

Prologuz

Truth.

Five letters that had the power to change the world.

To some, it meant liberation, new beginnings, a chance to start all over.

To others, it just meant betrayal, despair, and a world of hurt.

The truth will set you free. That it did. But, it all depended on whether you found yourself tumbling down or soaring afterwards.

The outcome was the same, though: nothing would ever be same after the veil of lies was lifted.

Looking over the golden sands of the desert she called home, Sheba An-Pyr was standing on the balcony off of the Captain's chamber, lost deeply in the past. It was a bittersweet moment.

She remembered the last time she stood on a similar balcony, a decade ago, back when she had been nothing but a small child, full of despair and loneliness.

Hurt. Inside and out.

A beautiful mess of mended skin and bones, scars littering her little body.

Scars she had become so apt at hiding behind a layer of glamour. Glamour she didn't even know how to cast back then. It was the beast living inside her that had known what to do. The beast inside her that had been awakened the day she had been taken by two monsters. The beast she now knew was no beast at all. It was her true self, who she was at her core... the *Flame* that shone so brightly for all those who were looking for a beacon to guide them in a sea of darkness, the *Flame* that never went out but grew and grew in times of need: hope.

She still had a hard time coming to terms with it. The only person with no hope left was supposed to be the epitome of it for everyone else. *Oh, the irony of it.*

If she ever doubted that fate hated her, then this was the ultimate proof.

Whatever, nothing new there. That bitch had had it out for her since the day she was born. Or even before that. Who knew.

A light knock at her door brought her back to the present.

She sighed. Enough procrastinating.

It was time.

Chapter 1

“So, you are a Princess.”

Sheba looked up at the person standing in front of her and sighed.

Really, they were back to that? Again?

This time it was Dareos who had sought her out.

She was sitting at the meadow under her favorite tree and watched her beloved companion grazing as the bright moon cast Aliaenar in a fascinating mix of light and shadow. Night was the only time she was free to drop the glamour and she made ample use of it. It made hiding the rest of the day more bearable, now that the cat was out of the bag. Lightning and her uncle thought it wise though to keep up the pretense around the servants and vendors and visitors who graced Aliaenar with their presence. Her whereabouts still wasn't public knowledge, and Barin wanted to keep it that way as long as he could. For safety reasons. *Yeah, sure.*

Behind Dareos, she could see Sireu, Tabaro and Danis, looking at her with the same bewildered expression they had sported ever since the 'Great Revelation' as Sheba had taken to calling it in her head. Every single day since their return to Aliaenar, one of them would approach her after staring at her every chance they got and ask the same thing, over and over and over again.

One would think they would have accepted the fact of who she was by now. It had been two weeks, after all. But no, apparently they were still stuck on it. The fact she still used her glamour might have something to do with it, though. However, their constant attention annoyed her so much so that she actually resorted to cloak herself in Shadows to evade them.

As if there weren't other, more important things to worry about at the moment. Like the fact that the remaining two years of their apprenticeship would now resemble more 'learning as you go' than 'practice makes perfect,' because Imbra's army was standing at the borders of Pyr, because her fucking *father* had risen from the dead and was now

commanding said army to conquer Quiliaris in the name of some ancient, evil god and because he wanted revenge for something that happened twenty years ago or so.

Granted, the kind of betrayal Sheba suspected had pushed her father over the edge was no joke, and she was all for getting even like every other Fire Elementar, but destroying a whole country because of the fucked-up decisions of two or three assholes was a bit over the top. But then, the general of Imbra's army was not the man she used to call father, but a being so vile and evil that she recoiled every time she thought of him.

The only saving grace about the whole thing was that thanks to said fucking army at the border, her uncle, her mentor and every other Hashisin in Aliaenar was too busy to put her through a lengthy and thorough interrogation about her past. As it was, she got away with a few pitying looks every now and then. She was grateful for the reprieve; she knew they were going to want answers soon. Especially Onyx and Lightning. However, she was in no hurry to revisit her own personal hell. Plus, she still needed time to figure out how much she was going to actually reveal to them and what was better left unsaid.

But back to the idiots in front of her. Maybe if she dealt with them all at once, they would finally stop harassing her and things could go back to normal. Normal meaning being ignored and left in peace, with a few mild insults thrown in to keep things interesting. Kind of like Aris and Nuri had done. It was just her luck that it were those two she actually wanted to, no, *needed* to talk to. It was kind of hard to try and make amends with somebody if they refused to even acknowledge your existence.

"Yes."

"Not only any princess, but *Nuri's* Princess. The Princess of Fire."

"Yes."

"But..."

She sighed again. "Stop it. We are not doing this again. This shit ends now. Yes, I'm the fucking Princess of Fire. So what? Nothing's changed. I'm still the person I was before, I'm still the only female Warrior here, I'm still a pain in your ass, as you've been so fond of reminding me these last two years. Now go the fuck away!"

At her last words, she pushed a bit of her power in their direction to get her point across.

As she had expected, they four of them retreated a few yards. But still, they weren't gone yet.

“Nothing’s changed? *Nothing’s changed? Everything* has changed!” Danis yelled at her from behind Dareos. “One, you are not the person you were before. Because you’ve never actually been that person in the first place. You are nothing but an impostor. And that makes you not a pain in the ass, but a lying, manipulating bitch. But that seems to be par for the course considering who fathered you, you fucking spawn of evil!”

“A spawn of evil who is trained in the *art of killing!*” Tabaro joined him, enraged and furious enough that his eyes started to glow.

Ah, so that was what bothered them, she thought. Well, the whole father-turned-rogue-thing kind of bothered her too. Still, when she was born, her father had still been her father, not the monster he had turned into.

“You should have never been allowed to set foot in here! What am I saying – you should have never been born! Your blood is tainted. *You* are tainted!”

Fuck, no.

She was up, power at the ready, scimitar drawn, without a conscious thought. It was the one button everyone knew not to push. Well, everyone but the idiots in front of her.

But before she could blast into them and possibly set some parts of them on Fire, she got cut off by Blade’s angry voice. “You all better be grateful for said ‘tainted’ blood, because it’s the only reason we are still alive!” His eyes had a dangerous glow to them and Sheba could feel his power crackling in the air. “Now, you’re going to leave her the hell alone and go to bed like good little apprentices. And don’t let me hear you spout that shit again, or you’ll regret it. You’re lucky enough that it was me witnessing this and not Onyx or the Captain.”

When they just stared at him, stunned, he began to glow all over and the ground beneath them started to rumble. “*Move!*” he all but spat at them menacingly.

The four idiots couldn’t run fast enough after that. Thank Nyx.

“You all right?” the Weapons Master asked her, concerned. “Sorry for that. I’ll make sure they stay away from you.”

“I’m good. Thank you,” Sheba replied, grateful. “And don’t bother. They’ll get over it eventually.” She shrugged. “It was to be expected. As long as they don’t attack me...”

“That might be true, Timaris, but attacks don’t always have to be physical in nature. Sometimes words can cut you deeper than any blade. Your reaction just a minute ago proves my claim.”

“Yeah, but still... words may hurt, but they can’t kill you. I’ll deal with all the bullshit they might come up with. It’s not like I haven’t heard it before.”

He looked at her, pensive. “Not that kind of shit.” At her raised brow, he amended, “At least not from them.”

He could only guess what the Traitor and the monster had said to her all those years ago. He suppressed a shudder at the thought, took a deep breath and tried to give her a heads-up of things to come. “I really thought the seven of you made progress over the last month. I thought you were finally becoming a team. What happened... it fucked with everyone’s mind. Though I’d like to tell you differently, if I’m honest, I’m pretty sure you’ll have to work even harder now to earn their respect.”

At that, she could only laugh. Hard. And bitter “Earn their respect? And here I thought I did that by saving their lives. How stupid of me to think my actions count more than the blood that runs through my veins.”

Blade flinched at the pain in her words. It sobered her up, quick. “Don’t worry, Weapons Master. I’ve survived so long, I can survive another two years of degradation, humiliation and ridicule. Besides, they do have a point. I *am* my father’s daughter, after all.”

“You might carry his blood. You might look like him. And you might even act like him at times. But, Timaris, there is one big difference between the two of you.”

“Which is?” she snorted bitterly. “That I’m a female and therefore weaker in body and spirit?”

“What you call a weakness, I call strength. Both of you faced betrayal. Both of you were faced with hard choices. He chose to get lost in darkness, let it swallow him whole. You chose to get back up and fight the darkness with everything you’ve got. Even in your darkest hour, you never gave up. Not on yourself and not on the world. He chose death. You chose life. Let me tell you, Princess, it’s a hell of a lot easier to cling to hatred and revenge than to believe in love and all that is good in this world, and be kind and forgiving. It’s this hunger, this passion for life you have that won’t ever let you succumb to evil. It’s something your father never had and never understood. That, Timaris, is why you are here, alive and well, and he is but an empty shell of what he once was.”

“Weapons Master?”

“Yes?”

“He might be my father, but I haven’t been his daughter for a very long time. So don’t call me Timaris again. My name is Sheba. Use it.”

Aris was up on Queen’s Throne again, resting with his back on a rock and looking over the lands before him. Pathetic, he knew, since he came here to relive the beautiful night he had shared with his sprite before their trip to the Temple. It felt like a lifetime ago.

Just when he had decided to pursue something with her, regardless of Onyx’s thoughts on the subject, regardless of the futility of this relationship going somewhere, something had to happen to thwart his plans. Seems not only *her fucking uncle* – figured his mentor had to not only be her guardian but family too – did not want her with him, no, fate seemed to be dead set against it as well.

It wasn’t fair. All he ever asked for was to be a Hashisin and to find someone to make a life with, or at least share some of it with. So like that bitch Fate to finally grant him his wish, only to take it away after one measly taste.

It had been complicated enough with the sprite being a noble Warrior – meaning she was of lower rank, and while not a suitable life mate, she was at least an acceptable choice as far as mistresses went – but now, with her turning out to be that damn Princess of Fire? Fuck if that wasn’t enough for him to run as fast and far in the other direction as he could.

Onyx had been right after all, she wasn’t for him. Now the man’s remarks about her being married off to the highest bidder made a hell of a lot more sense. Pyr, and consequently Quiliaris, needed her to gain strong and powerful alliances for the war.

He briefly wondered how any consummation of this marriage-to-be would work, given the Princess’ fear of touch... By Sol, it didn’t bear thinking about what that would do to the sprite. Because endure it she would. For her people. As was her duty.

He suddenly remembered blasting into her for calling him out on the way to the tryouts three years ago.

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

"I don't know what it is that put you in your current situation, but whatever it is you think I'm running from— I'm not! I'm a Prince of Aro, for Sol's sake; so keep your unwanted advice to yourself!" He shot her a look of barely concealed hostility.

"A prince you may be, but one with no friends and no life beyond duty," she exclaimed, pointing her finger at him. "And to top it off, you are the whipping boy for an irresponsible, careless megalomaniac!" she shouted at him, her anger palpable. "Yeah, why would you run from such an empty, cold life? Why would anyone? Lie to me all you like, Ascaris Cyn-Aro, but don't lie to yourself!"

Well, fuck. Now he understood how she was able to see through him and his motives for coming here so easily. How she could see him when nobody else could, not even those closest to him. She knew, because she could have been speaking about herself then. Both of them had nothing but duty waiting for them. Nothing but a cold, empty life, void of love. Both their future mates wouldn't care one whit about them as persons, only about their rank and what it could do for them.

It was funny, really. The first time he had heard about the Princess, he had been afraid that he might be the one to end up with her, thinking that even no mate was better than an Esendri Fire Princess. Now... now, that she turned out to be the only female to ever move his heart, she was suddenly so far out of reach, he had a better chance of surviving an encounter with the Fire rogue who led Imbra's army, unscathed.

The Rogue who turned out to be her fucking father, his mentor's brother, the dead King of Pyr. Well, not so dead now.

That had been one hell of a revelation. What had surprised him even more was that she hadn't seemed surprised at all. And the stone-cold way she had told the story behind Benali An-Imdhabra's trophy of flesh... he had kind of thought that she had been taken by mercs for a hefty ransom and been beaten up badly in the process or something like that. That would have been enough to give grown men nightmares, not to mention little girls. But the reality of what had happened to her... he had to wonder how she was not only alive but still sane. He wasn't sure if he could say the same after an experience like that.

And for her father, for any father, to be involved in such a cruel and abhorrent act... by Sol, he suddenly had a new appreciation for his own father. Belimar might be a cold asshole, but at least he wasn't evil.

Aris' heart broke for the sprite. Shea, no, *Sheba*, had had a pretty shitty life so far and it didn't seem like it was going to get any better soon. Imbra's general was hell bent on killing her; her family was desperately waiting for her to come of age to marry her off as fast as they could; and even here at Aliaenar, which should be a safe place for her, all she had was her training and her beast of a mount.

He had already heard the others whispering about her being 'tainted.' He just hoped they were smart enough to keep their opinion to themselves. And if not, that the sprite didn't incinerate them for their cruelty.

It was as if now that her identity was revealed, the others were even more leery of her than before. It was a good thing she was still using her glamour, even if he rather enjoyed the sight of his sprite in her natural state. But her beautiful but exotic looks were a reminder of who she was and most importantly, who her father was. Sure, her rank meant she was to be treated with respect – Aris himself was the only one her equal now – but her power was the real threat. Or rather the potential her Fire held.

He still wasn't sure what the fuck he had witnessed in Ter at the fight. According to Onyx, she had just channeled all of the power inherent in their surroundings and pitted it against the Rogue's, but that didn't seem right. For one, the shield she had thrown over them before that last blast had been strong, so strong, it had kept the Rogue's evil at bay. This alone meant she was way stronger than she had ever let on. And second, for her to channel that much energy to cleanse the land so completely and still be standing, her focus and capacity to hold power must be vast. As vast as the Rogue's. Who had given an excellent impression of a bottomless pit of darkness.

So, there were only two possible conclusions: one, the whole thing was nothing but a lucky one-off and based on a weird combination of desperation, rage and protective instinct.

Or two, she didn't only inherit her father's Warrior Talent, but she was his true heir. And that not only meant that her Fire rivaled the Rogue's, but that she was in real danger of turning to the dark side. If even her father had been overpowered by his Fire, how much of a chance did his daughter stand, younger in years and experience and way more soft-hearted?

And since everything about her had turned out to be a well-crafted lie, from her rank to her Talent to her appearance, his fellows were inclined to believe the worst and go with the second option. Because even if she held only a half her father's power, it was enough to erase entire kingdoms.

By Sol, she was so fucking perfect for him.

Nuri had watched Dareos, Tabaro, Sireu and Danis from one of the windows in the common room off the dining hall, while they had approached the girl. He knew from experience that they would most likely say or do something stupid. And usually, he would be right there with them. But never again. He had known his less than respectful behavior had been wrong all along, but he hadn't thought about it too much. It wasn't like the little servant Warrior could do much harm. Well, his arrogance was now coming back to bite him in the ass.

It had been a hard pill to swallow that the girl he had put down and ridiculed on many occasions was actually of royal descent. The Princess of Fire. The one he had admired for so long. By Nyx, he had never been more in awe in his life as when her glamor had been lifted and the dark-haired, blue-eyed beauty had replaced the plain, mousy wallflower known as Shea Onyx. She had been a beautiful child, but now she was absolutely stunning. However, after he had heard her story of Benali, had heard who it was exactly who had tried to kill them in the fields of Ter, he had wished for the ground beneath him to open and swallow him whole. He had gone from utter awe to utter shame in the matter of minutes.

Nuri had kept his distance ever since. He didn't even dare look at her. She had tried to approach him a few times, but he'd just pretended she didn't exist. He was aware that she most likely thought he was pissed beyond belief because of her deceit and had wanted to apologize, but... no, just no. The only one here to apologize was him. As soon as he managed to gather enough courage, he was going to seek her out and do exactly that.

When he saw the Weapons Master interrupt his fellows and send them on their way, his shoulders dropped in resignation. Given Blade's glow they must have outdone themselves this time. He sighed heavily. Things were going to get a hell of a lot of uglier for his Princess. He watched the others run into fortress and a few minutes later he heard them entering the dining hall.

"By Sol, Blade is an asshole. No offense, Dareos," Tabaro muttered.

"None taken. You are right, he is."

"*Be grateful to her. She saved your lives,*" Danis mocked. "As if. It was pure luck that she was able to neutralize the rogue. She might be born a princess, but she is as common as

can be: looks like a desert whore, manners like a harridan, average in power and less than average in strength. The only thing of interest about her is the destructive potential of her blood due to her relation to a psychopath.”

Nuri felt his anger and with it his power rise at the derogatory words of the youngest Wind Prince. He didn't know exactly why the red-haired royal hated her so much, especially since they had once been friends. But what he did know was that no one was allowed to speak about his Princess in such a fashion. He might not be able to talk to her yet, but he could damn well make sure that the assholes in the next room would stop running their mouths.

He quietly entered the dining hall, managing to surprise them all with his sudden appearance.

“That *asshole* is right, though, you know. She did save our lives that day. And every other day she chose to ignore the shit we said and did to her. The only reason every single one of us is still alive is because she refused to retaliate. Something she would have had every fucking right to do. It's not like you need a vast amount of power to set someone on Fire or make their blood boil. So, instead of alienating her further by insulting her and pushing her into the exact direction you're afraid of her going, you might want to ensure to keep her on the side of good. I'd rather have her fight with us than join the ranks of evil.”

“Onyx,” Lightning addressed his spy master in his study at yet another emergency meeting. “How did it go? Any problems setting the plan in motion?”

“It went well, of course. I'm no fucking amateur. It was easy to dispel the few rumors flying around. He didn't exactly make his presence known while he was there. So, people readily bought what I sold.”

“The Regent and the Heir?”

“Fell for it hook, line and sinker. Not that I thought differently. Any lie would be better than the fucking truth. And what a brilliant lie it is. Good work, Lightning.”

“Great. Let's hope it stays that way. And the other matter?”

“He'll arrive around sunrise.”

“Perfect,” Lightning said, pleased.

He leaned back in his chair and took a swig of his brandy. Now that everything was exactly the way he wanted, needed it to be, it was just a question of how to inform his apprentice of what they had done and why.

And then tell the rest of them about the changes in their apprenticeship. Even the Gods had agreed that sticking to tradition was quite counterproductive in times of war. They needed more Warriors, and they needed them now. So Lightning and the other mentors had put their heads together and managed to come up with something that would get the seven ready for war in ten weeks instead of three years. *Poor apprentices.*

Sheba was taking Chari on a ride into Iquis. Pyr and Sir Aman'ti were too dangerous for her right now. She thought about what her mentor had told her an hour ago. Their plan to deny the Rogue the ultimate victory was a good one, she had to give it to them. Brilliant, really, in its simplicity. And necessary for the greater good. Because in this case, the truth might do more harm than a little white lie. Or so they had argued.

Still, it made her furious. Once again, the truth was hidden. There was danger in being blind to what was right in front of your eyes, and she didn't want to see people die because they didn't know what they were dealing with. She knew firsthand how devastating it felt when the truth finally came out. And it always, *always* came out.

She feared the day her own truth would come out. There was one last secret she had managed to keep for herself, one secret that had the power to both destroy and save lives. But at what cost?

She thought back to what Blade had told her before he went to tattle on the four young idiots. He had given her this nice, encouraging, motivating speech – and while he had some good points, it wasn't as simple as the Hashisin had made it out to be, either.

Yes, her father had chosen darkness.

Yes, he was but an empty shell of who he once was.

Yes, she had chosen light.

Yes, she was alive and sane (or as sane as she could be, all things considered) and hungry for life.

So, he was right, she wasn't very likely to turn dark.

However, chances were high that she turned rogue nevertheless – just not the way they thought. At the assessment, the gods had confronted her with greatest fears, with her greatest demons, had shown her exactly why she had been Chosen.

She understood now.

Understood that they were all but pawns, put this way or that way by the hand of fate and her children, the gods ruling this world.

Some would be taken, some would be broken, some would be destroyed... and some would survive, anxiously waiting for fate's next move – always aware that this might be their last one.

Understood that in order to survive, she needed to put the shards of her soul, shattered by the King's betrayal, together once again, as the Gods had told her at the Temple that now, with the ugly truth finally revealed, it was time to leave the past behind, concentrate on the present and set the course for the future.

Easier said than done.

Especially when all that was waiting for her in the future was her past.

A little piece of her heart crumbled at the thought of what was to come. Another part of what made her Sheba An-Pyr, what made her human, was swallowed by her diamond Fire. There wasn't much left of her anymore. She didn't know what would happen if she lost the fight and turned into *Pyr'ea'th An'deareath*, the *Flame in the Dark*.

She just knew that if she wanted to keep her heart, her soul, she needed something, someone, to remind her that there was more to living than fighting battles, physically and emotionally. That there was more than pain and hurt and anger and hate. That is was things like love and joy and happiness and companionship that made the difference between life and survival.

She understood too that she had had too few moments of those, too few memories of good things. Sure, she had known friendship, had experienced comradery, had felt joy and happiness on occasion, but it had never lasted for long. Her only chance to stay herself would have lain in a stable life. Fate had made sure though that that never happened. Now, it was only a question of how long she was able to keep the change at bay.

Shit was mounting up faster than she had time to process – there was only so much a person could ignore before everything got too much and demanded to be seen, to be dealt

with. With every new revelation, every new truth coming to light, it got harder and harder to withstand the pressure.

She just hoped she was far enough away when the beast finally claimed her.