



*S*HE WORE THE CORPSES FOR show. They trailed behind her, grotesque fabrics of writhing flesh and bone, spreading across the plain for miles around us. Those bereft of legs and feet used hands and elbows; those lacking jaws and tongues moaned from the hollows of their throats. Those onlookers who drew close grasped at the train of her gown until I was no longer certain where her dress ended and they began.

“Intimidation,” she told me, amused by my repulsion. “Men abandon battle when they see their own fates in these ruined faces.”

I could not argue with her results: resistance crumbled as soldiers disobeyed their commanders and ran, rather than face her horrors.

She plundered every graveyard we found, no headstone left unturned, since entering Daanoris. Her strength had grown since leaving the Sea of Skulls. When she first resurrected her daeva, each summon had sapped such strength and life from her that, by the time she had raised the last, she was nearly dead herself. Yet she brought back these unfortunate ghouls from their graves with relative ease.

Asha reached their limit after raising five or six corpses, I remembered. Even the strongest bone witches could not manage more than a dozen at best. I knew the girl’s immense power had everything to do with her heartsglass, as black as the darkest night when other asha’s would shine silver.

I was appalled by her disrespect for these innocent dead, beseeched her not to interrupt their rest. To this, she only laughed. "The dead do not need rest," she told me, "only the living believe the grave can bring you peace."

There was no reason to raise these armies of undead, and she knew it. The daeva that surrounded her were enough to ruin kingdoms. Strangely docile, all seven plodded beside their mistress, each more terrifying than the next. In ages past, they had the reputation for violence, capable of supping on whole armies with little effort. Yet throughout our journey to Daanoris, they paid no heed to the men and women who fled from their approach. Stragglers were shown mercy and ignored.

I understood the people's fear. For many nights, I had broken camp with these demons, wondering each time if I would live to see morning. Only the presence of the Deathseeker, Lord Kalen, calmed me, though he was no more alive than the throng of cadavers that followed his lover. His chest rose and fell like mine, his face bore none of the pallor associated with death, and his brown eyes were sharp with the spark of life, even if the absence of true breath in him disproved this.

"It is necessary that they flee," he said quietly one night. "In time, you will understand."

"Then tell me her intentions now," I challenged him. "I promised to tell her story. Why leave me in the dark?"

"Conquer one fear at a time," he responded with a pointed glance at the daeva frolicking with its master in the near darkness. "Accustom yourself to one type of fiend before we introduce you to another."

The words filled me with foreboding. What did the asha intend when we reached Daanoris's capital?

I watched them, the necromancer and her familiar. I watched her cast quick, secret glances at Kalen when she thought he did not see.

"Am I distasteful now?" he asked without looking away from the fire. "Am I that much different?"

"Never," she said quietly.

"How did you raise me? Silver heartsglass can't..."

"I didn't." She looked down. Her hands trembled. "I was...so full of the Dark. I felt powerful enough to believe I could stop the sun. And so I did."

He knelt before her then, taking her heart-shaped face in his large hands.

"Are you angry at me?"

For the first time, I saw her afraid.

"Do you resent me for bringing you back to this chaos?"

"I promised you with my dying breath, with my blood and your heart in my hands. I promised that I would crawl out of my grave and kill everything that stands between us." He bent closer, kissed her hard.

She kissed him back, hungry, her hands stroking his neck. He drew her tightly against him, as if holding her could never be enough. I turned away.

There were faint marks on the bone witch's neck when we left the next day, and her eyes were very bright. The Deathseeker sported no injuries, and his gaze was gentle whenever he looked at her.

The Daanorian capital, Santiang, lay before us. I took in its high walls and fortified towers. I saw the bobbing torches of the men

who manned its garrisons. Even from this distance, I saw their fear rising, higher than any flag they could wave.

I watched the familiar reach forward to wrap her in his arms. I watched the Dark asha relax, leaning back against him with a vulnerability she rarely allowed herself to show.

“The Daanorians will not surrender easily, Tea,” Lord Kalen said.

“That will not matter. Their gates shall fall anyway. We rest here tonight and begin on the morrow. It will give them time to send their women and children away, and the rest to put their affairs in order.”

“It is not too late. We can go—anywhere. They won’t find us.”

For a moment, I saw the temptation in her eyes, the longing his words sowed. “You know they will do the same to the next bone witch after me, and the next, and the next. You know this will never end.”

The Deathseeker pressed his forehead against hers. “Then we will fight.”

The girl turned back to her throng of faithful undead. “Thank you,” she told them softly, the way one might tell a bedtime story to children. “Sleep, and wait.”

The corpses sighed in unison, a frightening sound that echoed from the nearest ghoul that clawed at her skirts to, as I imagined, the farthest of her carrion, many miles away.

And as one, they fell. They sank down like groundwater, the land swallowing them whole until no trace of them remained. What was once a company of thousands of corpses became a fellowship of three and seven, and the daeva bayed their good-byes.

The asha sat by a fallen log, gathering stones. The Deathseeker

gestured, and fire sputtered from the pile. She gestured at me to sit, and I complied.

“You have more to tell me,” I said, knowing this was far from the end of her tale.

“Yes.” She gazed thoughtfully at the fire, at the flames licking through the stone. Then, like it was the most normal thing in the world, she said, “I suppose the trouble began again when I tried raising a king from the dead.”



***H**E DOES NOT LOOK SO formidable, I lied to myself, staring at the warped, decaying body before me. I can defeat his will. I will break him. It is a wonder what Mykkie had ever seen in him.*

It was not the first time I had deceived myself in this manner. Neither was this the first time I had raised King Vanor from the grave. But if I repeated that mantra enough times, I thought I could finally believe my words.

The dead king refused to look at me, his eyes distant. The royal crypts were built to strike both fear and awe in those who visited, but I had grown accustomed to the stone faces looking down at me with quiet scrutiny from their high precipices. But King Vanor's continued silence unnerved me every time—more than I cared to admit.

“A wise philosopher once said,” Fox drawled from the

shadows, “that doing the same thing over and over again while expecting a different result is the mark of a fool.”

“Why do I bring you along?”

“Well, a wise philosopher once said—”

“Shut up.” My brother had no need to tell me my quest was hopeless. Numerous Dark asha, all more experienced than I, had made the attempt. But I had to do *something*.

“You’re in a worse mood than usual. Did Kalen chew you out at practice again?”

“If you don’t like it here, why not find some women in the city to flirt with instead?”

“Not in Oda—” He caught himself. “None of your business. Can we get this over with?”

I turned back to the corpse. “Where are you keeping Mykaela’s heartsglass?”

No answer. The colossi statues guarding the catacombs were likelier to respond than this infernal sod of a king.

“Answer me! What have you done to her heartsglass? Where did you keep it? Why do you hate her so much?” My headache worsened. Somewhere in the back of my head, I was aware of a shadow thrashing about, sensing my anger. I saw a vision of water, green and murky, before it faded out of view.

I took a deep breath and let it out carefully. The ache lightened and the shadow retreated as I recovered my calm.

“This is a waste of time.” Fox folded his arms across his chest. My brother looked to be in peak physical health, though he was no more alive than the royal noble standing before us.

Their similarities ended there; there was barely enough skin and sinew clinging to Vanor to pass for human. That was my doing. The first few times I resurrected him, I had been respectful, taking great pains to restore his body to how it appeared when he was alive.

Now I allowed him only enough muscle and flesh to move his jaw.

“He’s not going to talk, Tea. You know that, I know that, and he definitely knows that.”

“I will *make* him talk.” Many years ago, my sister-asha had fallen in love with this wretched excuse of a ruler. In exchange for her unwavering devotion, he had taken her heartsglass and hidden it so well that no one had been able to find it.

And now, more than a decade later, Mykaela was dying. She could no longer return to Kion. Her health had deteriorated to the point where she had to remain near her heartsglass, still hidden somewhere within Odalia, here in the city of Kneave. It was hard enough to be a bone witch; that she’d survived for this long was a miracle in itself.

I grabbed what was left of the king’s shoulders, pulling him toward me. He reeked of death and obstinacy. “Answer me!” My voice echoed off the columns. “Didn’t you love her even a little? Or are you so petty that you’d allow her to suffer for the rest of her years? She’s *dying*. What grudge do you harbor to hate her this much?”

“Tea.”

I froze. So did Fox.

I had told no one else about my weekly excursions to the

royal crypts. Not my friend Polaire, who would have boxed my ears if she'd known, nor Mistress Parmina, who would doom me to a life cleaning outhouses. Only Fox was privy to my secret, which he had agreed to keep despite his own misgivings. And Mykaela was the last person I wanted to find out.

She had aged more rapidly during the last few years since she had taken me under her wing. There was more gray in her golden hair, more lines on her face. Her back stooped slightly, like she struggled under a heavy burden. She had taken to using a cane everywhere she went, unsure of her own feet.

"Mykaela," I stammered, "you're not supposed to be here."

"I could say the same for you," she answered, but her eyes were fixed on King Vanor, her pain obvious. He watched her gravely, without shame or guilt, and my anger rose again. How many raisings had my sister-asha endured, forced to watch while this king refused to speak?

I raised my finger to sketch out the rune that would send Vanor back to the world of the dead, but Mykaela lifted a hand. "Vanor," she said quietly, "it's been a while."

The decaying figure said nothing. His eyes studied her, savage and hungry and ill suited for such an impassive face.

"I apologize for my wayward apprentice. She has been willful and intractable since her admission to my asha-ka, and has shown little improvement since. Please return to your rest. Tea, let him go."

Mykaela's words were a steel knife through my heart. Stuttering apologies, I completed the spell and watched as King

Vanor's body crumbled back into dust in his open coffin. Even as his features dissolved, King Vanor never once looked away from Mykaela's face.

"Close the lid and move the stone back in place," she said. I could detect the anger behind her calm. "I would tell King Telemaine to seal his coffin, but even that might not stop you. Whatever possessed you to let her do this, Fox?"

Fox shrugged, grinning like an abashed schoolboy. "I'm her familiar. It comes with the territory."

"Being her familiar is no excuse for being an imbecile! And you! What possessed you to summon dead royalty in the middle of the night?"

"I wanted to help." The excuse sounded weaker when made to Mykaela than to Fox. "I thought that I can control daeva now! You said no Dark asha's ever done that before! That's why...why I..."

Mykaela sighed. "And so by that logic, you think you are different from Dark asha of the past? What you have in ability, Tea, you lack in wisdom. You cannot compel the dead if they are not willing. Wasn't that the first lesson I taught you after you raised Fox from his grave? Arrogance is not a virtue, sister."

I looked down, blinking back tears. Was I arrogant to want to save her? Unlike Fox, Dark asha and all those with a silver heartsglass cannot be raised from the dead, and that permanence frightened me. "I'm sorry. I want to help. But I feel so powerless."

I heard her move closer, felt her hand on my head, stroking my hair.

“It’s not such a bad thing, to feel powerless sometimes. It teaches us that some situations are inevitable, and that we should spend what little time we have in the company of the people that matter most. Do you understand me, Tea?”

“Yes.” I wept.

“Tea, I’m not dead yet.” A finger nudged at my chin. “I would appreciate it if you stopped acting like I was. I do not give up so easily, but we must adopt other means.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It is only an apology if you mean it. This is the last time you will be summoning anyone in the royal crypts, no matter how noble you think your actions are. Promise me.”

“I promise,” I mumbled.

“The same is true for you too, Fox.”

“I promise, milady.”

“Good. Now help me up the stairs. My legs aren’t what they used to be.”

Fox reached down and scooped Mykeala into his arms. “It’s the fastest way,” he explained. “You’ve expended enough energy yelling at us.”

The older asha chuckled. “Yes, that’s always been rather tiresome, now that I think about it. Perhaps you should direct your energies toward more productive tasks so I can tire less.”

“How did you know we were here?” I asked.

“I’ve taken to wandering at night. I looked in on Tea, but her room was empty. I detected a shifting of runes nearby and merely followed it to its source.”

“I didn’t mean to make you worry.” The staircase led back to the Odalian palace gardens. For the past two months, Fox and I had been King Telemaine’s guests, traveling the kingdom and tending to the sickly. Most of the people here fear and dislike bone witches, though with lesser fervor than before. It is not easy to hold a grudge against someone who has nursed you back to health.

At the king’s invitation, Mykaela had taken up residence in the castle indefinitely. But every day finds her weaker, and I feared that the palace would serve as her hospice.

“There are many other concerns, Tea. Likh has a new case pending, hasn’t he?”

The asha association had rejected Likh’s appeal to join, but Polaire had dredged up an obscure law that permitted Deathseekers to train in the Willows until they turned fifteen, which was Likh’s current age.

Mykaela glanced over Fox’s shoulder, back at the catacombs, then turned away.

She still loves him, I thought, and fury burned through me like a fever. “I’m really sorry, Mykkie.”

She smiled. “As I said, only if you mean it, Tea. Get some rest. We’ve got a busy day ahead.”



I listened until my brother’s footsteps faded before sneaking out of my room a second time. I opened the doors of my mind to welcome the hidden shadows; they wrapped around my core,

creating a barrier that had for many months prevented Fox from discovering the other sentience I hoarded away, like a sweet vintage I had no intentions of sharing. I couldn't. Not yet.

Chief waited for me at the stables. A lone woman on a horse caused no outcry, and we rode undisturbed out of the city, into a copse of trees that hid us further from view. I climbed off my stallion, told him to await my return, and moved deeper into the forest, into a small clearing that served as a rendezvous point.

I reached out once more to the moving darkness. The scar on my right thigh was hot to the touch. It burned in the cold air, but I felt no pain.

Despite its size, the beast was made of stealth and shadows. Where there was once nothing, it now stood beside me, as if summoned from the air. Three pairs of hooded eyes gazed down at me, forked tongues dancing. Its wings extended, and twilight rolled over me, soothing and pleasant.

Master? It was a voice, but not in the manner we think of voices. Our bond gave us an understanding that went beyond language.

I reached out. Its scaly hide was a combination of coarse bark and rough sandpaper.

Play? It sat, unmoving, as I climbed up its back.

Yes.

In the blink of an eye, we were soaring across the sky, rolling meadows and fields of green passing below us. *Turn*, I thought, testing the limits of my control, as I have over the last several months. The *azi* complied, wings curving toward the horizon.

I laughed, the sound joyous and free against the wind, and one head dipped briefly to nuzzle at my cheek, purring.

This is not selfishness, I told myself, *but a responsibility*. Mykaela was partly right; I was arrogant and overconfident, but I was not like other Dark asha. No other Dark asha had been able to tame the *azi*. And riding with it on quiet nights meant it was not rampaging through cities.

But I also knew I had to keep my companion a secret. Raising a dead king was a far lesser sin than taking a daeva as a familiar. *I shall conquer this*, I thought and, in doing so, sealed my fate.



*WHY ARE WE AT DAANORIS?” I asked again when she paused.
“Why won’t you tell me?”*

“Because I need you as a witness as well as a storyteller, Bard. You will not remain unbiased for long if I supply you with foresight.”

“You summoned me. I travel with you. My opinions will make little difference.”

“You have a reputation for impartiality, Bard. I trust your judgment and my prudence. And here in Santiang, there is someone I would like you to meet.”

“Who?”

“They call him the Heartforger.” She flashed me a quick, mischievous grin. “I find it difficult to believe that you will be so eager to rule in my favor after the endless stretch of corpses I summoned in my wake. Or after informing you of my intentions to take Daanoris. It is not easy to mask your repugnance. Why have I come to Daanoris? Perhaps simply because I can. Has that not crossed your mind?”

“Tea,” Kalen admonished, his voice low and amused.

She laughed. “Let me continue my story while we still have the luxury.”

The shadows grew across the trees. The daeva melted slowly into the forest, moving silently despite their sizes. No other sound passed through the woods—no chirping of birds nor chatter of squirrels.

There was only the wind whispering through the leaves, the crackling of fire, and the sound of the asha's voice.

“Have you gotten around to kissing a boy yet?” Councilor Ludvig asked, and I choked on my tea.

We were sitting in one of the rooms at the Gentle Oaks in Kneave, one of the rare teahouses in Odalia where *asha* were acknowledged. It was a far cry from the more elaborate *cha-khana* found in Kion, but I liked the fewer formalities required here. Fox had gone off to train with the Odalian soldiers and I’d attended a few functions that day, choosing to spend the rest of my free time with the councilor, a veritable Isteran leader in his own right. I had expected more history lessons from him or a sharp critique on current politics. I had not expected this.

“And why, pray tell,” I managed, after wiping the spill on the table and clearing my throat, “should that be any of your business?”

Councilor Ludvig grinned, making him look younger

than his seventy-odd years. “Is it wrong to inquire after my favorite student? Asha much younger than you have had more experience in romance, despite having done much less for Kion. I’ve kissed a pretty asha a time or two myself, back in my prime.”

“I’m...far too busy to be thinking about that.”

“Poppycock.” The councilor tore off a piece of *tanūr* bread. “Balance must be struck. You are still so young, my dear, and in danger of being overworked if it were up to your asha-ka mistress. Enjoy your youth. Do not let harridans like Parmina convince you otherwise. And also,” he added, chewing thoughtfully, “I have a wonderful nephew. He is only a couple of years older than you...”

I groaned. “Thank you, Councilor, but I already have my hands full juggling relationships with people I know without adding anyone new to the mix.”

“So I presume there has been progress between you and the prince?”

“Absolutely not!” My cheeks colored. “He’s a prince! And I’m just...I’m a...”

A bone witch. Feared and hated everywhere but in Kion. And even in Kion, I frequently felt that we were entertainment first and people second.

The councilor only nodded. He’d been in politics longer than I had been alive and knew the lay of the land, so to speak. “Yet you are drawn to Prince Kance.”

“Well, he’s kind. He’s the first person besides Mykaela and

my brother who does not care that I am a bone witch. And he cares for his people. *Really* cares, not just parrots what will appease his subjects. He's sincere about what he believes in. And he's very..." This was harder to admit. "He's very nice looking in the face. But not just in the face—overall. I mean—"

He chuckled. "I get the point. But marriages between asha and royalty have happened before. Even with Dark asha. It is not so uncommon."

"It doesn't matter. He has enough trouble helping his father run Odalia as it is." *And there's an azi inside my head, milord, I added silently. Everyone knows daeva are a weapon of the Faceless, and I am wielding the most dangerous of them all. I don't want the prince involved.* The shadows in my head shifted, agreeing.

"How are your friendships with the other boys in court, then? Prince Khalad?"

Only Councilor Ludvig would still refer to Kance's brother as a prince, though his heartforging abilities had put an end to his claim to the throne. Khalad and I had grown close the year I became a full-fledged asha, and no other asha had his unique ability to forge memories into heartsglass. "Pretty good," I said, "though Khalad's even busier with work than I am."

"And what about Kalen?"

I stared at him, then started to laugh. "Kalen? He still hates me."

"*Hate* is a strong word, Tea."

"He does. He ignores me whenever he can, and when he can't, he talks down to me in that infuriatingly passive-aggressive

way he has. I can never do anything right, if you listened to him, and if he could sever my ties to Prince Kance, he'd do it, then expect me to kowtow to his demands without protest."

"Have you done anything to arouse his enmity?"

"I haven't kept my resentment hidden exactly," I admitted sourly. "And I might have ignored his orders on occasion, on account of he being a jerk with no redeeming qualities."

I paused. Councilor Ludvig was staring at something behind me, his expression bemused. I took a deep breath. "I suppose he's behind me."

"Right on the first try." Kalen leaned against the door, hands folded across his chest. As was customary for Deathseekers, he was dressed all in black, like that was supposed to make him look more impressive. His heartsglass swung from his neck, a bright silver. He gave the Isteran politician a small, respectful nod. "Lord Ludvig, it's good to see you again."

"Likewise, Kalen."

"How is King Rendorvik?"

"Refusing my advice, as he is wont to do nowadays. How are the prince and his father?"

"Doing well. Please send our regards to his Highness." Kalen turned to me. "Kance wants to see you now," he said shortly, then walked back out.

"I'd advise you not to get on his bad side," Councilor Ludvig said as I rose to my feet, careful not to trip over my dress. "Kalen is Prince Kance's closest confidante after all. Perhaps if you opened up to him, he'd relent."

I sighed, then leaned over to give the councilor a hug and a quick kiss on the cheek. “Given that his point of contention is *me*, I believe the point moot.”



“Wait up!” I yelled, hurrying after Kalen as he stalked back to the castle, attracting more than a few curious stares. “I’m sorry for what I said, but I’m not the only one at fault. You’ve been nothing but rude to me since we met.”

“I have no need to explain myself to you,” he said stiffly.

“I thought we’d reached some kind of understanding.” Which was true. He’d been almost friendly in the weeks after we’d fought the *azi* at Lake Strypnyk, but that fragile amiability disappeared and he was back to criticizing how I fought, what I did, and what I said.

“You thought wrong.”

I glared at him. “Out with it.”

“Out with what?”

“You heard me listing what I don’t like about you. It’s not very sporting of me, I know. So now it’s your turn. Say something about me that you don’t like.”

“This is not the place or the time—”

“If you had your way, there will never be the place or the time for it, because you’re as dense as a rock on Mithra’s Wall, with the immovability to match. See? It’s not that hard to share your feelings. Let it all out. Give me just three things—”

He glowered but took the bait. “You’re overconfident. It always gets you in trouble. And you’re irresponsible. You don’t think through your actions and expect someone else to bail you out—your brother, usually. You have this annoying way of scrunching up your nose when you don’t like what you’re being told to do, which makes you look even more ridiculous.”

I clapped a hand over the bridge of my nose, suddenly aware I was doing exactly that. “Fine, you’ve said your—”

“You never listen. To anyone. You’re slow to take advice, especially at sword practice. You always think life will turn out for the better, although it never does, but that doesn’t stop you from doing the same mistakes again—”

“I said *three* things, you lout!”

He stopped. For a moment, I thought he was going to smile. A spectrum of colors spread across his heartsglass; his initial anger was abating, giving way to amusement and grudging acceptance—and something else. But when he saw where my gaze lingered, his heartsglass turned back to its unblemished silver.

“And you’re still a danger to Kance,” he added quietly. “You can just as easily lure a daeva to him as kill it.”

“But I haven’t.”

“That doesn’t matter. I’ve seen more Dark asha than you, and they’ve all burned out sooner or later. Mykaela had to kill a fellow bone witch once because she was too far gone in the Dark. You may not have stepped over the line, but you sure as hell enjoy having the magic, and that’s even worse.” His expression was unreadable—I preferred it when he was angry. “My job is

to protect Prince Kance. I train you only at Kance's request and against my better judgment. I am not your friend. And I can't be in a position where I treat you as one."

So that was it. With Kalen, it would always be about his duty to the king and the prince. Which still hurt. "Fine. And I'm sorry about my previous outburst. Like you said, I don't think things through. And whether you believe me or not, I have no intentions of harming the prince. But if we can't be friends, can't we at least be civil?"

His shoulders relaxed. "If that's what you want."

That wasn't what I wanted at all, but I gritted my teeth and swallowed my retort. "Swell."

"Good. Let's move. Kance is waiting."

I slunk quietly after him. His words stung—but I couldn't blame him. My words probably had too.

Prince Kance was up to his ears in paperwork when we entered the room. My aasha-sisters Polaire and Zoya were beside him, and all three looked up as we approached. Though Prince Kance looked tired, his features brightened. I hurriedly tucked a few stray hairs back in place, my mood lifting. While seeing Polaire hard at work came as no surprise, Zoya avoided grunt work whenever possible.

Prince Kance apologized. "I asked Kalen not to bother you if you were busy."

"Yes, he made that very clear to me." I glared at Kalen, who showed no shame at this concealment.

"As you know, there were reports of a daeva sighted along

Odalia's borders this week," he began, his bright-green eyes on me. I was wrong; *nice* didn't even begin to describe his face.

"An *aeshma*, yes," I said.

"We've finally tracked it to the Kingswoods. My father gives his leave for you to hunt it down."

"I'll get right on it."

"I wouldn't think of underestimating you or any other *asha*, but I can bring an army. More catapults, perhaps. Fortifications. It isn't safe."

"Your High—"

"Kance."

"Kance." I was pleased by his concern—for me?—but I also took in his pallor. "We'll be fine. I've done this before. And you need rest. I'm sure Lady Zoya and Lady Polaire can assist you in the meantime."

"Lady Zoya is not so sure about that," Zoya chirped, and was swiftly silenced by a stern look from Polaire.

Prince Kance smiled wanly. "Is it starting to show? I've been having trouble sleeping. Lady Altaecia's made me an herbal potion for it."

"All the more reason not to overexert yourself," I said.

He shook his head. "I've been working on a new form of taxation that will lower land taxes and cut out unnecessary intermediaries. The sooner we can put that into law, the better for Odalia."

"Shouldn't the finance minister be overseeing that?"

"The finance minister is good at what he does, but he is also part of the problem. Most officials make concessions and

exemptions to curry favor with the nobility, so their reforms impose a heavier tax burden on the poor. I convinced Father that we had to lay the groundwork ourselves to weed out claims of favoritism. With my plan, we can both help our citizens and generate more revenue in under two years. Polaire and Zoya are working with me on the details.”

Kance was perfect—intelligent, compassionate, empathic. How could anyone *not* like him? I snuck a glance at Kalen. He had said nothing since we’d arrived and lounged by the door like a statue ready to come to life at the first sign of danger.

“And it’s a good plan,” Polaire said with a smile, though she looked tired herself. “Our young prince is quite the genius with numbers. But Tea is right, Kance. That’s enough work for today.”

The prince made a rueful face but nodded, moving to organize his papers. I stepped closer to Polaire, remembering something Kalen had said earlier.

“Mykaela killed a Dark asha before,” I said softly and urgently, not wanting the others to hear. She had told me about that once before, when she had taken me to see her raise a daeva for the first time.

Polaire raised an eyebrow. “And what of it?”

“I need to know more about what had happened.”

She sniffed. “Illara was a good girl and one of Mykaela’s charges, but she was far too ambitious for her own good. She was eager to learn of the Dark, but she didn’t realize it would burn her out. She craved the Dark beyond her own limits. She called a daeva and sought to control it instead of killing it. The daeva drove

her mad—and Illara became almost like a daeva herself. Mykaela had no choice. To wield anything that the Faceless would, from the most terrible of daeva to their innocent-seeming runes...there must be no compromise.”

“Oh” was all I could say.

“To be headstrong is not a flaw, Tea. Mykaela was quite impulsive when she was younger. We all were. Why do you ask this now?”

“I was only wondering, Polaire.” *Because there is an azi nesting in my brain.* Did that mean I was taking in more of the Dark than I should? Would I be another bone witch casualty, another Illara?

I almost told Polaire my secret. I *wanted* to tell her.

But if I did, would they kill me too?

Polaire shook her head, having read the sputtering strings of color lining my heartsglass and mistaking them for lesser worries. “There is nothing to concern yourself over.”

“Is something wrong?” Prince Kance approached us, a quizzical look on his face.

“It’s nothing, Your H—Kance,” I said, moving the conversation away from my morbid thoughts. “But what does this taxation have to do with me? I have no experience with drafting laws.”

The prince blinked. “Oh. No. I asked you here for something else entirely. It’s about the *aeshma*. I intend to accompany you when you confront it.”

“Absolutely not!” Kalen and I exclaimed at the same time.

The prince was still smiling, but he had a determined tilt to his chin that I recognized from both his older brother and their

cousin. “That’s not a request, I’m afraid. To be a ruler goes beyond lawmaking, and if there is a creature terrorizing my land, then I will not hide behind my throne like a coward. Does a departure at seven tomorrow morning sound good to you?”

There was no other choice but to agree. For all Kance’s merits, stubbornness always did run in that family.



SURRENDER,” SHE CALLED OUT. THE walls were no barrier to the zarich’s claws. Stone and granite tumbled down like they were made of sand, and armed men were sent screaming. The akvan sang and battered at the gate walls with its massive tusks and trunk until, with a loud splinter, they disintegrated.

“Surrender,” she called out. From above, the indar struck, raking its terrible claws into wood and masts until every catapult and weapon of war splayed before us was rendered useless. The aeshma hissed and curled itself into a ball, using its spikes as a battering ram to break through the last wall. The cries of the fleeing soldiers and the groans of the injured carried louder than the sounds of battle.

“Surrender,” she called one last time, and the nanghait strode forward, its two faces in full view for all to see. The daeva stood proudly in the open, and no manner of sword or cannon or pitch could pierce its hide, until finally, even the bravest of the soldiers were forced to retreat from the nightmare staring back at them.

But it was the azi that posed the greatest threat. From the skies, it swept down and bathed the roofs in fire and ashes, until the city writhed from within a great bonfire. The beast screamed its defiance into the clouds, heralding death to the people below. But even then, Lord Kalen was quick to act; he raised his hand, and water poured from the heavens, quickly extinguishing the inferno before it could do more damage.

I cowered behind the savul, the only one among his brethren ordered to remain for my sake. It rested placidly beside me. With the scales of a large lizard and bulging, yellow eyes, the savul was reptilian in appearance, yet this twenty feet of monster ended in sharp talons. Whenever a stray arrow or fireball drew too close, it lifted a hideous limb to snatch it out of the air. The fire did little to singe it, and arrows caused it no harm.

I clutched at the zivar the asha had given me; it prevented compulsion against my will but did not protect from physical harm. Without any other armor, I clung to it desperately, the way a drowning man clings to driftwood.

In the space of an hour, every line of defense from the city of Santiang had been demolished. At Tea's signal, the beasts lumbered on, stepping past the gates and into the now-deserted streets of Daanoris's capital.

"Make for the palace," the asha said and then added, with a touch of steel in her voice, "Harm no one else."

Quietly, I wept. I heard the wails of the injured, of those searching for loved ones. The bone witch had tried to stem the casualties, but...

"I had no choice," the asha said quietly, her face drawn and tired. She repeated the words a few seconds later, like a mantra.

The Daanorian palace stood before us, the ivory gleam of its curved towers shining brighter as we approach. Soldiers still manned the palace walls, the tips of arrows quenched in fire pointed at us as we drew nearer. Beyond them, heavy catapults mired in pitch waited for the signal to burn.

The asha stopped, her face suddenly wreathed in smiles.

“So it is the hanjian,” she called out pleasantly, her voice carrying through the distance. “How nice to see you again.”

From atop the highest wall, a man in gilded armor came into view. He called out to her in Daanorian in a shaking voice, but she responded with laughter. “You know as well as I that you understand the common tongue, hanjian. It was the language you spoke when you betrayed your emperor.”

The man staggered back, his fear palpable. He turned toward his soldiers and issued a harsh command. At his shout, they released the fire-tipped arrows. At the same time, the catapults flung flames into the air.

The savul faced them with imperturbability, shielding me from the incoming storm. The arrows did no damage, but the fiery boulders produced better results. The savul’s scaled hide caught fire, and the beast began to burn.

Alarmed, I backed away, but the asha took hold of my arm before I could step out the daeva’s shadow. “Do not be frightened, and do not move if you wish to survive.”

“You called him a hanjian.” The Daanorian word for traitor.

“There is only one punishment for traitors.” She seated herself beside the savul’s webbed talons, heedless of the growing heat. Already the fires on the daeva’s hide were dying out, leaving no wounds. “We shall wait until the bulk of their arrows are exhausted, their stores of pitch and rocks depleted. It is the only way to save those soldiers’ lives.” She glanced back up at the wall, where the man in bright armor had revealed himself. A strange, terrible eagerness came into her voice.

“That man, on the other hand, is a different matter. Shall I continue the tale as we wait, Bard?”

I stared at her in shock, but already she was calmly resuming her story, even as fire and fear were all around us.



3

THERE IS NO TRAINING ADEQUATE to prepare one for fighting daeva, and I speak as one who has faced them all. Of these beasts, the *aeshma* is easily the most intimidating. Its body is an armorer's dream, with spikes and talons of everlasting sharpness. It was two dozen feet high but still fast on its feet, scampering from view long before the soldiers' arrows could find their mark.

I had protested the presence of the king's army, of Prince Kance coming to watch me. A daeva raising is not a cherry blossom viewing. It is not a kingdom festival that requires royal approval. A daeva is a creature that makes no distinction between noble and common flesh, and even all the armies of the world in attendance—and they were—will not improve anyone's chances of survival.

"Hold your fire!" I barked at the royal soldiers. "Make no sudden moves, and leave the fighting to Fox!" Brave as they were

to stand their ground, the soldiers' swords and bows were as useless to the fight as silk ribbons and dresses.

The *aeshma* bellowed, but Fox dodged its attack, his own sword meant to distract rather than deliver a killing blow. Over the course of a year, Fox had had as much experience baiting daeva as I had had in putting them down.

The monster charged, and my brother vaulted over its massive head, the *aeshma's* spikes missing him by inches. He landed, then swatted tauntingly at its nose. Even Fox was not above theatrics when there was an audience.

Pain blistered, an ache ripening behind my ears, but I fought through the hurt. I braided the wind around me, and a *binding* rune shone. The *aeshma* froze in its tracks as tendrils of my magic covered its form.

"Die," I growled, and the creature fell, paralyzed. But it was not vanquished yet; it took strength to kill, and my headache was proving a hindrance.

A collective sigh of relief rose from the army. Prince Kance, his eyes unnaturally bright and his movements strangely stilted, stepped closer.

In my head, the shadows shifted. I had another vision of water and wings folded back behind me as I sped quickly through the depths of the sea...

I forced the image out of my head, but in that short, broken moment of concentration, the creature had gathered itself for one last, desperate lunge. Kalen was already moving, grabbing Prince Kance by his robes and dragging him back as Fox jumped to shield

him. One of the *aeshma*'s spikes caught my brother squarely in the chest, sliding out through his back.

"Die!" I shouted again, and the spell tore into the *aeshma*, straight to its heart. The hideous monster fell backward, dragging Fox along on top of it. Its stubby, furred legs kicked out involuntarily before it shuddered and went still.

"Fox!" I'd seen him with far worse injuries, but an impaled brother was a vision no sister could grow accustomed to.

From atop the unmoving beast, Fox rose to his feet, still skewered. With a faint grimace, he set his boot against the creature's ridged hide and ripped himself free with a wet, tearing sound.

Around us, people retched. Prince Kance shook, averting his gaze, and Kalen was grim, his glare accusatory.

"I'm fine," Fox said. "A little heartache never killed anyone."

"You're a moron," I said, breathing easier now that I could see he was OK, and drove my knife deep into the fallen *aeshma*, ignoring the stench of entrails and blood as I probed deeper, until I heard the telltale click of my blade against something stronger than bone.

I plunged my hand in and pulled out the violet-hued bezoar. The *aeshma*'s corpse immediately crumbled to dust. All that was left of it was the gem that gleamed brightly in my hand. *It is odd, I thought, how something so beautiful can come out of something so grotesque.*



Back in the palace, Prince Kance trembled. He rubbed his forehead. “I don’t know what came over me, Lady Tea. I was foolish enough to think it was safe. I didn’t know how close I was until you shouted.”

“A daeva killing is not something you see every day, Your Highness,” Fox pointed out. “In all the excitement, it’s easy to act impulsively.”

The prince smiled weakly. “I wouldn’t have called getting stabbed by a two-foot spike ‘excitement,’ Fox.”

“If the Dark asha had put the *aeshma* down completely the first time,” came the frosty rejoinder from the palace window, where Kalen had taken up residence, “then additional ‘excitement’ might have been avoided.”

“Perhaps if the prince’s bodyguard had been more vigilant,” I snapped back, “I might not have been so distracted.”

Kalen opened his mouth again, but Prince Kance beat him to it. “It’s nobody’s fault but my own, Kalen. I was careless, and if it wasn’t for your presence of mind, I might have met a disastrous end. In my haste to learn more about how asha do their work, I was careless.”

“I could have told you that in the safety of the castle, Your Highness,” I said, and Kalen made a small sputtering noise, and in my mind, Fox snickered. “Wh-what I meant was there was no need for you to view the daeva yourself!”

“For far too long I have been sheltered from the realities of my own kingdom, Tea. I cannot rely on books and advisors to tell me how to rule. How can I govern wisely if I have none of my own experiences to fall back on?”

“The common people don’t exactly experience Daeva on a daily basis, Your Highness.”

“But you do as a Dark asha, don’t you? Lady Mykaela is still convalescing, so that responsibility falls to you. I wanted to see you in action, to help me understand how I might lighten your burden. Instead, it seems I have only added to it.”

I could feel my ears turning red, and prayed that my cheeks did not follow suit. “Any burden you give will be light enough to carry. Your Highness’s safety is most important.”

“I cannot be protected from all dangers, Tea. But I shall strive to be more careful next time.”

“Next time?” I echoed, as Kalen exploded with, “There’ll be no next time, Kancel!”

“You cannot tell me what to do anymore, Kalen,” the prince said. “I must know what lies beyond my borders and within them. In fact, I had hoped that I could accompany you when you return to Kion.”

“Really?” My mood brightened almost immediately. Kalen’s glower spoke volumes.

“I believe we can make it in time for the upcoming *darashi oyun*. I hear that Zoya and Shadi are dancing the lead roles again this year. Are you leaving for Ankyo after Lady Mykaela’s Heartsrune ceremony?”

“A week or so after, Your Highness.”

“Khalad shall be attending too. I offered him a room at the palace, but Father thought it best for him to take up lodgings at the Kingshead instead.”

A shadow crossed Prince Kance's face, and I knew why. Khalad had long since embraced his apprenticeship to the old Heartforger, but Prince Kance had never gotten over the guilt of inheriting the throne in his place.

"The old forger probably insisted," Fox remarked. "He's not a fan of the king, or most nobles in Odalia."

"I think it's more than that. Khalad and Father had never been on the best of terms."

"No, we haven't," King Telemaine agreed, entering the room. As always, I had to tilt my head to look at him; he was tall, but he would have been a towering presence even without his extraordinary height. "For the longest time, he blamed me and the asha for your mother's death, though time with the forger has tempered his anger. But son or not, to welcome a Heartforger under our roof foments more distrust and suspicion. That Mykaela already resides here has not set well with many."

"He's my brother, and it is a ridiculous superstition."

"I had not wished a silver heartsglass on Khalad, Kance, but even kings must follow custom. Even if I would have wanted otherwise. Lady Tea, Sir Fox, you have my thanks once again."

My hands disappeared, engulfed within the king's. Gratitude shone through his heartsglass, and I was embarrassed. "It's nothing, Your Majesty."

"It's nothing," she says. Saving my son and putting down the terrible beast plaguing my kingdom is everything to me, Lady Tea, and I vow to do everything in my power to repay you for your service." He paused, unusually hesitant. "Is—is Khalad doing well?"

“He is. He does a lot of good work, Your Majesty, and he takes pride in it.”

“Good, good. If only...” The king sighed, his eyes distant.

Bezoars found within kingdoms were customarily entrusted to their rulers, but I couldn’t move my hands to gift the gem. Fox solved my dilemma by fishing it out of my pocket and handing it over.

King Telemaine shook his head in wonder, staring down at the purple stone. “So many wars won and fought over such a small stone. Lady Tea, Sir Fox, please excuse us. There are certain matters Kance and I need to finalize before his birthday celebration.”

“I told you that we have no need for such lavishness, Father.”

“You are my son and my heir. How is that not reason for lavishness?” The king laugh boomed. “Kalen, I shall need your advice as well.”

Prince Kance bowed to us and followed his father out of the room, Kalen half a step behind.

“Are you all right, Tea?” Fox asked.

“I think my fingers are dead.”

Fox’s tone shifted to one of concern. “Are you in pain? Did the *aeshma* hurt you?”

Familiar or not, I wished Fox couldn’t decipher my moods so easily. “It’s nothing, just another headache.”

“You’ve been having a lot of those recently.”

“I’m tired. I didn’t get to sleep much last night.” That was true enough. “I’ll rest once we visit Khalad. I want to ask him about his progress on Mykaela’s new heartsglass.”

“If he’d made further headway, he would have contacted us.”

“Well”—I cleared my throat—“I was also thinking about getting Prince Kance something for his birthday, and I have an idea I wanted to run by Khalad.”

For someone who no longer needed breath, my brother’s sigh was loud and exasperated. “Tea.”

“It’s only a gift! I can go without you if you’ve got other things to do.”

“Oh, I’ll come with. But mark my words, little sister. Getting your hopes up will bring you nothing but misery.”

Looking back, I suppose I should have wondered why he seemed so bitter, like personal experiences had inspired the remark more than sound advice.



“It won’t need much,” Khalad said. “A few happy thoughts and nostalgia. This is the easiest glass I’ve been asked to make in years. Did you kill the *aeshma*?” He paused. “Did you give the bezoar to Fa...the king?”

The Heartforger apprentice’s room at the Kingshead was filled to overflowing with books, papers, strangely shaped glass containers, and bottles upon bottles of flickering lights and hues. I wondered how much the innkeeper had been charging Khalad to keep them all stored here. “I did.”

“Did he say what he planned to do with it?”

“He didn’t say. He asked about you though.”

A frown marred Khalad's face. "I don't care. Fox, I'm going to extract a happy memory from Tea, so you might feel some tugging on your end."

"Thanks for the warning."

"Khalad, how long has it been since you've talked to your father?" I asked.

"Not long enough." Khalad slid a finger across my forehead, a gesture he had done many times before. There was a familiar tingling as Khalad turned the pages of my memories, searching.

"Ever thought about visiting?" I ventured.

"Tea."

"Sorry."

"There's a good reason we don't talk anymore. Let's leave it at that." He withdrew his hand, and a few stray wisps of blue and yellow clung to his fingers. In those colored strings, I could see memories of me running across a field with my brothers and sisters, and of a younger Fox giving me a piggyback ride through a shallow stream. Asha retain their memories even when a Heartforger takes them, but their removal never stops feeling odd. "How is Lady Mykaela?"

"In bed, resting. Polaire is taking care of her."

"If 'taking care of her' means bullying Mykaela into submitting, then I agree," Fox said.

"Says the guy who bullies me as frequently."

"Lady Mykaela is nice enough to listen when she has to. You don't."

"Children," Khalad said mildly, his skilled hands forming a

small lump of clay in front of him. Sparks flew from his fingers, and the small mound twisted and turned, trapped by magic not even I could see. He kneaded the strings of memories into the clay until the thick mixture absorbed them and hardened. The mound made a tinkling noise and split open, revealing a spherical glass crystal where blue, red, and yellow lobbied for dominance, shifting from one color to the other.

“I don’t know what to call it,” Khalad admitted, handing it to me. “It’s the first of its kind. It’ll boost his mood, keep him calm whenever he tires. I can only imagine what he has to deal with every day. That’s one thing I don’t miss. As a ruler, you never have time to yourself.”

“Do you miss any of it?” Fox wanted to know.

Khalad gestured at the bottles lining his shelves. “I got a rare memory today. The old man who had it escaped death by hanging in Drycht. In one of these boxes, I have a heartsglass for a woman who forgets everything she’s done the day before. Ironic that I take a memory from a man who does not wish to remember for a woman who would give her all not to forget. I’ve helped more people in the last two weeks than I ever helped people in the last three years as the crown prince.

“The only thing I regret is turning over those duties to Kance with little warning. I used to blame my father—and Dark asha, if I must be honest—for killing my mother. But now that the anger has gone, my dislike for my father remains. He holds many views I do not agree with, and I have always rebelled against him with my temper. He always saw me as an

heir more than a son. He favored Kance long before my heartsglass turned silver.”

He paused and frowned. “Have you been feeling unwell lately, Tea?”

“She’s been having headaches,” Fox reported.

“When I was looking through your memories, I felt something unusual.”

“Unusual?” Khalad was as good at reading heartsglass as I was, so I tried to keep my calm.

“I don’t know how else to define it. It felt like there was something that wasn’t a part of you but somehow still is. Is Aenah still in Kneave?”

“She’s warded as closely as the asha can. She has no control over me, Khalad—quite the opposite actually.”

Khalad didn’t look convinced.

“I just put down an *aeshma*, Khalad. Controlling daeva, even for a short time, doesn’t leave one feeling clean.”

“Take the rest of the day off.”

“I see you don’t take your own advice.”

He smiled. “Heartforgers don’t have to deal with daeva. Although Master likes to say they’d probably be better company than the people we deal with.”

“How is the old man?”

“Traveling.” Never idle, Khalad was building a pyramid of pebbles on the table. “He visited Istera last month, and he’s now in Daanoris. He’s on the hunt for rare memories, and there are a few strange illnesses he wanted a closer look at. There have been

some cases of a sleeping disease that turns its victims' heartsglass gray. He's been working on an antidote. Said it was promising." He looked at me and then glanced back at the small glass case he had made. "We haven't been able to find the rest of the ingredients for Lady Mykaela yet. I'm sorry."

"Don't be." Dark asha cannot regenerate heartsglass, though new ones can be forged. But finding the memories needed for Mykaela's had been difficult: a memory of love and sacrifice, a memory of a heinous act committed, and a memory of surviving dire odds. Khalad had already extracted that last one from my battle against Aenah and the *azi*.

"Master told me something about King Vanor," Khalad began, hesitant. "He had met with the king shortly before he was assassinated. Master wasn't fond of Odalian nobles, but he was fond of my uncle. Master says he isn't as bad as you think he is—"

I covered my heart with both my hands, glaring. "You saw me raise Vanor!" I accused.

Khalad blushed. "I don't get to choose what I see in heartsglass. You know that." His hand jerked, and the pyramid he was building tumbled. "Sorry."

"Well, you're wrong on one count. He's a horrible bastard, and I can understand why he was killed."

"Tea!" Fox warned.

"You know I'm right. Why would Vandor hide Mykeala's heartsglass if he loved her?"

Khalad exhaled noisily. "I don't know. But Master was adamant about Vanor's innocence. He was sure of it."

“You don’t have to feel guilty because you were related to Vanor, you know. It’s not like you were responsible. You feel things too much.”

“My master has said that on many occasions. He’s not wrong, but it helps me forge better.” Khalad was suddenly eager to change the subject. I made no complaints. “We still need those two memories for Lady Mykaela’s new heartsglass. I’ve looked through several possibilities, but none are of the potency I need.”

“How about a heinous act committed by a Faceless?”

“That would probably work. They’re not known for doing things half—” He trailed off, shocked. “Tea, you don’t mean that!”

“Why not? We have her imprisoned and then she’s in no position to refuse us.”

“I have to side with Khalad on this one,” Fox said. “Aenah’s crafty enough even when she’s powerless. Don’t drag Khalad into a battle he hasn’t volunteered for.”

Khalad’s eyes lit up from behind his spectacles. He tugged at his hair, which was white, like most Heartforgers’. “You misunderstand me, Sir Fox. I’m not turning it down. I can’t extract any memory from a Faceless if she’s not willing, but I’m curious about the other notions I might find in her head.”

Fox groaned. “I’m surrounded by idiots.”

“It’s worth a shot, I think.” Khalad paused and added, after a sidelong glance at my heartsglass, “But don’t tire yourself for Kance. He wouldn’t want that. He can be a little...oblivious, sometimes. Even more so nowadays.”

Was my crush really that obvious to everyone but the prince himself?

Yes, Fox said in my head. Yes, it is.