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SPECTRE OF THE PAST

MIREK

Shayera Starwind, the Crown Princess of Highwind, stood agape as the implications of my words sank in. The moonsilver blade of her elven dueling saber glinted in the moonlight, ready to cut me to ribbons with a flick of her wrist. Her Dal'Rethi tattoos had nearly faded, though I could still see a faint blue glow beneath her flesh.

She looked more confused than angry, thank the Aether, and I was grateful for the momentary respite. My lungs burned from sprinting, and my forearms tingled painfully from the Flensing. I'd had to channel a significant burst of energy through my body just keep up with her, and enhancement magic was not my specialty.

And then there was the fact that my cock was still tingling in my trousers thanks to her unforgettable efforts in the tavern mere minutes earlier. Suffice to say, this was not at all how I had expected this night to unfold.

"What in the bloody void are you talking about?" she demanded once she collected herself.

Standing straight, I held out my hands with my palms open. "It will take me some time to explain. And this probably isn't the best place for us to have a conversation. If you're willing, we could find a quiet inn somewhere nearby and—"

"I'm not going anywhere," she snapped. "Not until you tell me who you are and what the hell you want from me!"

"I understand your anger, I really do." I tried to keep my voice as calm, steady, and low as I could. Just because I didn't see anyone nearby didn't mean no one was listening. Vorsalos was filled with people who wanted to kill me.

Or would, anyway, if they knew who I worked for.

"Then stop stalling," Shayera growled, her turquoise eyes still glowing just enough to add a bit of menace to her words. "No one in this city will care if I skewer a sorcerer in the streets."

I nodded, my heart racing. Thinking on my feet had never been one of my strengths. Tonight's events were proof enough of that.

"You're probably right," I admitted. "But despite that fascinating light show of yours, you're not really a Senosi. You don't hate sorcerers."

"I do when they use their magic to trick me!" she replied tartly. "That's how you won the duel, isn't it? You cheated!"

"I'd hardly call it cheating to use my own natural abilities."

Shayera snorted. "There's nothing *natural* about sorcery."

"Of course there is! I was born with this gift, just like you were born with that graceful body of yours. I fail to see the difference between my magic and your...erm...*assets*."

It took all the willpower I could muster to keep my gaze from drifting down her neckline. Her beauty was almost suffocating, especially up close. A part of me still couldn't believe that her lips had been wrapped around my cock not long ago...

My admittedly ill-conceived strategy to gain her attention had fallen apart the moment I had seen her smoky eyelids fluttering up close. After my victory, I should have rejected her counteroffer and proposed a quiet conversation like I had originally planned. I could have simply returned her gold in exchange for a chance to chat somewhere private.

But then she'd sauntered close enough that I had been able to smell her flowery perfume and take in her taut, dancer-like body...

Aether forgive me.

She was standing just as close to me now, but her long lashes were no longer fluttering flirtatiously. Her eyes remained narrowed and her blade remained pointed at my throat. She could have run me through at any moment, but I held out hope that the daughter of famed heroes wouldn't murder an unarmed man in a cold blood.

But I could have been wrong. This girl certainly hadn't acted like the daughter of a righteous paladin and an elegant queen thus far tonight.

"Who are you?" Shayera repeated, lower but just as insistently. "And who sent you?"

This is a mistake. As usual, you have allowed your emotions to cloud your judgment. Why are you even speaking with her? You should have already subdued her. Do you have any idea how much favor the High Sovereign would bestow upon our family if you brought the daughter of Serrane Starwind back home? He would double our lands. He would give us a seat on the Council. By the Immortal Dragon, he might even allow you to breed her yourself!

"No one sent me," I replied, shaking my head as I tried to ignore the voice screaming inside my skull. My father may have been a thousand miles away in the family estate, but there were times when I swore he owned a second mansion inside my head. "Encountering you in that bar was pure luck."

The corner of Shayera's mouth twitched up ever so slightly. "But you know who I am."

"Yes." I let my hands slowly fall to my sides. I hoped that it would encourage her to lower her weapon.

It did not.

"How?" she demanded.

Keep your mouth shut! You cannot afford to jeopardize your mission. I sacrificed everything to get you this assignment. I am counting on you—the fortunes of our house depend on you!

"That's...complicated," I managed.

"Actually, it's quite simple," Shayera said, pushing her swordpoint against my throat hard enough it nearly broke skin. "Either you start answering my questions, or I get stabby."

I drew in a long, deep breath and tried to recenter myself. "I'll explain everything. But please, just allow me to finish before you do anything rash."

"No promises. Now start talking."

Your brother would never have made this mistake. He would have already had this elven cunt tied up and ready for transport! I should have known that you weren't ready for this much responsibility...

"I told you the truth before—my name is Mirek," I said. "I'm not an assassin or a bounty hunter or even a mercenary. I'm just an...*observer* here in Vorsalos."

"An observer?" she asked with a snort. "You mean you're a *spy*."

"If you prefer, though I assure you that I'm not nearly as important as that title makes me sound." I paused, resisting the urge to glance around again for eavesdroppers just in case the movement set her off. At least my voice had remained mostly even. My rapid training hadn't

been completely worthless. “But I do take pride in being well-informed, which is why I’m so surprised to find *you* here. The last I heard, your mother sent you to Nelu’Thalas a little over a year ago. I assumed you would still be there. Highborn training typically spans decades, not months.”

The color drained from her face, and I felt the blade drift away from my throat as her arm sagged. “How can you possibly know that?” she breathed. “We didn’t tell anyone!”

“You’re the only child of the most powerful individuals in the Northern Reaches,” I reminded her. “People tend to notice when the princess doesn’t attend official parties for over a year.”

Wheels turned behind her eyes. My hope, foolish though it might have been, was that the shock of my identity would be easier for her to process if she arrived at the realization herself. Blurting out who and what I was without any context or explanation seemed like a quick way to end up dead.

Or perhaps it wouldn’t make a difference and she would just kill me regardless.

“You don’t work for the Regent Lord or any member of the Raven Count—they would have called the guard and tried to lock me up,” Shayera reasoned. “And I doubt you’re working for the Tidebreaker’s Guild, either—you don’t look like a pirate.”

“Or smell like one,” I added. “Besides, they prefer cutlasses to rapiers. Better for cutting rope and all that.”

“Then that means...”

Her eyes flared wide, and I stayed light on my feet just in case she tried to gut me. There was nothing in my appearance to suggest where I was from—these clothes had been purchased locally, and pale skin, black hair, and green eyes weren’t the exclusive province of any country or city-state in Torsia.

My accent was the only potential giveaway. I had worked hard to quash it over the years, but I knew I still rolled my ‘Rs’ and dropped the occasional consonant here and there. Most people didn’t notice—or if they did, they just assumed I was from Ebara or even Talisham, since we all shared the same root alphabet.

“*Le’thos*,” Shayera spat. “You’re a bloody Crell.”

And there it was.

“I’m *from* Crell, not *a* Crell,” I corrected with a bit too much defensive pride. “We’re not monsters. Not *all* of us, anyway.”

Her face hardened, and I felt the tip of the blade prick against my throat again. I still couldn’t believe that I was taking this risk. Neither could the voice that had replaced my conscience.

All my work, all my sacrifice, and you’ve thrown it all away! And for what? You already have a mission here, and it is absolutely vital to the future of our people!

“You’re conquerors and slavers!” Shayera hissed. “What’s the difference between you and an orc from the Peaks?”

“A keen appreciation for personal hygiene,” I replied mildly. “And I don’t have tusks.”

She scowled, her voice dripping with contempt. “A Crell sorcerer...*amin umail dura ta*.”

“I know how bad this must seem, but I assure you it isn’t what you think. If I had wanted to harm you, I wouldn’t have bothered trying to have this conversation. I could have just waited until you left the bar and jumped you in an alley. It wouldn’t be difficult to subdue you with my magic.”

Her face twisted into a snarl. “Is that supposed to make me feel *better*?”

“That...didn’t come out the way I intended,” I stammered, swearing under my breath. This was *exactly* why I was always better off sticking to a plan. Whenever I tried to improvise, something bad happened. I could practically feel the heat of my father’s glare burning a hole in my back.

“I hope not,” Shayera growled. “Because you’re really making me wonder why I haven’t killed you yet.”

I drew in another breath and tried again. “Look, I understand that you have no reason to trust me. All I ask is that you hear me out.”

“And why in the Maiden’s name would I listen to anything a Crell slaver has to say? Do you have any idea what would happen to you if the Regent Lord or the Ravenguard knew you were here?”

“Nothing good, I imagine,” I lied. Like everyone else in Highwind, she had no idea who was really in charge of Vorsalos. “But neither of us are in friendly territory, are we? I imagine there’s room in the gallows for two.”

Her cheek didn’t even twitch. She just held her glare firm, still waiting for me to give her a reason why she should allow me to keep drawing breath. I wished that I had an easy one to offer. If she were aware of even a fraction of our machinations in this city, I would have already been bleeding out on the street.

Nothing leading up to this point had gone the way I’d planned, but her reaction to my identity was hardly surprising. The Imperium wasn’t exactly popular in the Northern Reaches...or anywhere else in Torsia, if I was being honest. We embraced the power of sorcery rather than shunning it, and the Sovereign Council was determined to bring order to the lawless backwaters of the continent like Vorsalos—and not purely out of ambition or greed, either. The Northern Reaches had endured several bloody wars over the past few decades, all of which could have easily been prevented if Vorsalos had been in the hands of the Imperium rather than an insane religious zealot and her cult of magic-eating assassins.

But I hadn’t reached out to this girl as a ploy to threaten Highwind’s new royalty or anything so sinister. I really did need—and *want*—her help.

“I wasn’t lying about what I said earlier,” I murmured, sweat beading on my forehead despite the chill in the autumn air. “The people of Vorsalos are in grave danger, and they don’t even know it.”

“What could be more dangerous to them than a Crell spy?”

“The same women you were just mistaken for,” I said. “The Senosi.”

Shayera paled. “*What?*”

I finally risked a furtive glance up and down the adjacent street just to confirm that we were still alone. A part of me still couldn’t believe I was going through with this, but it wasn’t as if I had many options. When I’d mentioned this to my accomplice, she had dismissed it out of hand. She insisted that I was imagining things, and it wasn’t as if I had any real, tangible evidence to change her mind.

But I knew the truth. And maybe, just maybe, there was still a way that the daughter of my enemy could temporarily become my friend.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I added, hoping to preempt her inevitable protests. “Whenever anything remotely bad happens in Vorsalos, people claim that the Senosi were behind it. And it’s always bullshit, because most of them were wiped out during the revolution when you and I were both children.”

“Not just most of them,” Shayera corrected sharply. “*All* of them.”

I frowned. “Is it really so difficult to believe that a few survived?”

“I know the person who hunted them all down, so yes,” she replied with surprising force. “She was *very* thorough.”

I hesitated for a second, wondering why she was so adamant. I had read the intelligence reports about the Senosi traitor who had joined the Dragon of Highwind in the war against the Raven Queen, and I recalled that this rogue Huntress had allegedly worked with then-Ranger-General Starwind on more than one occasion. Details were sparse, but perhaps Shayera had a personal stake here I wasn’t aware of. As if I needed another reason to tread lightly...

“Why do you believe this?” she asked when I didn’t respond.

“Because I saw it with my own eyes right here in the city. A woman in the golden armor and helmet of a Sanctori.”

Her cheek twitched. “And you’re sure it wasn’t a costume party at the Regent Lord’s estate?”

“I’m sure. I also heard a name—Veleca—which I ran by my sources in the city. She’s one of a handful of the Inquisitrix’s servants whose body was never found.”

“I didn’t realize there was a list.”

“Revolutions *love* lists,” I said. “And there’s nothing revolutionaries love more than crossing off the names in blood.”

Shayera paused for a long moment as if mulling it over. “This woman could have died in a hundred ways without leaving a body. An explosion, a sunken ship...maybe she was incinerated by the dragon.”

“Maybe,” I conceded with a shrug. “But I’m not asking for you take my claim on faith. I have a lead on where the survivor is hiding, and I was hoping to snoop around and get some more answers. I just can’t do it alone.”

She shook her head. “If you seriously believe that a Senosi is still alive *and* you know where she is, why not just tell the Ravanguard?”

“Because they don’t take tips from Crell spies,” I replied dryly. “And to be honest, I wouldn’t trust them to handle something like this anyway. Veleca isn’t alone—she has powerful help.”

“If you tell me she has an entire squad of Senosi Huntresses along with her, I won’t believe—”

“Not more Senosi,” I interrupted. “Something even worse. When I saw her, she was holding a *Kertabos*—a Runic Focus.”

Shayera blinked. “A what?”

“An Avetharri relic of tremendous power,” I explained. “They’re exceedingly rare—only a handful are believed to have survived the Dragon War. Most of them are still across the sea in Varellon, but there are a few in Nelu’Thalas and at least one back home in the Imperium.”

“Then how in the bloody void would a Sanctori get her hands on one?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “But wherever she got it, it’s dangerous. Runic Foci are unlike any other piece of artifice—no one has ever learned how to copy the original Avetharri techniques. In theory, the artifact can allow anyone who uses it to channel magic.”

Her expression sank. But she did finally lower her blade from my throat. “That’s impossible.”

“I know,” I said gravely. “Like I said, no one knows precisely how these Foci work. Even the Runesages back home barely understand them. But from what little I know, each Focus is inscribed with a rune for a specific school of magic—fire, illusion, primal, whatever—and

anyone who unlocks the rune can manipulate the Aether in very specific ways. A Focus with a fire rune could allegedly allow its wielder to shoot flame from his fingertips just like a sorcerer.”

She slowly shook her head as a gust of evening wind tousled her blond hair. “Do you know what school it was?”

I nodded grimly. “Shadow.”

“*Faarea*,” she breathed. “You mean—”

“Palerending,” I said. “If I’m right, she may be able to use this relic to summon demons.”

Shayera had gone white at the mention of this Senosi, but now she almost looked sick. Everyone in their right mind was terrified of the invisible, malefic spirits from the Pale—demons were literally the stuff of nightmares. But she obviously knew more than just the children’s tales. Her father was a paladin—was *the* paladin, in fact, and his Knights of the Eternal Dawn had battled demonic incursions and Chol alike.

“You understand why I’m concerned,” I said softly. “A Senosi survivor is bad enough, but if she actually understands how to use this relic...”

“She could threaten the city,” Shayera said.

“She could threaten the entire *region*—and beyond,” I added. “I don’t expect you to have much sympathy for the Imperium, but you should know that we take demonology as seriously as anyone. This Senosi has to be stopped, and the Runic Focus has to be recovered.”

She stayed silent for several heartbeats, her eyes flicking back and forth in thought. I still wished that we were having this conversation indoors, but at least she seemed to accept what I was saying. It was more than I could have reasonably hoped for under the circumstances.

“Let’s assume for a moment that I believe you,” she said quietly. “What is it you expect me to do? Send a message to my father and have him summon a squad of knights to put down an infestation?”

“No. Even if you had a calling crystal and could speak with him—which I doubt—his paladins would never get here in time. To say nothing of the fact that the fools governing this city would consider it an act of war if even a single Knight of the Eternal Dawn showed up on their doorstep.”

“Then what *do* you want from me?”

“Like I said, I have a lead on where this Veleca is hiding. But I’m a sorcerer, and she’s a Senosi. I can’t stop her on my own.”

“Okay, but there are hundreds of other warriors in this city,” Shayera pointed out. “You have enough coin to hire a whole squad of mercenaries.”

“But I couldn’t keep that quiet, and frankly I don’t trust them to get the job done. Your family has a personal history with the Senosi, and a rogue survivor with demons at her beck and call threatens Highwind as much as Vorsalos.”

I paused and looked her up and down again. Now that my mind had cleared enough for my reason to overcome my lust, I saw her like I had when I’d first entered the Bloody Boar. She wasn’t just a beautiful half-elven girl—she was a skilled fighter and the daughter of legendary warriors. Blood lineage was everything in the Imperium.

“Besides, I’ve seen you fight,” I added. “I need someone with skill and finesse. You’re worth a dozen hired blades.”

She eyed me warily, and I watched as the color gradually returned to her face. She still could have lifted her sword and skewered me in a heartbeat if she wanted to, but the tension in her body had mostly drained away.

“You may be a sorcerer, but you know how to fight, too,” she commented. “Or at least fake it well enough to beat me.”

I shrugged. “As you pointed out, I cheated.”

“Hah! At least you finally admit it.” She paused, the faintest hint of a smile touching the corner of her mouth. “So how did you do it, anyway? Did you worm your way into my head?”

“No. I couldn’t—those Dal’Rethi tattoos of yours would protect you.”

She raised an eyebrow. “But you didn’t know I had them.”

“No, so I’m glad I didn’t try.” I grunted softly. “I needed an illusion that would fool everyone in the bar, so I manipulated the light and shadows to make you think I was standing a few inches from where I actually was. It wasn’t much, but it was enough.”

“That’s...actually clever,” she admitted. “*Very* clever.”

“I thought so.”

I flashed her a tight smile. She didn’t return it, but she did finally raise her saber and slide it back into the scabbard at her hip.

“Dammit,” she breathed. “All right, fine. I still think there’s a decent chance you’re full of shit, but if there is a Senosi survivor here...”

Shayera trailed off, but I nodded and offered her a grateful bow.

“I appreciate it. With your help, I can—”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself just yet,” she interrupted. “I said I’d help you, not that I trust you. I can’t promise that I won’t kill you when we’re done.”

“I suppose that’s still better than killing me right now,” I murmured. “I’ll take what I can get.”

Shayera snorted softly, though a ghostly smile returned to haunt the corner of her lips. “So, where is this secret hideout you mentioned?”

I gestured down the road. “Northeast of here in the ruins of an old fort called Tanisgarde. It’s been abandoned for decades.”

“Mm,” she murmured, brushing a rebellious lock of golden hair back behind her pointed ears. “So in other words, it’s not someplace in this city you wanted to check out tonight.”

“No. It will probably take at least three or four hours to get there, and the path through the foothills is a little rough. No one has bothered to maintain the trail since the fort is deserted.”

“I see.”

I looked at her, trying in vain to read her mood. “If you’re willing, I’d like to head out first thing in the morning. We could meet up somewhere, if you’d—”

“No.”

I blinked. “No?”

Shayera shook her head and crossed her arms. “I’ll help you find this woman if I can, but there’s no way I trust you enough to let you out of my sight.”

I opened my mouth to protest but quickly decided not to push my luck. “All right,” I said. “So...what did you have in mind?”

“I have a place a few blocks from here,” she said. “It’s private and secure, and it will let me keep an eye on you.”

I nodded slowly, though I was more apprehensive than I let on. Hopefully she didn’t expect me to sleep in a closet or something...

“All right, come on,” she beckoned, striding past him out of the alley and into the street. “I’ve always had a weakness for bad decisions. What’s the harm in making another one?”

Shayera walked a few steps but then abruptly stopped in her tracks and looked at me. “Actually, there is one more thing I’m curious about.”

“What’s that?”

“What *was* your plan in the bar? Because the more I think about it, the stupider it all seems.”

My lip twitched involuntarily. “I, uh...I wasn’t expecting to find anyone here in Vorsalos who could help me. Then I recognized you and...well, I had to improvise.”

“And challenging me to a duel was the best you could come up with?” she asked, planting a hand on her hip.

“I wasn’t sure how else I could get your attention,” I said defensively. *Too* defensively. “It seemed like a decent plan at the time. I knew I couldn’t match your skill, but I was reasonably confident I could trick you with an illusion.”

Shayera arched a slender eyebrow. “And then what? You ask me for help while I have your cock in my mouth?”

I felt a rush of embarrassed heat fill my cheeks. I had really, really hoped she wouldn’t ask me about this. I wanted to seem nonthreatening but still *competent*.

“That...uh,” I mumbled. “Look, I really thought you would take my offer and let me have your winnings instead.”

“Leaving me broke. And then what?”

“Then afterward, when the crowd dispersed, I could offer your winnings back and have a real chat.”

Shayera blinked incredulously. “You thought I would want to have a polite conversation with a man who just took all my coin and humiliated me? *That* was your master plan?”

“I assumed you would...I mean, I thought...” I bit down on my lip and groaned. “Okay, maybe it wasn’t such a great plan.”

“It wasn’t a plan at all! Maiden’s mercy, you’re lucky I sucked your cock instead of biting it off.”

She glared at me for what felt like a small eternity, and I wondered if I had just ruined everything by being honest. But then a mischievous grin tugged at her lips, and her turquoise eyes brightened.

“You’re also lucky that I respect the hustle,” she said. “I was cheating them, then you cheated me. The player can’t really be upset when she gets played, can she?”

I smiled back. “I suppose not.”

She snorted softly, her eyes sizing me up again. “I’m not sure what’s worse, the fact that I sucked off a Crell or the fact that I haven’t finished that hard in...well, *ever*.”

My mouth went completely dry, and my trousers suddenly felt like they were about two sizes too small. I didn’t understand how she kept catching me so flat-footed; it wasn’t as if I was a stranger to attractive girls. I had grown up surrounded by pretty noblewomen and their sometimes-prettier slaves, and I had spent at least one night a week with my accomplice, Farah, for the past few months. She was one of the most beautiful women I had ever seen...

But Shayera was different. I had heard the tales about her mother’s beauty, of course—the Ranger-General-turned-Queen was one of the most important figures in the entire north, especially after the disappearance of the Wyrms Lord. Even the sketches I had seen of her had been arresting, and the fact that she had taken a human lover had enkindled the dreams of young human boys for a thousand miles in every direction.

Shayera wasn't a figure of story and legend, though—she was here in the flesh. And by the grace of the Aether, that flesh was frighteningly irresistible.

“Just so you know,” she added after a pause, leaning forward until I was painfully aware of how close her lips were to mine. “I don't usually get off when a man pops over my face.”

Somehow, my throat got even more parched. “I...assumed not.”

“I've never actually fed like that before,” she said. Her eyes drifted to the side and went distant. “Never from a man at all, actually. Just other girls when we were both...never mind.”

I made it a point not to turn my hips slightly to try and hide my erection. Despite what I had told her in the bar, her lips had easily been worth a thousand silvers. By the Immortal Dragon, I would have paid twice that to feel them again.

Maybe this was a mistake. Maybe Farah was right and I should have just let this Senosi thing go. I had a job to do here, and this wasn't it. I may not have been able to bring myself to ambush Shayera and deliver her into the hands of the Imperium, but I could have just pretended I never saw her and gone about my business.

Because the longer this went on, the harder it would be for me to conceal her presence from Farah or our other operatives in the city. And if any of them discovered that Shayera Starwind was here, I would have a lot more to deal with than the constant, domineering voice of my father.

“Come on then, Master Spy,” Shayera said, clearly amused at my discomfort. “Let's get off the streets.”

Shayera's “place” was a modest inn several blocks toward the city's eastern wall. The two-story building seemed sleepier than most of the similar establishments in Vorsalos, though I imagined that likely had something to do with how far it lay from the docks to the west. A kindly old gentleman let us inside, and from the friendly banter between him and Shayera, it was clear that she had been staying here for at least a few weeks. He did seem surprised by my presence, however, which I wasn't expecting. From what I'd seen of her behavior so far, I had assumed that she brought a different man back to her room every night. But evidently, I was the first. Perhaps she really was just a teasing flirt who had never lost her little game before tonight...

There weren't any other patrons in the cozy common room downstairs, and once the owner was convinced that I wouldn't cause any trouble, Shayera led me up a narrow staircase to the top floor. She produced a key from inside her knee-high boots and gestured for me to head inside once she had unlocked the door.

“It's not very big, but despite what you probably think, I prefer cozy and private to public and spacious most of the time,” she said. “And this place is about a thousand times cleaner than the awful flophouses on the docks.”

I nodded and stepped inside. The rectangular room was only about ten feet across and twice that long, which left enough space for a modest bed, a wardrobe, and a dining table with a single chair. A well-kept oil lantern—surprisingly already lit—was the room's only illumination. The scent of her expensive lavender perfume teased my nostrils the moment I entered, reminding me that the girl at my heel was royalty despite her almost sailor-like disposition. A part of me still expected to find rumpled sheets and hastily discarded clothes from her previous conquests covering the floor, but once again I was wrong. Everything was remarkably tidy.

“I’ve never invited anyone else in here, not even the cute Ebaran girl who works at the stables,” Shayera said as if reading my thoughts. She closed the door behind her, then folded her arms over her chest. “If my mother knew that I had a Crell spy in my bedroom, she would probably disown me.”

If my father knew that I was speaking with the princess of Highwind instead of kidnapping her, he would probably disown me, too.

“If it would make you feel more comfortable, you could take my sword,” I offered. “And there’s a knife in my left boot you could have, too.”

“It’s not your weapons I’m worried about. You’re a sorcerer—you could burn me to ash with a flick of your fingers.”

“If I had that kind of power, I wouldn’t have needed to ask for your help in the first place,” I pointed out. “Besides, your tattoos would protect you anyway.”

“Maybe, but you could incinerate my stuff,” she said, nodding her chin toward the wardrobe. “Threatening a girl’s clothes is an unforgiveable offense.”

I snorted softly when she gave me a thin smile. For a moment, I wished she *didn’t* have those damn tattoos, not matter how enthralling they were. Without them, I could have easily peered into her thoughts and read her intentions. Did she actually believe me? Was she just toying with me?

I could have outright manipulated her mind, too, though I only relied on such magic when it was absolutely essential. Charm spells could be dangerous and unpredictable, not to mention hard to maintain. And while some of my friends back home saw nothing wrong with keeping mind-slaves, I found it...unsettling.

“Well, I’m not sure how else I could put you at ease,” I said. “Unless you have a vatari collar lying around, sorcery is difficult to stop. Though if it makes you feel safer, I suppose you could tie me up until morning.”

Her eyebrows twitched upward. “Do you enjoy being tied up and collared?”

“Um...that’s not exactly what I meant.”

Shayera’s thin smile widened. “That seems to happen to you a lot. Are all Crell spies this easily tongue-tied?”

I sighed. “We come in many varieties. Some of us are wily and clever, others feel like they are constantly in over their heads.”

“Ah. Well, Master Spy, you don’t have to worry—I wasn’t planning on tying you up and sticking you in the corner. I just wanted to keep my eye on you.”

“Fair enough.”

Shayera regarded me for another few moments before she finally uncrossed her arms and sauntered over to the wardrobe beside the bed. “Besides, if you did try something, my companion would track you down and rip you apart.”

I frowned. “Your...companion?”

“That’s right,” she said as she unclasped her golden earrings. “He’s my protector *and* my best friend. Honestly, you’re lucky he prefers sleeping in the wild. He never would have let you in here alone with me.”

I paused, wondering who in the bloody void she could be talking about. No royal bodyguard would have ever let the princess out his sight. Though I couldn’t imagine why a lover would, either. What kind of man would sleep out in the woods when he could be here with the most beautiful woman in the city? It didn’t make any sense.

Her cheeky grin lingered as she unclasped her earrings, almost like she was enjoying a private little joke at my expense. I might have been annoyed if she hadn't leisurely bent over to look into the small mirror affixed to the wardrobe. The flawless feminine curves of her ass and lower back were making my trousers feel impossibly tight yet again.

"If I'm not going to tie you up, I do need to figure out what I'm going to do with you," Shayera said as pivoted back around and leaned against the wardrobe. It took an embarrassing amount of effort to lift my eyes from her taut stomach and impressive cleavage, but somehow I managed.

"I've slept on floors plenty of times before," I told her. "I don't mind."

"Don't be stupid—there's plenty of space on the bed," she said.

An excited flutter rippled through my chest and then quickly moved south to my loins. Was she actually suggesting...?

"It's still early, though," Shayera added, her voice lowering to a sultry purr. "Have a seat."

I wavered, half out of ingrained professional caution and half because my brain was going wild concocting fantasies about where this might lead. I still couldn't believe how any of this had played out so far. An hour ago, I'd hatched a hair-brained scheme to recruit some help for a mission. Now...

Now she's playing you for a fool, my father's voice scolded me. This girl is the key to our family's ascension, and here you are letting her manipulate you. It's pathetic. Yet another failure—yet another disappointment.

I took a deep breath as I sat down on the edge of the bed, trying desperately to reassemble my composure. I wasn't a lovestruck teenager on his first assignment—I was an operative of the Zarul, the most powerful covert agency in all of Torsia. Every citizen of the Imperium lived in fear of us, and every foreign kingdom dreaded the mere mention of our name.

But the truth was that I shouldn't have even been here—I wouldn't be, if my brother had still been alive. I should have been back at the Aetherium studying magic and trying to track down the rumored children of the Dragon of Highwind.

"I could order us some drinks, but the ale here is mediocre at best," Shayera said with a casual flick of her wrist. "Better than the Bloody Boar, but that's not saying much."

"Frankly, I haven't been impressed by any of the local cuisine." My eyes made the mistake of drifting down her cleavage to her abdomen. "And the drinks aren't anything special."

"True. Personally, I've only been impressed by one drink in this town...and wouldn't you know, tonight was the first night I tried it."

Grinning coquettishly, Shayera sauntered over to me like a cat stalking her prey. She sat down on the edge of the bed and sidled up next to me.

"This is the part where you wonder if you're about to get lucky," she purred as she gently placed her right hand on my leg. "You imagine that the mysterious elf girl you just met has already been smitten by your irresistible masculine charms, and now she can't wait to make hot, steamy love to you all night long."

My breath caught in my throat when she brought her mouth within an inch of my ear. The combination of the perfume-laden air, her natural scent, and the heat of her body made me feel like I was suddenly in her thrall...

"You probably wish I were a real Senosi right now, don't you?" she asked, her left hand brushing the black curls of my hair while her right crept another inch closer to the bulge in my trousers. "Overwhelmed by insatiable hunger, constantly needing *nourishment* from my Crell

companion who just so happens to be the only one who can sate me with his potent sorcerous seed...”

My head turned to her as if in a trance, my eyes wide, my heart pounding. Her lips parted, and her eyelids fluttered as she moved in to kiss me—

And then abruptly pulled away and dismissively flicked her wrist as if she had grown bored. “Well, sadly for you, I’m *not* a Senosi,” she said. “And I don’t fuck on the first date, either, so I guess you’re out of luck.”

My mouth drooped open, and I stared at her silhouette for several long, agonizing seconds before her façade finally cracked. She giggled and smacked the inside of my thigh.

“I warned you about challenging me to another duel,” she teased, her eyes bright and playful. “I’ll out fence you, I’ll out flirt you...the sooner you realize you can’t win, the better.”

I grunted and searched for my voice. It was buried so deep in my chest it was nothing short of a miracle that I managed to find it.

“I’ll, uh...I’ll try and remember that,” I said.

“I bet you will.” She flashed me another impish grin before her hand returned to my leg and slid along my thigh until it was resting atop my manhood. “But don’t worry—I may be a tease, but I’m not a complete bitch. And I wasn’t lying about what happened back in that tavern. I’ve never felt anything like that before. So if you’re up for it...well, we have some time to kill, and I wouldn’t mind being fed properly this time.”

My mouth went dry again. “Properly?”

“Yeah,” she said, opening her mouth wide and extending her tongue. “As much as you can give me, all the way down here.” She held the pose for several seconds before she rolled her tongue back over her lips and smiled. “So, what do you think? Can you help a girl out?”

“I, uh...I’ve always believed in chivalry,” I replied, voice trembling despite my attempts to stay cool. “And a good operative never passes up an opportunity to build a bridge between cultures.”

Shayera snickered, her free hand brushing my hair again. “Uh-huh.”

She held my eyes firmly as her fingers deftly worked at my belt buckle. She kept her mouth close enough to mine that I could feel the heat of her breath, but she never made the move to kiss me, not even when she liberated my throbbing stem and cradled it in her long fingers.

“Gods, I had no idea how big they grew them down south,” she said, her eyes finally dropping as she began slowly stroking my shaft. “Must be all that wickedness and sorcery...”

“No, it’s—ooh...” I groaned uncontrollably when her thumb brushed across the swollen tip. I was suddenly grateful that I had already spilled once tonight, otherwise I doubted I would have lasted long enough to savor her touch...

She parted her lips and leaned down as if she were about to swallow me—but then she swore under her breath and stopped. When she abruptly removed her hand and stood, I feared that she had just been teasing me yet again...

“I didn’t have the chance to do this properly in the bar,” she said, reaching behind her back to unfasten the straps of her leather bodice. “But here there’s no excuse.”

I stared, confused but captivated all at once. “What?”

“When I’m queen, there’s going to be a law against sucking cock when you aren’t topless,” she said. “Civilizations need rules—it’s what separates us from the savages.”

My heart skipped a beat when she tossed her bodice on the floor. Her breasts were, in a word, *perfect*. I’m not sure why I was surprised, given her stunning body, but seeing her pert

half-human tits—perky yet plump, with the same unblemished creamy skin as the rest of her body—made me reconsider everything I thought I knew about the female form.

“That’s better, isn’t it?” Shayera asked, running her hands over her rosy nipples. “If you’re a good boy, maybe I’ll let you cum on them sometime. You haven’t even seen them glow.”

My cock throbbed at the mental image of straddling her naked body on the bed, madly thrusting my cock between those perfect pillows as she breathlessly begged me to spill...

Chuckling, she knelt in front of me and gently pushed my knees apart. My cock was so stiff it was starting to ache, and it nearly slapped her in the forehead before she curled her fingers around the shaft again.

“Here we go again,” she cooed, angling my stem toward her mouth but pausing just before her lips enveloped the tip. “You can use your hands if you want. And if you need to grab my hair or whatever, that’s fine, too.”

She didn’t wait for a response before she rolled her tongue over the throbbing crown, then leaned forward and swallowed it altogether. I gasped in delight, my hands grabbing the edge of the bedframe for support. I had always believed that there was something truly magical about watching—and *feeling*—your cock disappear through a woman’s lips, especially when she was on her knees like a priestess prostrating herself before an altar. Your pleasure was her religion and your cock was her god.

Yet despite that rush of excitement, I didn’t feel the least bit in control right now. I hadn’t felt in control at the bar, either, even when she had been wearing my cum on her face. I couldn’t explain it. Normally when I drove my manhood down a woman’s throat, there was absolutely no question who had the power in that particular instant. But with Shayera, I couldn’t help but feel like I was as much prey as predator.

It was an entirely new experience. And it was driving me wild.

“*Nngnn*,” I groaned as she began bobbing up and down, one hand working the base of my shaft while the other dug into my thigh. She seemed absolutely determined to work my full length down her tight, clinging throat, but she couldn’t quite pull it off. I could hardly blame her—no woman ever had.

“Fuck!” she gasped as she suddenly popped up, panting and licking the spittle from her lips. Her eyeshadow and mascara had begun to run down her cheeks, which somehow made her look even hotter. “I’m going to need your help getting him all the way down.”

She slowly stroked me, her gaze locked on my stem as if it were a puzzle to be solved. Her determination was almost terrifying.

“You’ll have to grab my head,” she told me. “Don’t worry about messing up my hair—it doesn’t matter. This is *going* to happen...”

She dove back down, swallowing more than half my length in a single gulp before her eyes flicked up to mine. Releasing my white-knuckled grip on the edge of the bed, I feathered my fingers through her blond hair until I had a firm grip on the back of her skull.

And then I pulled.

Shayera’s eyes bulged, and the resistance of her throat became overwhelming. Her fingers dug into my thighs. A short, gurgling gasp erupted around her lips. But she didn’t recoil, and so I pushed her head away before pulling it down again, harder than before.

Another inch deeper. Another gurgle of strained effort. But from the frustrated noise she made in the back of her throat, it still wasn’t deep enough for her.

I completely agreed. The flexing, fluttering muscles of her throat made me hungry for more. I kept going and picked up the pace.

Every man enjoyed a good throat-fuck, and I was no exception. It was so raw, so violent, so primal...and in my experience, it was also *rare*. Most women weren't interested in it, and even fewer put in the practice to actually be good at it.

Shayera was an exception to both rules. Her enthusiasm was genuinely shocking; she grew more ravenous the longer I thrust. She clearly wasn't the type to back down from a challenge—*any* challenge—and I was happy to give her what she so obviously wanted. Harder, deeper thrusts with an iron grip on her skull, pushing until her lips neared the base of my shaft or she gagged on my cock...

Given more time, she might have succeeded. But watching, hearing, and *feeling* her gorge on my manhood pushed me to and over the edge so quickly I simply couldn't last.

"*Nngnn!*" I groaned. "Shit! Here it...*oh!*"

I exploded so forcefully I couldn't believe she didn't pull away. She did the exact opposite, shifting both her hands to my thighs to help hold her in place as I fired my load down her throat. She took it all, remaining completely still until she had consumed every drop. I slumped back onto my elbows, drained and overwhelmed.

And that was when the lightshow began. Her eyes were the first clue; they were glowing when they fluttered back open, and a matching blue latticework quickly spread down her neck and arms as if the blood in her veins had turned to azure flame. She withdrew her lips from my cock just before the first spasm racked her body, and I watched, enthralled, as a climax shuddered through her just like back in the bar.

Her grip on my thighs faltered, and she sank back onto her haunches as the vatari crystal dust in her tattoos siphoned the magic from my seed and transformed it into sustenance for her body. As I watched, I couldn't help but wonder how the Avetharri elves had discovered this phenomenon in the first place. Yet given their legendary fetishes, it wasn't difficult to imagine the depravities they must have enjoyed with it.

For my part, I was simply amazed...and extremely aroused. The glint in Shayera's glowing eyes when they refocused on me was ravenous—not in a "come hither" way, but in a "I'm a vampire and I'm going to suck out your soul" kind of way. It still made me hard again, of course—I had never seen Dal'Rethi markings up close, and they were even more hauntingly beautiful than I had imagined.

But then the moment passed, and her eyes went from feral to flirtatious again. She licked at her lips as if searching for any last drop that she might have missed.

"Maiden's mercy," she breathed. "That was *so* good..."

I watched her, transfixed, half convinced that I was simply being outplayed by a more skilled illusionist. She seemed more like a creature out of fantasy than a real woman.

"You need to put him away before I start nibbling again," she said, stroking my cock one last time before she tucked it back into my trousers. "He's dangerous."

She straightened up on her knees and closed her eyes, her tattoos still blazing brightly enough to illuminate the small room more than the lone lantern ever could. It was like she had fallen into a meditative trance after playing with my cock, which under any other circumstance I would have assumed was a performance for my benefit.

But it clearly wasn't. I could see her eyes moving rapidly beneath their painted lids, and the way her chest and breasts heaved with every slow breath was utterly mesmerizing. I prided myself on being a considerate lover; there was nothing more satisfying than watching a woman

lose control of her own body through your efforts. But this wasn't anything like a pair of strong thighs clamping over your face as your tongue lashed a swollen clit. This looked positively transcendental.

And then there was the fact that I hadn't actually *done* anything.

"I didn't even know it was *possible* to feel like this," she murmured deliriously. "Gods, how did the Dal'Rethi ever get anything done?"

"Maybe they didn't," I said. "Maybe the stories are wrong and the Blade Dancers were just a sex cult."

Her still-glowing eyes reopened to fix me with a stare, a wry smile pulling at her lips. By the Aether, it was intoxicating.

"There are sages in Nelu'Thalas who would want to kill you just for suggesting that," she said.

"People in Nelu'Thalas would want to kill me for a lot of reasons, I imagine."

"Very true." She kept her gaze upon me, though it was difficult to tell exactly what she was focusing on with the glow completely eclipsing her irises. "You know, I'm so hot right now that if you weren't an evil Crell spy, I would probably crawl up there and ride you until morning. I'm really curious how different it would feel to feed if you finished inside me."

My cock nearly tore out of my trousers again. How in the bloody void was I supposed to respond to *that*?

"Too bad for you, I guess," she said, her smile turning downright sadistic. "Oh well."

She swept up her bodice as she hopped back to her feet. "I'm going to head downstairs and draw a bath. I feel...sticky."

I leaned up. "Will the innkeeper even let you draw a bath at this hour?"

"He'll let me do anything I want for a crown or two," she said, leaning down to her pack and rifling through it. "If you want to sleep, go right ahead. The bed is more comfortable than it looks."

My eyes flicked to the bed. "Then where are you going to...?"

"Honestly, I don't tend to sleep much, especially after feeding. Besides, I know how men get after they finish. You'll be completely useless for hours."

Shayera straightened holding a gossamer robe and a matching pair of red silken panties. "Besides, I plan on taking my time," she said, winking and gliding toward the door. "I still need to, shall we say, work some things out my own."