

Chapter One

Ria was late. She'd been so absorbed in her reading that she hadn't noticed the time. She ran through the halls of the palace, sending a silent prayer up to the gods that the Council would not be too upset with her for being late to dinner. *Not that they really care if I'm there*, Ria thought as she skidded around a corner, almost knocking into a maid carrying a stack of bedsheets. *But they'll take any opportunity to criticize me.*

She slowed as she came to the doors of the dining chamber and straightened her dress, brushing a smear of dust from her bodice. Ria patted her hair, making sure the dark, unruly locks were still secured in her braid from this morning. Assured that nothing was out of place—or at least, no more out of place than usual—she straightened her back and pushed open the doors.

The dining hall was warmly lit with dozens of candles, but it did little to soften the stern faces of the Council. The three men were seated near the head of the table, only leaving space for where the king and queen would have sat if they'd been present, and they did *not* look happy. Jaya, Ria's older sister, sat next to them, a cruel grin twisting her sharp features into something smug.

“How generous of you to grace us with your presence,” Jaya said. “We were beginning to worry about you.”

Liar. Ria couldn't remember exactly when she started to hate her sister, only that it was some time ago and the feeling was entirely mutual. Sibling rivalries were natural,

their parents said, healthy even. Friendly competition, they called it, except there was nothing friendly about Jaya, and Ria wasn't sure if there ever had been.

"Well?" Jaya's eyes flashed, her dinner knife held almost threateningly towards Ria. Patience had never been Jaya's strong suit. "Don't just stand there. Sit down."

Ria tried to ignore her sister, thankful for the dim candlelight and her dark complexion, both of which hid the unwelcome heat that had risen to her cheeks. Anytime Jaya graced Ria with her attention, it was only to find fault in her, and though Ria really should have been used to it after nineteen years, Jaya always knew just how to get under her skin. It didn't help that the Council seemed content to pretend that nothing was amiss between the sisters; they'd never once bothered to come to Ria's defense.

Ria settled down in the seat directly across from her sister, ignoring the impatient sighs coming from her and the Council. The slight weight of a hand, warm through the thin sea-silk of her dress, rested on her right knee, and she relaxed against it. Mikhael. His face was a mask of polite disinterest, and he didn't so much as glance in her direction, but underneath the table his thumb rubbed feather-light circles into her leg. It was no wonder he'd sensed her tension; after three years of engagement, there was very little that passed unnoticed between them.

He was the only person Ria could count on, the only person who disliked Jaya almost as much as Ria did. *Just a little longer*, Ria thought, allowing herself to focus on Mikhael's soothing, steady presence. They would be married in a matter of weeks, and then she would leave Helhath forever to go rule in Anor with him. She would never have to see Jaya or the Council again. She would be free.

"As we were saying," one of the Councilmen, Vili, said, lip curling as he glared pointedly at Ria, "the Pesh have reached out to see if we would be amenable to reopening trade with them."

He was the eldest on the Council by a good fifteen years, and he wore a stark white turban that matched his thinning beard. *Tradition*, he'd claimed years back when Ria asked him why he was the only person on the Council to wear a turban. Ria suspected

that, in truth, Vili was simply balding and wished to keep it a secret from the two younger Councilmen.

Slow and blurred, like trying to listen to a conversation underwater, a memory surfaced in Ria's mind of a much younger Jaya holding her by the hand as they snuck into the Council's meeting chamber. It was gone in an instant, and like so many of Ria's early memories, she wasn't sure if it was real or not. At times, she thought she recalled playing in the garden with Jaya, happy. But maybe that was the time Jaya convinced her to pick up a poisonous snake, resulting in a nearly fatal bite. And did Jaya pull her out of the frozen river when Ria was only six, or had she pushed Ria in?

It doesn't matter now, Ria thought, her eyes drifting towards Jaya once again. They'd been enemies too long. If there had ever been any love between them, it could never be recovered.

Vili was still talking, albeit more vehemently now. "We have not traded with Pesh for two hundred years, and we won't trade with those land-hungry bastards any time in the next two hundred. Not on my life."

Ria resisted the overwhelming urge to roll her eyes. For a man who looked like he should have died yesterday, Vili was always swearing on his life. She had no idea of his true age, but he'd been an old man even in her childhood. She didn't expect he'd be alive to enforce an embargo against Pesh for two more years, let alone two hundred.

"You're right, of course," a new voice said, this one clear and uninhibited by age. Ria knew it immediately; Lord Izan was a high-ranking noble who had the unfortunate burden of being Jaya's fiancé. Ria might've pitied him if she didn't think that he was just as cruel as Jaya and twice as subtle. They probably deserved each other. "Pesh won't settle for a trade deal. We open our ports to them, and the next thing you know, Helhath will cease to exist. They've wanted our land for centuries. We'd be fools to assume that's changed."

"Pesh doesn't have a navy big enough to challenge us by sea," Ria said, unable to stop herself.

Silence fell over the room, every pair of eyes trained on her. Ria swallowed. *I shouldn't have said anything. Why did I say something?*

“Because you know so much about fighting,” Jaya said, eyes dark and sharp. “Remind us, Ria, how are your sparring lessons going?”

She paused, and Ria narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, that’s right,” Jaya continued. “You quit them. To pursue—how did you phrase it—a more intellectual education.”

“Swinging a sword around has nothing to do with whether or not Pesh has a competent navy,” Ria said. “Which you would know if you bothered to read once in a while.”

“How dare you—”

“Honoriam,” Vili said, cutting Jaya off with his stern, rasping voice. Under his scrutinizing gaze, Ria was a small child again. And children did not speak at dinner. “I hardly think you know enough about our history—”

Ria clenched her fists under the table while Mikhael’s grip on her knee tightened. How dare he talk as if she hadn’t been studying every day with the Elder Scholar for the past three years? As though she wasn’t just as well-versed as any of the Councilmen in strategy, international relations, or her own country’s history. As though she was just a little girl playing pretend at the adults’ table.

But Lord Izan held up his hand. “Let the princess speak.” She didn’t think she imagined the condescension in his tone or the half-sneer pulling at his lips. “Since she knows so much about trade politics. What would you do, your highness?”

She swallowed and focused on the feel of Mikhael’s hand on her knee. His grip was bruising, but it grounded her.

“Pesh has many valuable resources,” she said, wetting her lips. “We trade with Etheri to get these resources, but we pay nearly twice as much because the middle men take their cut. Dealing directly with Pesh would be more economically efficient.”

“Possibly,” Lord Izan said, squinting at her. His eyes reminded her of a shark: cold and predatory. “But you fail to account for our long history with the Pesh. It’s not just about numbers.”

“A hundred years is a long time. Perhaps they are ready to let the past be,” Ria countered, gritting her teeth. “I do not disagree with your caution, Lord Izan, but we would be foolish to outright refuse peace negotiations.”

Before Izan could respond, another of the councilmen, Nasir, cleared his throat. Despite his relative youth—his dark hair untouched by gray, his skin unwrinkled—he had a commanding presence that rivaled that of the senior councilmen. Everyone’s attention shifted to him.

“Princess Honoria has perhaps forgotten that she is learning to manage the politics of Anor, which are more prone to taking such...risks,” he said almost lazily. He offered a tight smile to Mikhael. “Helhath is not Anor.”

“No,” Mikhael agreed. His lips were pulled into an imitation of Nasir’s, but his eyes were alight, sharp. “In Anor, we don’t continue to fear our enemies after we’ve defeated them.”

The men at the table erupted into a heated argument, each one yelling louder and louder in an attempt to be heard over the ruckus. Ria gulped down the contents of her goblet. *If only you’d kept quiet*, she reprimanded herself.

She met Jaya’s eyes across the table. The older girl sneered at her. *Look what you’ve done*, Jaya’s eyes seemed to say. *You ruin everything*.

Ria’s chair scraped against the stone floor as she stood, but the sound was lost to the clamor of the argument raging on around her. No one but Jaya saw her flee the dining hall.

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The room was dark, lit only by the faintest sliver of moonlight through her window, and silent except for the soft hush of her breath. Ria hadn't been able to sleep. The ordeal from dinner was playing on a cycle in her head as if a travelling troupe had rolled into town, but they only knew one scene from one tragedy, and they insisted on performing all night. At least with the travelling troupes, you could pay them to leave. This? This she was stuck with.

Tap. The sound was loud enough to interrupt her thoughts. A brief pause. *Tap.* *Tap.* Another pause. *Tap.*

Ria slipped out of bed and crept towards her door. It was late, far past the time they usually met, and she was grateful, not for the first time, that her chambermaid Sofi had taken to spending the darkest part of night with the butcher's son instead of sleeping next to Ria like she was supposed to.

She cracked open the door, squinting against the sudden brightness of the well-lit hallway. Mikhael stood in her doorway, tall, and pale, and golden, still dressed in his dinner clothes. She grabbed him by the arm and tugged him inside. Engaged or not, if anyone saw him standing outside her door at this hour, there would be rumors. Only some of them would be untrue.

"I wasn't expecting you," she confessed as she closed the door behind them. After the spectacle at dinner, she was frankly surprised that he wanted to see her at all. She still couldn't believe that she'd argued with the Council. And in public too. She was afraid to look up at him, afraid to see if he was cross with her, or worse, embarrassed by her.

His hands, eternally warm despite Helhath's frigid winter, cradled her face, tilting it up so that she could meet his eyes. Despite the dim light of the room, Ria still marveled at their color: pale, green-gray like smooth sea-glass. He was handsome in a severe, icy way. Everything about him was crisp from his defined jaw to his eyebrows, his high cheekbones to his mouth. The only imperfection, if it could be called that, was his nose, slightly crooked from being broken once when he was younger.

"I can leave, if you prefer." Mikhael's thumb brushed over the small, dark mole under her left eye. She leaned into his touch, eyes fluttering closed for a second.

“Stay for a moment,” she breathed. “Please.”

He hummed in response and brushed a strand of her thick, black hair behind her ear. His hand lingered, winding the strand around his forefinger, then unwinding it and starting again. He was quieter than usual, more pensive. Any other night, the silence would have soothed her, but now she could barely stand it.

“I’m sorry,” she said, cursing internally as her voice cracked. Mikhael despised weakness, and though he could calm her nerves and offer her reassurance, his patience had limits. “For dinner. I didn’t mean to start a commotion.”

His mouth curved into a small, rare smile. “I started the commotion. Or that idiot Nasir. Not you.”

“But he was right! Why would I know better than the Council? I shouldn’t have said anything—”

“You,” he said, suddenly serious, “are going to be my wife. When you sit by my side, no one will dare to silence you.”

Mikhael leaned down, closing the short distance between them to brush their lips together. It was soft, lighter than a southern breeze, and just a few seconds too long to be completely innocent. Ria felt the warmth rush to her cheeks as she leaned towards him. It seemed a miracle that he’d chosen her, she thought. Everyone always wanted Jaya. Jaya who was strong, who could fight as well as any man, who commanded attention whenever she walked into the room. There was nothing gentle about Jaya; she was all lean muscle and sharp features. Ria felt unbearably soft in comparison. Breakable. Inadequate.

But never with Mikhael. He pulled back from the kiss slowly.

“I should go,” he murmured, still close enough that his breath was warm on her face. Ria nodded, unable to form the appropriate words. He smiled as he stepped back from her, catching her hand in his. His eyes searched hers, caught somewhere between serious and teasing.

“If I wanted a quiet wife, Ria, I would have picked someone else.”

And then he brought her hand up to kiss the back of her knuckles. Ria's own skin was dark like aged bronze, and next to her Mikhael looked nearly translucent, like some sort of apparition. He was quiet like one too, and quick, and he slipped away without a sound, leaving her alone in the dark room which suddenly felt much larger than it had before. Only the tingling on the back of her hand where his lips had touched reminded her that he had been there at all.

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Her hair was not cooperating. She had tried everything: washing it, brushing, braiding it. It didn't matter; the black mass was relentlessly frizzy and uncontrollable. *This is mutiny*, Ria thought in disgust. There was only one solution: she'd have to cut it all off.

She made it halfway to the scissors on her table before Sofi came up behind her and slapped her hand away.

"And ruin your pretty hair?" the curvier girl admonished, shaking her head. She ran her nimble fingers through Ria's hair, detangling it as she went. If Ria didn't know better, she'd have sworn it was magic. "What would your prince say?"

Ria's fingers tapped against her collarbone, and she relaxed into the quiet patter of skin against skin. "Maybe he would say a queen can do whatever she wants with her hair." In the reflection in the mirror, Ria saw Sofi's lips twitch into a smile.

"Then—" Sofi gave Ria's hair a sharp tug, forcing it to bend to her will "—as you are not yet a queen, you'll keep away from those scissors."

Ria scowled but kept quiet as Sofi pulled her hair into a painfully tight braid. At least it was manageable like this and out of the way. Even if it did make her head hurt.

"There," Sofi said, standing back to admire her handiwork with a satisfied smile. She placed her hands firmly on the princess's shoulders and gave her a light push, guiding her towards the door. "Now go before you're late for your lessons."

“But breakfast,” Ria complained, her stomach grumbling.

Sofi gave her a knowing look. “If you’d woken up at a reasonable time, you wouldn’t have missed it.” She opened the door and practically pushed Ria through it. “Get.”

Ria stumbled out into the hallway, directly into the path of two councilmen deep in conversation. Their heads were bent together, whispering and not at all paying attention to their surroundings. Ria didn’t see them until she turned from the door and found herself reeling backwards to avoid being trampled by them. A tanned hand shot out and grabbed her by the elbow to steady her.

Nasir’s face was the pinnacle of concern. “Are you alright, princess?”

She tried to suppress her involuntary revulsion at his hand on her arm and removed herself from him as quickly as was polite. “Quite.”

“Our *princesza* is still clumsy, I see,” the other man said with a chuckle. Ria smiled at him. Out of the three Council members, Paavo was the only one who still called her *princesza*—little princess. He had always been her favorite, almost like a grandfather. The wrinkles around his eyes crinkled in amusement. “Don’t you have lessons with the Elder Scholar, Ria?”

“Yes, sir.” She bowed her head slightly to him. “Excuse me.”

As soon as the councilmen were around the corner, she ran through the hall and up the flight of stairs. It was inelegant to run in the palace, or so they’d been telling her, but even at a sprint, she slid through the library doors barely a minute before her lesson time. She was getting out of shape, she thought as she leaned against a bookshelf gasping for air. Since her engagement at sixteen, she hadn’t been required to attend the sparring sessions Jaya was subjected to. Instead, she was encouraged to pursue diplomatic studies with the Elder Scholar. Ria couldn’t say that she missed her daily humiliation at Jaya’s hands or the bruises that came with it, but even so, she had to admit that perhaps it would have been wise to keep up some sort of exercise routine.

Now that her pulse felt normal and she could hear past the sounds of her ragged breath, Ria noticed how quiet the library was, how still. Not that it wasn’t always blissfully

void of annoying court chatter, but this was different. It was like time itself had stopped. Even the air felt immovable, heavy with a bitter, burnt smell that lodged itself in her nostrils. Ria scrunched her nose and tried to dispel the unease in her gut, tried to ignore the way her every sense screamed that there was something wrong.

“Master Ameer?” she called, glancing around. The Elder Scholar was usually waiting by the door to reprimand her for being late, but the library seemed as empty as ever.

A pained howl came from the other end of the library, raising the hairs on Ria’s arms. She jumped at the sound, stomach roiling. *Could the Elder Scholar have been attacked? Were there thieves in the library? Or worse, assassins? Pesh mercenaries?* Unbidden, a memory rose to the forefront of her mind. She had been twelve, standing in the town square, watching a man’s head roll off the platform, the rest of his body still twitching. He’d tried to kill Jaya. She remembered wishing he hadn’t been caught.

Despite her fears, her feet moved towards the sound. Logically, she knew it was reckless; she was unarmed and walking into an unknown situation. A part of her also knew she might be overreacting. Maybe it was nothing dangerous at all, and the Elder Scholar had simply fallen off a ladder. But still, her mind kept returning to the image of the assassin in the town square. *He managed to infiltrate the palace, Ria thought. So could someone else.*

Ria knew she was getting close when she heard a string of muttered curses coming from the next aisle over. She tried to remember something, anything, from her combat training, but even though she could recall strategic techniques and the proper way to throw a punch, she wasn’t sure her muscles would remember how to move. Three years was a long time to go without any physical training, and she hadn’t ever been a stellar fighter to begin with. She looked around, eyes scanning the shelves until she found a hefty tome twice the size of her head. She picked it up, heavy though it was, and held it at the ready in case some villain really was lurking around the corner.

She peered around the corner of the shelf, holding her breath. There, in the middle of the aisle, a narrow figure cloaked in black knelt, head bowed. An old fear clawed its way

up Ria's throat: a demon spirit. She dismissed the thought immediately. Demon spirits were the monsters of bedtime stories, crafted by old nursemaids to scare children into behaving. Still, Ria remembered the stillness in the library when she first entered, the unpleasant scent that triggered a jolt of fear, and some small voice in the back of her mind whispered, *magic*. She raised the book in her hands as if she might strike down a mythical being with nothing more than leather-bound paper.

"Wax," the cloaked figure exclaimed in despair, raising a book of his own skyward like an offering to the gods. "Wax on a four-hundred-year-old book! Have they no respect?"

Ria lowered the painfully heavy tome in her hands, nearly groaning at the relief in her arm muscles, and silently chastised herself for being so jumpy. No thieves, or murderers, or demons. Just the Elder Scholar. *I should've known*. The older man had always been a bit of a kook. She'd been studying under him for three years now, and while the man was undoubtedly brilliant, Ria sometimes wondered what really went on in his head.

She must have made some sound because the cloaked figure suddenly bolted upright and turned to glare at Ria. His eyes often unsettled her: one so dark it was almost black, the other covered in a white film. He was completely bald—even though he couldn't have been much older than her own father—and currently giving her his most unimpressed look.

"Were you going to strike me with that book?" he asked. He snatched it from her hands as if it weighed nothing. He caressed the spine of it for a moment before glaring back up at her. "You're late."

"I was on time," she argued automatically. He raised a brow, but she didn't back down. "You're the one who wasn't ready to start lessons."

He hummed noncommittally, eyes glassing over for a moment. Ria suppressed a sigh. The Elder Scholar had a habit of losing focus from time to time, and Ria had learned that when he got like this, there was nothing she could do to snap him out of it. Initially,

it had been frustrating that her lessons were periodically disturbed by his absentmindedness, but she'd grown used to it after a time.

"I think I'm in need of a bit of fresh air," Master Ameer said suddenly, eyes snapping back into focus.

"Fresh air," Ria repeated incredulously. This, coming from the man who sometimes wouldn't even leave the library to eat. She could count the times the Elder Scholar had held lessons outside of the library on one hand.

"Some things must be seen in person," he said cryptically.

And with that, he turned on his heel, striding towards the library doors without waiting to see if Ria would follow. She hurried to catch up. It was no use trying to wring an explanation from the man; he subscribed to the irritating belief that knowledge gained by oneself was far more useful than merely being told the answer. She would have to wait and see for herself.

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"What do you know about trade ships?" The Elder Scholar's voice was low, conversational, as they walked side by side. The hoods of their cloaks were drawn low over their faces, and not just to protect from the wind. They were walking through the docks unescorted. The less conspicuous they were, the better.

"They ferry goods between nations and are used to help support international alliances," Ria said. She wasn't sure why they were at the docks, strolling and having what seemed to be an impromptu lesson without the benefit of the royal guard. If the Elder Scholar thought Ria could protect them from any of the thugs that loitered in this part of town, he clearly hadn't been paying attention.

The older man sighed, impatient. "I didn't ask for a recitation of your texts. I know you can read. I want to know if you can think. What are the implications?"

She was growing frustrated. How could he expect her to have the answer he was looking for if he wasn't even being clear with his questions?

"They're some of the most heavily armed ships, second only to naval vessels, due to frequent pirate attacks," she said, though the Elder Scholar's unchanged expression told her that she still wasn't getting it right. She hurried on, "And I know they're subject to random searches to avoid importation of illegal products."

"Yes, the *imports* are subject to random searches." There was a trace of a smile on the Elder Scholar's face, but it was gone the next moment. "And where do these trade ships go? Who sails them?"

She frowned. "Etheri and Anor, primarily, though we do some trade with Moruna, and occasionally Rüm Bokai." She paused for a moment, thinking. "I don't know who sails them."

The Elder Scholar hummed in response.

Ria was tired of his cryptic silence. "I'm afraid I don't understand the implications, as you say. What am I supposed to be learning?"

For a few seconds, it seemed he wouldn't bother answering.

"Things in Helhath are...shifting," he said as he stared at the sea ahead of them, deep in thought. Ria often wondered how it was the Elder Scholar knew the things he did.

Suddenly, he clasped her hand, eyes going wide and distant. She tried to pull away, but his grip was immovable. "Death rises with the full moon," he said, his voice taking on a rhythmic quality. "Beware the usurper with nothing to lose. Beware the usurper with everything to gain. Beware the price that must be paid."

Ria tore her hand from his iron grasp, backing away. Fear gripped her, heavy and metallic on her tongue, tight in her chest. She watched the older man warily. *He's insane*, she thought, but the air smelled singed just as it had been in the library, and her nose ached from it. *Magic*, a small voice in her head provided, but she squashed it. Magic belonged in bedtime stories and old wives' tales. She thought of Mikhael, her pillar of reason, and how he scoffed at the idea of magic as anything more than primitive hogwash.

“Really, Ria? Magical trees?” he’d said when she’d first told him about the sacred Whitewood. He’d laughed at her. “What’s next? The sun is a god, and stars are actually fairies?”

She hadn’t tried to explain to him that the sun was a symbol of one of her people’s gods. There were no gods in Anor; he wouldn’t have understood. At the time, she’d felt silly, stupid even. Now, she used the memory as reassurance. There was no such thing as magic.

The Elder Scholar shook off whatever stupor he had been in, frowning in thought. “You’ll have to forgive an old man, Ria. I’ve forgotten what we were talking about.”

She swallowed back her fear. “Trade ships.” She looked around at the boats, the bustle of the docks. No one else seemed to have noticed the Elder Scholar’s outburst. “Why did we come to the harbor?”

Master Ameer let out a deep sigh. “I’d rather hoped you would take an interest in sailing.”

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They walked for nearly two hours, back and forth and back again along the docks until, by some unknown sign, the Elder Scholar changed their path and took them down a side alley.

“I think we ought to get a drink now,” he said as they approached a rather shoddily put together tavern. The sign hanging above the door was crooked and the greenish-blue paint was peeling, but Ria could still make out the words, *The Sunken Reef*. It looked like the place you’d go if you *wanted* to get murdered.

“But—”

He silenced her with a look. “Don’t speak while we’re here. It’ll only take a few moments.”

She frowned but nodded. *You've been studying under him for three years*, she told herself. *He's not going to lead you to your death now. Probably.*

The inside of the tavern looked even worse than the outside, although how *that* was possible, Ria didn't know. The whole place reeked of ale, smoke, and sweat, and if she wasn't mistaken, one of the patrons was taking a piss in the corner. She wrinkled her nose. *Classy.*

The Elder Scholar, however, was entirely unfazed by the stench and the fact that nothing looked like it had been properly cleaned in a good half a century. *And is that a bloodstain*, Ria wondered as she caught a glimpse of a large dark brown splotch on the wood floorboards. She followed the older man as he weaved through the crowded tables without giving any of the patrons a second look. No, the Elder Scholar was solely focused on one table at the far side of the tavern.

There were five figures at the table, all cloaked, all with their faces hidden except one. The man was...well there was no better word for him than *spirited*. He was a blur of motion, even sitting in his chair. In his hands, he shuffled a deck of cards so fast that Ria almost thought they weren't moving. It was a round table, but somehow, he seemed at the center of it, with the other four patrons almost subconsciously leaning towards him.

She could understand why, of course. Even without his bizarre magnetism, he was astoundingly pretty with artful waves of chestnut hair and brown eyes that were so light they could've been called golden. They were framed by dark lashes and rimmed in black kohl which almost made him look a little feminine despite the scruff of week-old stubble on his face. His shirt was pristine white—a sharp contrast to the grimy environment—and loose enough that she could see a flash of his darkly tanned chest. He couldn't have been more than thirty, his face unlined except for the white slash of an old scar that ran from temple to chin on his left side.

He spotted them a moment later, lips curving into a smile as he stood, waving away the guests at his table. They moved without hesitation, and Ria wondered who this man could be if he commanded that much respect in a dump like this.

“Ameer,” the man said in greeting, clasping the Elder Scholar in a firm hug. He pulled back and his eyes settled on Ria. “And who is this?”

“My niece Ebele,” the Elder Scholar supplied without missing a beat. The other man looked between Ria and Master Ameer before raising a disbelieving brow.

“You never mentioned a niece.”

Ria watched him warily. The man shifted into a subtle fighting stance, one she had seen on Jaya many times. *Usually right before she tossed me in the dirt*, Ria remembered with a grimace.

The Elder Scholar met the other man’s gaze, unimpressed. “I’m sure there are a great many things I’ve never mentioned to you, Siraj.”

Siraj’s smile only sharpened. “And yet I’m sure you said this meeting was private.”

“It is.”

“It isn’t.” Siraj’s eyes snapped back to Ria. “Not with her here.”

Ria narrowed her eyes at him. Whatever business the Elder Scholar was conducting with this man couldn’t possibly be legal if this Siraj character was so paranoid. But what could Master Ameer need from a criminal? He had the palace’s resources at his disposal; he could, theoretically, get anything he wanted—illegal or not—without repercussions. Unless...*unless he doesn’t want anyone to know*, she realized. But why hide it? Ria couldn’t think of a reason for the Elder Scholar to sneak around unless he was up to something that would threaten either the Council or the crown.

Don’t be stupid. If it was treason, he wouldn’t have invited you along, you twit. So not treason, then, but what?

“I’ll remind you that it’s my life and reputation on the line here, Siraj, not yours.” The Elder Scholar took a seat at the table and motioned for the other man to do the same. “You have nothing to fear from my niece. Or me, for that matter.”

Siraj grumbled, but sat across from Master Ameer anyway, easily relaxing back into the position he’d been in when they first entered the tavern. Ria wasn’t sure if she should

sit too, or if that would make things worse. The last thing she wanted was to set the other man off again.

It didn't seem to matter. Both men had forgotten her, lost in their transaction. Ria watched as the Elder Scholar pulled a small leather pouch from his robes along with a sealed letter. He slid them across the table.

"Before you ask, yes, your cut is in there too," the Elder Scholar said. Siraj looked down at the seal on the letter and let out a low whistle.

"You said easy. This is not easy."

"For a man of your talents, I expect you'll manage." Master Ameer reached out and grabbed the other man by the wrist. "By the end of the month. Maybe sooner."

Siraj, for the first time since they'd walked into the tavern, actually looked serious. "You've seen something." He looked back down at the letter and shook his head. "It'll be tight. Very tight. I assume you need the works?"

"Everything. And someone you trust personally. For the transport. I won't take any risks on this."

Siraj snorted. "This whole thing is a risk."

"But you'll do it?"

"Not my life on the line, my ass," he grumbled, mostly to himself. He held the letter up and Ria could see the vague imprint of the royal seal. "I could get killed just for having this."

"Then you'd better not let anyone see." The Elder Scholar stood and brushed dirt from his cloak. "Until next time, Siraj."

Master Ameer laid a heavy arm across Ria's shoulders and began guiding her out of the tavern.

"I haven't taken the job yet," Siraj called.

The Elder Scholar looked over his shoulder at the other man, a small smile on his lips. “Yes, you have.”

Only when they were back out by the harbor and halfway back to the palace did Ria feel safe in talking again.

“Who was that man?” she asked. “What did you give him? Why did you take me with you? Why did you pretend I was your niece?”

The Elder Scholar didn’t falter, just kept walking forward.

“Siraj is...more trusting of people he’s met before. I needed to introduce you, just in case.”

Ria frowned. *Just in case of what*, she wanted to ask, but somehow, she knew he wouldn’t give her a straight answer. Whatever it was, it couldn’t be good, not with the Elder Scholar sneaking about and dealing with tavern trash. If he didn’t want anyone in the palace to know about it, it must be serious, and if he thought Ria would need this Siraj’s help...well, that didn’t bode well.

“What did he mean when he said you saw something?” she asked, though she was sure she already knew. His words on the docks from earlier rang in her head. Magic. Almost like a prophecy.

“I have been wrong before, Ria. It’s best not to worry about futures that may not happen. Our business today was a safety measure. Nothing more.”