chair and started with the myth of creation of the youngest of Quiliaris’ kingdoms.

“As you all know, the Fire kingdom, or Pyr, is the youngest of the four kingdoms, having come into existence about a century after the Kingdoms of Light. Factually we know from the records of the Light Kingdoms that their outcasts banded together and took off in a hunt for land; somewhere along the way they were joined by rebellious Imbrians who refused to worship the Sun King as their God; the cross-breeds of the two were the first Fire Elementars. The three groups together were able to conquer the northern desert of Imbra and called the place Pyr. Within the next decade, the Fire land got shaped in the likes of the Light Kingdoms, put a King on its throne, and so became Quiliaris’ fourth kingdom.”

Tertios stopped with his lecture and watched the apprentices’ reaction to his words. As expected, Beren’s boy didn’t seem happy about it.

“Nuri, you don’t agree, I take it?” he addressed the sour-looking apprentice.

“No, I don’t,” Nuri hissed and jumped up from his chair, agitated. “We got our power from Nyx! Everyone knows that. And there you wonder why we Fire people have no love for you lot. It would be the same if I said it wasn’t Sol who created you, but that you are merely a product of mixed breeding. Show some respect towards the Goddess and us!”

“Mind your manners, boy! I don’t take well to attitudes like yours. And that’s what all the records say; so chances are it’s true, whether you like it or not.”

“But...” Nuri sputtered. His face had turned scarlet at Tertios’ words and he radiated anger.

Tertios closed his eyes. It was always the same. Every four years another Fire Warrior ignited at his words, at the truth. Their creation myth was all right and gave them purpose, but it was a myth nonetheless. And Nyx was but a minor Goddess, her sole purpose of existence was to act as counterpart of Sol, of light. That truth didn’t change just because the

Fire Elementars chose to ignore it. And the one in front of him would just have to come to terms with it.

“Boy, calm down and withdraw your power! If you can’t control your temper, then you have no place here in the Guild!”

Apparently that was the wrong thing to say. Nuri just looked at him defiantly and his Fire got even more aggressive. Tertios sighed and gathered his own Earth power and commanded it to curtail the boy’s fiery Flames. At least he tried to.

Nuri’s Fire raged against his Earth and managed to crack the walls of its enforced confinement. The air got hotter and hotter, and sweat began to drip from his forehead. From everyone’s it seemed. A few of the others looked like they wanted to interfere and try to calm the boy down, who had bright red-gold eyes by now as he refused to give in, but they wisely refrained from doing so.

This was a power play; one he needed to win. But if the boy didn’t calm down soon and reigned in his Fire by his own volition, then Tertios had no option than to hurt him. A blast of his Earth power would take the boy out in under a second.

“One last warning, Nuri,” Tertios said in his strictest voice. “If I have to take you out, you won’t like the repercussions. The backlash of such a loss of control are severe!”

Nuri’s only reaction was a smirk and then his Fire started to pound against his Earth, the force behind it increasing with every hit.

“Then so be it,” Tertios told him coldly and drew extra power from the earth beneath him to strengthen his attack. That way he could hold the confinement as well as knock the boy out. Now it were his eyes that turned a bright light green. He saw his own apprentice look at him, gaping. *Good.*

He compressed his power into a glowing ball and raised his hand.

Nuri’s smirk deepened.

“Last warning, boy,” Tertios tried to warn him one last time.

But it was in vain.

The boy raised his own hand. A Fire ball danced on his fingers, waiting to be released.

Tertios shook his head, disappointed. The second the boy attacked him he was going to be thrown out of the Guild. What a pity; the boy had been promising. But most Fire Elementars were, up until the point they had to leave because they couldn’t stick to the rules.

Suddenly he felt another power weave itself between his and the Fire boy's. It managed to contain the angry blaze and the pounding stopped.

"Hedraem, Nuri!" Tertios heard the quiet but strong and commanding voice of...the girl?

Nuri's eyes widened in surprise and after a last flare, his power started to calm down and withdraw. *What the hell was that about?*

The boy breathed in and out, in and out, in and out. Then the Fire ball in his hand vanished and he lowered his hand.

"I'm sorry, Sir. I'm deeply ashamed that I've lost myself in my anger. I will report this to my mentor and take whatever punishment he deems adequate for this childish behavior. I hope you'll find it in you to forgive me," the young man said in a low and embarrassed voice.

Tertios sighed. At least the boy was decent enough to apologize and take the consequences of his actions. So he was going to stay a bit longer in Aliaenar. Good for him.

"You write an Erudite paper on the history of the Fire kingdom, using the Guild's records, and present it to us next week. Besides telling your mentor what has happened, of course. If the paper is to my satisfaction, this incident will be forgotten." He looked expectantly at Nuri.

The Fire Elementar nodded and sat down again. He lowered his head and his hair hid his face, his fingers shaking.

"Well, then let's go on now," Tertios said, looking at his other students, all the while ignoring Nuri. "As the Fire people revere strength above everything else, they announced the strongest, most brutal Warrior they could find their king. His name was Damiar In-Rei, who became King Damiar An-Pyr, the first of ten. The tenth had been of course the last High King three hundred and fifty years ago in the last war against Tortaris. Like it or not, the Fire Elementars' single-minded focus on revenge makes them the best Warriors in times of crisis. And what is also noteworthy, in comparison to the other kingdoms the House of Fire is the only one where the current ruler is a descendant of the original royal line, their stubbornness showing even here..."

Nuri sat at his table and listened stoically to Danis' mentor. By Nyx, he was ashamed. The last time he had lost his temper that badly had been after his little sister's death. But he

was fast approaching the end of his patience. Over the course of the last three weeks he had felt discontent and strife grow in his heart, day by day. For all the Guild was said to be a brotherhood, some were more equal than others. As he had found out, even here the Fire Elementars were looked down upon. How Onyx could stand that, he didn't know. He couldn't though, not for much longer.

Best example was that Tertios had expected his outburst; the Warrior hadn't seemed the least bit surprised to suddenly be confronted with an angry Fire Elementar.

Still, Nuri was aware that if he had given in to the temptation, he would have had to go and return back to his father in disgrace. And his goal to find the Princess would have been forever out of reach. Thank Nyx, the servant girl had spoken up. Maybe her weakness, both in terms of strength and education, was a good thing – she didn't seem to be fazed by the Hashisin's words in the least. She would have buckled under the Earth Elementar's display of power within a second.

He looked over to her place of choice in the far corner of the back and watched her for a moment. She looked the same as always. Brown hair, in a braid; brown eyes, a bit dull now – ah, so that's how she had stayed so calm, he realized, she only *appeared* to be listening; and her black set of clothes. If she put up her hood and concealed her face, one would never know she was a woman, much less realize she was even there. She was well versed in making herself invisible. Maybe he should ask her to teach him, because that ability sure would come in handy as an 'Avenging Angel,' the Guild's primary field of work in times of peace.

When he saw her gaze innocuously moving in his direction, he mouthed a "Thank you." She just blinked; he decided to take that as acknowledgement of his gratitude and concentrated on the lecture again. He had a paper to write after all.

At the end of the lesson, Tertios waited until the boys had left the room. "Girl!"

Barin's apprentice stilled but immediately relaxed her stance. She always reminded him of a frightened little filly. Always wary of her surroundings, always waiting for an enemy. If she were a man, she would be an excellent Hashisin. As it were, she might have the heart for it, but her body was going to betray her one of these days. Thanks to Barin, everyone could watch her humiliating weapons practice. The apprentices didn't realize it yet but their

mentors knew the signs of exhaustion when they saw them. But at least she did what she was told without ever mouthing off – quite contrary to his own apprentice.

Danis Cyn-Aro might have been raised a prince, but no one seemed to have bothered to teach him endurance, patience, and order. Whatever; nobody was perfect.

“What did you say to Nuri that he calmed down so fast?”

“I’m sorry if I overstepped my boundaries, Sir. I won’t do it again.”

Surprised, Tertios raised a brow. “You didn’t. You saved his hide in there. But I want to know what you said, girl, because I think it’d be most helpful for any of his instructors to know how we can calm him down instead of taking him out.”

“But you sure must have other strategies to deal with such behavior; he isn’t the first Fire Warrior here and certainly won’t be the last. You could even ask Onyx for his opinion on the matter?”

“Ah yes, but Onyx hadn’t been here much over the last years and he’d be the first to tell you that whoever can’t control himself has to go. But you probably know that already. So?”

“I just reminded him of something, Sir, something Fire related. And I don’t recommend you using it, since it might have the opposite effect coming from you. Will you excuse me now? I still have to take care of my horse before Elements trainings and drill practice. Until next class!”

Without another word she left the classroom.

Tertios watched her go, stunned. No apprentice had ever dared to leave him standing. And she had done so graciously. But he still didn’t know what she had told Nuri. His forte was history not languages, thus his Pyriant’ha was close to nil.

As was most everyone else’s. Not many bothered to learn the Fire dialect. Most of the Pyrians spoke Quiliar’lin anyway, so it didn’t matter.

Which meant he had to go and ask Onyx if he really wanted to know. *Great*. He and the Fire Hashisin sure weren’t the best of friends; their personalities just too different for that. He could ask his Captain instead. *Nah*. The man would just send him to Onyx out of spite.

Anyway, that could wait for later. Now he had to watch his apprentice’s performance in basic Elements training.

“Damn Nuri, that was a close call in there! What did you think?” Dareos asked his friend. For a moment there he had been afraid that the Fire apprentice was going to lose it.

“Yeah, well, how would you react when someone insults your creator?”

“But come on, if it’s in the records... You know how anal the Erudites are in accurately noting even the minutest details.”

“Sure they are. But you seem to forget that it’s your Erudites who’ve written that down. Our records say something different. And they differ on the creation of your kingdoms too.”

“I don’t think so. Your Erudites were outcasts of the Light Kingdoms! They’ve learned the same stuff, after all.”

“Believe what you want. I do the same!” Nuri answered angrily and stormed off in the direction of the Southern gate.

Dareos shook his head. There was no reasoning with a Fire Elementar when he was in one of his moods. If it weren’t for the girl, his friend would be packing right now. Which reminded him. He ran after Nuri. When he had caught up to him, he asked, “What did this ‘hidram’ mean?”

“It’s ‘Hedraem,’ Earth boy. And don’t ever use that word again. It’s ours.”

“By Sol, would you stop with the tantrum already? It’s just a word!”

“It’s not. And if you don’t want a bunch of blisters, then leave me the fuck alone for the rest of the day!”

“Oh, be that way, asshole! Keep your secret, for all I care! I just wanted to be nice,” Dareos hissed. Then he turned and went back to the fortress. And here the Fire people wondered about their fucked-up reputation.

Suddenly he felt the air heat around him and his power warned him about an impending attack. Immediately he turned and faced the challenge head-on. “Wanna fight, Fire boy? You do realize I’m stronger than you are?” he drawled.

Nuri just looked at him and smiled coldly. “We’ll see.”

Dareos swallowed. He knew he was the more powerful of them but still, he had a feeling that the Fire Elementar had to have an ace up his sleeve – there was no fear or even wariness apparent in his demeanor. He tried to reason with Nuri one last time. “You do this,

and your chances are high that you go home today! Then you have no chance in hell that your dreams will ever come true!”

“Oh, they will. With or without the Guild,” Nuri spat at him.

“What the hell is wrong with you, Nuri?” Dareos yelled at him. “Why are you acting so weird all of a sudden?”

“I’m not the one acting weird! You lot are! You with your prejudices and disdain for the Fire people. And why? Because we live by different standards?” Nuri shouted. “But you know what? Without those ‘barbaric’ standards Imbra would have run over Quiliaris a long time ago. We are the ones that keep them at bay – because every one of you Light people would run screaming!”

“Did you just call us cowards? Really?” Dareos shot back angrily. “We can’t help it if we don’t have the ability to deflect the Sun people’s power like you can! And who did ever call you barbaric here? Or showed any disdain towards you? For all I know, everyone here likes you!” A pause. “Up until now, that is!”

“Yeah? What about the servants who go out of their way to avoid me? What about those who would stop talking whenever I or even Onyx enter a room?”

“Oh come on, the servants don’t count! As for those rare others – maybe they were discussing sensitive information.”

“Even if, am I not trustworthy? Let me tell you a hard truth: no, I’m obviously not – because Fire wielders can’t be trusted, since betrayal is part of our make-up!”

“What about them? There will always be biased idiots sticking to their beliefs, however wrong! What counts are we, your friends, who spend the majority of our days with you. And none of us thinks like that!”

“Don’t you? Everyone in there, even you, thought my anger and my loss of control was a typical Fire thing!”

“Well, you do get easily excited! And every stereotype contains a grain of truth; in your case, that’s your volatile temper! You almost attacked a teacher just because you didn’t like what he said, for Sol’s sake!”

Dareos sighed. On Nuri’s fingertips another Fire ball began to show; his color was mirrored by the glow in his eyes.

Damn.

Sheba looked at the sun and hurried to get to the arena. Elements training was going to start soon and she didn't need to piss off Cliro anymore by being tardy. The man wasn't particularly fond of her to begin with; he didn't need any extra ammunition to pick on her and humiliate her even more by publicly showcasing her lack of power. *The jerk*. It wasn't enough for them to openly show their dislike of Fire Elementars, no, they regarded her with contempt for her weakness, too. She was providing them with the full package, she thought sarcastically.

When she came to the Field of Doom, she felt aggressive power in the air – one that felt familiar... by Nyx, what was Nuri up to now? The boy had been picking fights left and right for some time now. One of these days he would be going too far.

She told herself to forget it, but she turned south nevertheless. As absurd as it was, she didn't want to be the only Fire apprentice. She knew she was doing the right thing for the wrong reasons, but she sure as hell didn't want to suffer the consequences of Nuri's misbehavior. Which she would have to; the instructors would be even harder on her then. No, she did not want that; she was too close to her limits as it was.

She found Nuri and Dareos close to the Fire gate, facing off, glowing power balls in their hands. *Damn those men and their egos*.

When she saw Nuri lifting his hand in a hurl, she broke into a sprint and put herself in front of his target. Dareos might be strong, a noble Earth Elementar no less, but even so he wouldn't be a match for the angry Fire Elementar. His Fire would be fueled by all his negative emotions, turning into a raging, destructive force. Never mind that Nuri was weaker than Dareos. His ire would leave Dareos' Earth scorched.

Sheba let her own power go and felt it form a thick wall in front of the Earth Elementar. She made sure to keep part of her Fire in her body to stay unaffected by any of Nuri's attacks.

"What do you think you are doing, little girl? I don't want to hurt you, so get out of my way!" Nuri told her offhandedly, never lifting his gaze from Dareos.

"Yes, he is right. This isn't your fight! And you can't do anything here. We are both stronger than you are!" Dareos fell in and tried to push her out of the way.

He didn't come far. Her wall kept him at least three feet away from her. He was lucky that he didn't find himself knocked on his ass a few yards away. Her power did like to show off at times.

Whatever.

She ignored the raging Earth Elementar who battered against her Fire wall with his own power. Good luck with that one, she thought.

She changed to Pyriant'ha and tried to find out what this was all about. She hoped their native language would get Nuri to listen at least.

"What the hell, An-Inis?"

"Move out of my way, *Esendri*," he hissed at her, scoffing.

Sheba calmly watched the red-gold in his eyes change into a burning red shade. Ah, he was getting really angry now.

"If you need release, you should have told your mentor or ask Onyx to spar with you. The Light Elementars don't know about our needs."

"This is not about *release*, little girl! It's about their highhanded, derisive demeanor!" Nuri finally broke down. "About their prejudices and bias! Don't tell me you didn't notice! Maybe you don't care, seeing that you are used to it, but I do. Never in my life have I been treated this badly!"

She answered his derisive comment about her status with setting his hair on fire. "Call me little girl ever again and I incinerate you," she informed him in an even colder voice than his.

"Stupid bitch," Nuri screamed as he tried to save his hair. He drew back his arm and hurled a Fire ball at her head, accompanied with a blast of pure power.

Upset much?

Sheba heard Dareos shout at her to *move*, but she didn't even twitch. She felt the impact of his attack rebound on the protective shield her power instinctively provided her with. Except for one time in her life that shield had never been broken. And she strongly suspected that it had been due to the weakness of her mind then.

She saw his eyes widen in surprise and she couldn't help herself – she threw back her head and laughed. Out loud.

"You didn't really think that would work, did you?"

"But how...?" he sputtered. "You are *Esendri*!"

“I hate to repeat myself, but like I told you before: I am not, and never have been. I wouldn’t be here if I was.”

“Oh come, your being here is because of Onyx’s protection! You didn’t even lift your sword in the battle trial; not to mention that you came back empty-handed from the fifth!”

“Oh, boy, you are an idiot; you know that right?” she said, still laughing. “You do realize that I earned my place here the same way you did? They despise women even more than they do Fire Warriors. Meaning that they would have thrown me out in a heartbeat if I didn’t pass the trial with flying colors. And for the battle trial: no one said I had to raise my weapon; as far as I remember, the objective was to get the prize. The how-to was never defined. My acceptance here had nothing to do with Onyx – who wanted me gone even more than the rest, by the way.”

“Tell yourself what you need to justify your presence here; we all know the truth!”

“Anyway, that’s not important right now. What is important though is you going crazy on us all of a sudden. You need to exercise control!”

“Control? You of all people want to lecture me on control? You have no idea what it takes to keep my amount of power inside, raging and agitated as it is! So shut up, weakling!”

At this taunt Sheba set his clothes on fire. “Don’t you ever call me that either, asshole. You have no idea how strong my power is or what it takes to control it. And since you don’t see me going around trying to hurt my friends and I have a lot more to deal with than you; that makes me the stronger one, moron!”

“Says the girl who’s trying to torch me! Don’t delude yourself, baby, you are no better than me!”

Now Sheba’s eyes began to glow, too. No one, absolutely no one, was allowed to call her *baby*.

She heard Dareos shout something behind her but she ignored him. The wall behind her that kept the Earth Elementar unharmed became impenetrable as her blazing white-gold power came to the fore. In a blatant show of dominance, the cold sentience sent out one single pulse of pure, vast force that shattered the earth beneath them.

At the tell-tale rattle of the ground she was standing on, Sheba suddenly lost her power-induced stupor. The remnants of the oath bond that helped her from giving herself away had sent a warning; though immediately burned to ashes, it had served its purpose.

Closing her eyes, she drew up all her strength and focused on leashing her power once more. *I am in command, I am in command*, she told herself. Over and over she repeated the words in her mind until she believed them whole-heartedly. The second she did, she wrestled her power back under her control and firmly leashed it. She even caged her white blaze in yet another pitch-black prison in the deepest abyss of her soul she could find. No one could know how close the edge she really was.

Then she breathed in utter relief. That had been a close call. She had almost let Nuri's aggression goad her into an all-out fight. For all Nuri's bitterness about unjustified prejudices, the volatility of their temper wasn't one of them. As they both had proven right now, one Fire wielder's emotions triggered the same in others of his kind. And then... *boom*. She looked up at the sun again and swallowed. They needed to go. Now. Or Cliro would have their hides.

"As much fun as that was, Nuri, we need to go. Elements training is about to start."

She turned around and headed to the arena.

"Not one word about this, Earth boy, not one!" she hissed at a flabbergasted Dareos in passing.

Nuri blinked, once again stunned. His power dissipated and suddenly her words penetrated his haze.

"Shit!" he muttered as he broke into a run too, taking Dareos with him. They made it to the arena just in time.

A second after they took their places in the row, Cliro started roll call.

Chapter 4

Cliro looked pensively at the seven younglings in front of him. Two of them were in need of a brutal lesson on control. His favorite two, no less, from what he had seen five minutes ago. They didn't really think their little fight went unnoticed, did they? He had to admit that he had been impressed as the earth started to shake – he hadn't thought the boy had in him. Well, the two Fire Elementars still had to be punished for their behavior. Cliro had even gone and ask Onyx if this was a Fire thing – he did remember his fellow's need for release from their own apprenticeship – but even the spy master had said that release was one thing – this had been something else altogether.

“Welcome to training today, everyone,” he greeted the novices in front of him. Although they all had gone through some Elements training during their childhood, the Hashisins had different standards. Keeping your power in check and knowing the basics was of no use in battle, since it worked on the assumption of being in full strength, rested, and relaxed. Most of the apprentices had no idea how to use their power under duress or in stressful situations. Not to mention when tired, exhausted, or injured. For that the basics needed to be drilled into them until they were second nature; they needed to learn how to be in control of their Element even under the most extenuating circumstances; they needed to be prepared for every likely situation and even more of the unlikely variety. But first things first.

“As promised we are doing something new today. The last months we concentrated on the beginners stuff, like how much power do you have at my disposal at any given time; keeping your power contained inside yourself to prevent a constant drain, things like that. Today we start using that power. I want you to tell me what was the first exercise your teachers made you do and then you'll show it to me; afterwards, you'll practice that until I'm satisfied with the outcome – based on economy of power used, style, etc. You know the criteria by now.”

He looked into the faces of each of the apprentices and saw various degrees of shock, annoyance, and smugness there. The annoyance didn't bother him, that was to be expected

considering no one wanted to do kids' stuff; but the smugness – well, that expression would be gone by the end of class. No one who thought he had a certain exercise down pat had ever left the arena without yet another extra drill set on his already heavy training schedule. And it figured it'd be Danis and Sireu. Both the Wind and the Water Elementars started training with something as simple as 'feeling' the currents of their respective Elements. Without that, no manipulation of either was possible. But still, there was recognizing a current and then there was knowing how to work them in your favor. And that was not on the agenda of ordinary training. Most Elementars had an instinctive understanding of the currents, of course, but the majority had no idea what they could do – thus never tapped their full potential. This was a good thing ultimately, because otherwise the Hashisins would be superfluous.

"Earth Elementars first. Dareos, Tabaro, what were your first exercises?" he addressed the two Earth Warriors.

Both thought for a moment, then Tabaro said, "My first exercise was feeling the structure of the ground beneath. The awareness that Earth is a living thing with its own sentience, own microcosm, and own set of rules."

"What?" Cliro asked when he saw Dareos' raised eyebrow at his fellow's report.

"Well, my first exercise was growing plants for my mother." At Cliro's puzzled expression, he explained a bit embarrassed, "Well, I had my first lesson a day before her birthday and I was never one to remember such dates..." He shrugged.

Cliro had to suppress a grin. The others didn't.

"Well, then show me!"

So they did. Tabaro closed his eyes and focused on the earth beneath his feet. As he had been taught, he stretched out his power and commanded it to report to him whatever it touched. When the information began to flow, he started to speak.

"On the surface, there's humus, tamped from a million feet over the years; a few feet down, there are the remnants of some seeds – fungus and the likes – but they won't ever grow anymore because of lack of nourishment; further down there's a stream, an underground side arm of the Divi'siae; below it, there are several layers of sand, limestone, and chalk; ah, and beneath that, it's getting hotter." He opened his eyes and looked expectantly at the Hashisin.

Cliro nodded and just motioned to Dareos to do his thing. He heard Tabaro's frustrated sigh and raised an eyebrow. "No verdict until everyone is done."

"Yes, Sir," the Earth Elementar grumbled.

"Dareos, your turn! We don't have all day!"

"Oh, yes, Sir. Of course."

How he was going to let something grow when there wasn't one single plant there according to Tabaro, he had no idea. Maybe he could grow some of the dead fungus, though, Dareos thought.

He focused on his element and searched for anything alive within the arena. He let his power check his immediate surroundings, but expanded it more and more when his search proved fruitless. He pushed his power farther and farther until he was almost at the side walls. Ha! At last he found something: a seed of some sort of fruit. Not his favorite plant, but at least there was enough vital energy in it for him to work with. He encased the seed with his Earth power, felt it merge with the tiny grain's energy, and sent the command for growth.

And grow it did. The grain turned out to be a tree of sorts; one he didn't recognize, but given its spiky leaves and dark, withered stem and its somewhat 'drained' energy, he took an educated guess and say it was its origin was in Pyr.

He let more of his power flow into it and after some time, the plant started to bloom. It was gorgeous. Red blossoms popped up in fast-forward. Dareos looked at the tree in wonder. The flowers combined every shade of red there was, from the colors of dawn to the fiery red of Fire to the darkest velvety crimson one could imagine. *Beautiful.*

He stopped when he felt the blossom reach its peak and drew his power back inside. He threw a glance at his fellows, only to see the same awed expression on them, then looked expectantly at Cliro. Who sported a decidedly non-awed expression; why the hell would the man be angry?

"Does that suffice?"

"Well done, apprentice," Cliro said with an unsettling neutral voice. "Water and Wind are next. Sireu!"

The Water Elementar stepped forward and took a deep breath. "My first lesson was creating a tempest in a teacup." At Cliro's disbelieving look, he said, "Well, my teacher was a well-known man with lots of ambition. And he only wanted top-notch students, so..."

“All right,” Cliro replied and produced a filled teacup out of nowhere. Yep, having a secondary Muse Talent sure was great. “Show me!”

Sireu blinked in surprise. He had known his mentor had an Illusions ability, but he had thought it minor. Immediately he thought what that revelation could mean for him. Mercenary, yes, but that was a large part of every Water Elementar’s personality. Hm, Sireu himself had a secondary Healer Talent, which was what had let him pass the fifth challenge. No one had to know that he had had a wound that would have confined others to the infirmary for weeks. Anyway, Cliro’s Illusion ability could come in handy for improving his Healer Talent. Everyone needed bodies to practice on and his fellows sure wouldn’t let him do it; besides the fact that he wanted to keep his ability a secret for as long as he could.

Well, time to create a whirl. He concentrated on the damn teacup and its quiet content. He commanded his power to adapt the element’s energetic currents and went to work. This was child’s play, really. On a superficial level, the fluid was undisturbed, but if you let yourself sink into it, let yourself drown, you eventually reached its core. And in this little bubble all of Water’s powerful potential was stored; it was the sum total of what Water was: from the tiniest drop of dew to the great destructive seismic waves, everything was there. It was just about bringing the right potential to life. He scanned through the mass of information and finally found what he was looking for. Sireu formed his power accordingly, left the core, and while he was rising to the surface, he let his power stream into the liquid.

When he reached the top again, he already felt the first stirrings. Slowly the currents changed and created an undertow in its wake. It got stronger and stronger and then it was done. In the middle of the little teacup was a perfectly crafted whirl.

Cliro nodded at Sireu and the cup vanished. “Wind Elementars. Your turn.”

Aris and Danis looked at each other and Danis stepped forward. Ever since their childhood, he got to perform first. That way his work didn’t appear as pathetic in comparison to Aris’ greater strength and ability.

“Er, my first lesson was thawing a pond I had unintentionally iced over,” he said embarrassed. His father had not been amused that his prized fish had been deep-frozen and had ended up on a platter that week.

He saw his brother grin at his words; most likely he recalled the King’s major fit when he had found out. *Jerk.*

“How am I going to do that?” he asked as he waved his hand at the dry, pondless arena.

Cliro just raised a brow and said laconically, “Using the one to your left would do, don’t you think?”

“Huh?” Danis turned in said direction and wouldn’t you know it, there was a nice little pond. It looked a bit out of sorts, surrounded by dirt and naked earth as it was, but whatever. Maybe they could skate there afterwards? “Yeah, that will do. Thanks,” he smirked in Cliro’s direction, whose eyes had turned cold at Danis’ quip. Which the youngest Wind Prince failed to notice. As usual.

Danis went over to the pond and took it in. Icing it over would definitely be an improvement, he thought, disgusted. The pond resembled more a swamp than anything else and its water was muddy and the odor... ugh. Danis shuddered and managed to keep his lunch down, barely but still. He shot a dark look at Cliro, who watched him expressionlessly.

Asshole.

Anyway, the faster the thing was iced, the faster the reek would be gone. Thank Sol, his specialty was a snowy wind. He gathered his inborn power, sent it a picture of the iced over pond, and let it go. All he had to do know was speeding up the process by letting a steady amount of power feed the air over and around the pond. No getting a feel for the air currents here. Small mercies, he thought. A moment later the first ice crystals formed and the wind picked up. He opened his core a bit more to increase the amount of Wind energy. Half a minute later, the pond’s surface eventually, finally, began to ice over. First, it was but a glittery coat but as more and more snowflakes covered it, the layer became harder, thicker, and at last indestructible. He stopped when he saw the ice having grown almost two feet. He took a moment to enjoy his handiwork, then he reversed the process, extracting every bit of Elemental Wind out of the ice. Satisfied, he ordered his Wind back and confined it inside his soul once more. He might not be as strong and talented and apt as Aris, but he wasn’t a total failure.

He went back to his fellow apprentices and with a smirk on his face, motioned Aris to take his turn. His brother just rolled his eyes at him and shook his head. A rather normal occurrence, but as usual he had no idea why. *Whatever.*

Aris stepped forward and immediately began talking. No use wasting anyone’s time here. “First exercise was exploring the limits of my power in terms of spread. How we are

going to do that with the dome over the arena? The way I understand it, it keeps our power in?”

Approval flashed in Cliro’s eyes at the Wind Warrior’s astute words. Onyx was a lucky bastard to have snatched such a smart and strong apprentice. But then, those types came with their own problems – pride, arrogance, stubbornness; Cliro suppressed a shudder at the thought. That was not something he wanted to deal with. He liked his students compliant and willing to learn.

“That won’t be a problem.”

Aris looked at the Water Hashisin for a moment, then shrugged. Since the man sure wouldn’t lift the practice shield, he must have created an illusion for him. *Impressive*. It took a lot of power to do that, especially given that his Wind had a range of close to a hundred miles. Well, it was show time.

Aris went deep into his soul and let his mind dissolve into a million little sparks. He was still aware about his immediate surroundings but it lost its acuity. Everything and everyone was nothing but a mass of particles formed into confining silhouettes that posed an obstacle in his way. He fused with his always moving, never still power and dropped the walls of its cage in his core. His Wind, happy to be free, immediately pushed outwards, out of his soul, out of his body and then just spread. It joined its source around its wielder and simply rode the currents. Aris, or rather his splintered self, commanded it to expand, to explore, to discover, as far as it could.

Aris focused on his Wind’s eastern expansion, saw the green hills of Ter, the fields flowing by; heard the stories that were carried in the air, listened to the birds’ chatter about something or other, until he was close to Ter Sentra. There the relaxing sounds of nature changed into noise. And it got *loud*. Good thing, that he was reaching his limit. Ah, there it was now. One yard more and he wouldn’t be able to hear a thing. Quiet. The air was nothing but air anymore, soundless, cold, and windy.

“I’m done,” he said after he had come back into his body and had his mind back together. It felt a bit strange to be limited to his physical body for a moment or two, but then he rolled his shoulders, stretched a bit, and things were back to normal again.

“So?” Cliro drawled.

“So?” Aris drawled back.

And here it was, Cliro thought, the arrogance of the strong ones. Not that he wasn't too, but at least he had waited until the end of his apprenticeship to publicly announce it.

"How far did you get?"

"Given our location I reached at least one major city in every kingdom."

Prevaricating much? Cliro decided to let it go, though. Most likely the Wind boy wanted to keep the exact level of his strength a secret. For now that was all right, but the boys – and they were still boys in his opinion and would continue to be so until their first real battle – had to learn to trust each other and rely in that trust to keep them alive. It was the foundation of the Guild, after all.

"Last, the Fire Elementars. Nuri, you are next."

The boy did as he was told and said, "Hm, the first 'exercise' I had to do was actually lighting a fire. My mother was ill and cold, as was my little baby sister, and with my father gone I had to do it."

A camp fire appeared right in front of him and Cliro motioned him to start. Still ramped up from the fight before, it didn't take him long to kindle the logs, although they were green and wet. He formed his excess energy into a ball and sent it directly to the pieces of wood. At impact, he ordered his Fire to spread and cover every inflammable surface it could find within the circle of stones around it. Then he gave the command to ignite. The logs went up in flames like match sticks and he had to hold back to feed the dancing heat any more of his power. He didn't think anyone would appreciate a scorching stake.

Feeling the fire's hunger for new fuel, he withdrew his power. Immediately the flames calmed down and then fizzled out. Nuri stepped back to his place next to Dareos.

Cliro nodded.

"So, now that I have a good overview of your level of expertise..."

"Sorry, Sir," Dareos suddenly interrupted him, "but what about *her*?"

"Well, I wanted to spare her the disgrace of publicly showing her non-existent powers, but of course you are right. Girl, your turn," Cliro said offhandedly in the girl's direction. As usual she stood alone at the far end of the row. The apprentice was right though, she needed to be given a chance too. Worst case she cemented her status as the weakest of them all. Which she was, of course.

She stepped forward and said calmly, "My first exercise...well, I didn't do one, seeing as I never had that sort of training."

At that Cliro turned and stared at her, disbelieving. “You never had any training? How can that be?” Now that was... unexpected. To his knowledge, *everyone* got basic training, even the Esendri in Pyr. The Fire people were way too volatile for staying untrained. And contrary to common belief, the girl did have power. She was weak, yes, compared to Dareos or Danis even, but definitely no Esendri. Otherwise she would never have made it through the fifth challenge. However, he had no idea how much power she really had at her disposal; it was hard to tell given the strange fearlessness that was usually typical for a strong Elementar. Cliro wasn’t sure if even Lightning knew, because the one time he had asked him about what to teach her given her servant status, all he got was a non-answer stating he should teach her to the best of his abilities. Yeah, really helpful. He didn’t know why he had expected an actual answer.

“So?” Cliro asked when she didn’t answer.

“I don’t really know why, Master Cliro, but fact is I never had any formal training. The only thing close to that sort of thing was a variation of Hide and Seek I played with those in charge of me.”

Hide and Seek? This conversation got weirder and weirder by each word she said.

“Which variation?”

Silence.

“Well, since I couldn’t be left alone, I was ordered to come with them, but to stay the hell out of the way. Unheard, unseen.”

“You played ‘Shadow?’ That’s the variation you mean?”

“I suppose so.”

“And?”

“And what?”

“Were you any good at it?”

“I suppose so, given that I never got caught,” she said with barely concealed sarcasm.

Ah, the girl did have some pride after all, Cliro thought. Although her voice was without inflection and monotone as always, she stood a bit taller. She had to work on that. Now that he thought about it, he realized that her usual calmness was probably as much crafted as her tone of voice. Onyx had indeed taught her well in all those years.

Hm, he was curious what else she had picked up from her former guardian. Maybe she wasn't as hopeless as he had thought. A servant spy with the knowledge of a Hashisin certainly could be an asset.

"You've never been caught? More like everyone kept quiet for your sake," Cliro told her, scoffing. At his jaunt her whole body relaxed. *Strange.*

Still, he thought about her statement and tried to come up with something to allow her to showcase her ability, but he drew a blank. She needed to do something else, then.

"I can't create a setting to let you prove your claim, though; only a true Muse can craft an illusion that elaborate. Don't you have a task similar to Nuri that you had to perform sometime in your childhood?" he asked her, a bit at a loss.

She looked at him thoughtfully and was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "The only other thing I ever had to do at that age was staying out of the way and don't get into trouble." She shrugged. There was nothing else to say. No one had ever taught her anything, other than the basics of reading and writing and housekeeping that was.

Now it was Cliro's turn to look at her pensively. The others were suspiciously quiet; no one even twitched. Even Nuri's face was utterly expressionless.

"Yeah, well. All right, you do the same thing as Nuri," he said at last, and the camp fire was back. "Kindle the logs, girl."

She gave a nod for an answer and a second later the fire burned. She didn't have to concentrate, like Nuri had. A thought was all it took. A second too late she realized that it would have been better to play dumb. But then, the logs had been dry as cinder. If she wanted to, she could burn down the arena – even earth could burn if heated enough. But no one needed to know that; she'd be happy if Nuri chalked up the instant fire to the dryness of the material.

When she saw surprise flash in Nuri's eyes, she added for good measure, "Dead wood," in his direction.

The camp fire vanished as fast as it appeared and Cliro cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.

"Now that I had the opportunity to judge everyone's level of ability, I'm going to announce your new training routine for the next two weeks."

The men looked at him expectantly and some even with excitement.

“Earth Elementars, you practice finding every living thing within a range of a hundred yards, horizontally as well as vertically; your goal is to have comprehensive knowledge of your surroundings in under thirty seconds max. Understood?”

Dareos and Tabaro stared at him in utter shock. Thirty seconds for a task like that? And in two weeks? *Delusional much?* They were used to a range of ten yards for something like that, fifteen at the most. And in their former life, that had been well enough. But this was the Guild. They had a reputation for doing the impossible on a regular basis.

“Understood!” they answered unison. What else was there to say?

“Sireu, you concentrate on finding water and bringing it to the surface if need be. Same range and time frame. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir!” Sireu wasn’t as shocked as the Earth Elementars; he had already expected something like that. The tricky part was getting the water above ground though; that was hard enough without a time frame. He suppressed a sigh at the thought and immediately started to come up with feasible strategies. If only he was stronger.

“Wind Elementars, you focus on the information floating in the air and on reconnaissance. Time and range is also thirty seconds, a hundred yards; in Aris’ case five hundred will work too. Understood?”

“Understood,” the brothers answered without complaint. Although Danis seemed to have paled a bit.

“Choose a random place in here and get to work. Status report an hour from now!”

“What about the Fire Elementars, Sir?” Tabaro asked quietly into the subsequent silence.

“Ah, yes, the Fire Elementars,” Cliro said slowly. He shot both of them a hard glare and announced, “As punishment for your outrageous, poor, and unbecoming behavior before class, you two get a special task. As you seem to be unable to keep your temper in check, the two of you will team up and practice control. As I was told that is the very first thing Fire children are taught the second they speak their first word. And since you behaved like little ones you’ll get the according training. After ten days I’ll evaluate your progress; if you pass my judgment, then you’ll be allowed to start with your original task, namely detecting every particle of heat and fire within the given range and either bring it to the surface or set it afire. You have the same timeframe as the others you have to succeed: two weeks.” He watched the two Fire apprentices like a hawk when he told them the news, but he couldn’t

detect even the slightest emotion. At least they had their facial expressions under control, if not their emotions.

“Oh, and if you fail, you are out. Do you understand? You can’t control yourself, you go home and are not to return. Ever.”

“Yes, Sir,” Nuri said, contrite.

“Yes, Sir,” the girl said. Inflectionless. “But...”

“But what?” Cliro snapped at her.

“But how we are going to practice that? We can both control ourselves just fine when on our own; it’s interacting with others that poses a problem.”

Cliro was impressed. That had indeed escaped his mind. And she had been honest enough to point it out. Seemed like she wanted to stay.

“Well, you will interact, don’t worry.” He turned to the rest of the apprentices and said, “You are welcome to treat them as your punching bag, figuratively speaking. Pick at them, insult them, call them names, everything goes, except physical contact. You touch them in any way, you are going to join them. Understood?”

Shocked silence. Then a loud “Understood” echoed over the arena.

Cliro turned back at the girl. “See, that’s how you are going to train that. And remember, one wrong move, one unkind reply, one flare of power however small, and you go home!”

At the Fire Elementars’ nod, he ordered everyone to move and get in place. In shouting distance to the two stoic culprits who had to sit down right in the middle of the arena.

And so it began.

The nicest words they heard over the course of two hours were “stupid bitch” and “scum of the earth.”

However, both of them managed to stay calm and quiet. It wasn’t that they hadn’t already heard the same a million times over in their lives. The real challenge was to keep their Fire in, which burned hard and fast and dangerous and wild inside them now as a direct result of their enforced company.

First rule of Fire: never leave two strong Elementars in one place for too long a time.

But they managed to get through class. Their stubbornness was legend after all.

When they left the arena afterwards, they two of them shared a knowing look. They would have to keep their distance from each other as much as possible.

Or else.