

CHAPTER ONE

A bright pain shot into my head as I came conscious. Daggers of sunlight stabbed through my eyes, and there was a thundering roar in my head. I considered rolling over, but just then I wasn't sure I could remember how. A shadow crossed my face.

"Ohh, don't move." Whether I was talking to myself or the shade didn't seem important, but both were good advice. I tried to open an eye to see the shadow-caster and instantly regretted moving.

"Maybe you shouldn't move," said a voice from above me.

I groaned and held both eyes shut until the world stopped spinning. I gladly embraced the stillness.

"Hey." The voice was a lilting feminine alto, and I found myself listening to its notes more than its words. "You need help?" A stab in my side jerked me awake again.

"Stop that," I told the stick that kept intruding on my personal space. I batted at it, but it evaded my grip and poked me again.

This time, I opened both eyes. When my eyes focused, it became much clearer that my antagonist was not a stick, at least not directly. It was, in fact, a girl about my age—seventeen or so—wielding said stick. She stood between me and the sun. It was hard to make out her face, but her hair was a dark braid that hung to her waist. Even slightly concussed, I found her appearance striking.

She sat perched on a boulder, one leg tucked under her. The other rested out in front, showing off brown leather boots that fitted closely around her calves. Scarves and wraps decorated her wherever they could fit. She had dark gray ones affixed to each wrist, two at her waist—one blue, one gold—a bright red one holding back her hair, a black one tucked into each boot, and one small scrap of fraying red fabric tied around her left forearm.

But more than the scarves, what caught my attention was the sunlight glinting from the jeweled hilts of what I could only assume were daggers. Three straight sheaths of increasing sizes hung from her belt. Another glittering pommel peaked from the cuff of her boot. I thought I saw one tucked into her wrist wrap as well, but I couldn't have been sure.

I looked up at the girl I could only presume at this point had to be some new breed of beach-dwelling swashbuckler. I really should have been wondering if this was a rescue or something else, but she seemed nice.

She poked me again. "You dead?"

"I hurt too much to be dead."

"Oh good. Death is so messy. What happened to you?"

I watched the clouds shift and change shape. My mind was wandering, which I knew was a bad sign, but I couldn't keep focus. I didn't really feel like talking, anyway. The roar in my ears was deafening. It kept moving up on me then receding, like... waves?

I noticed I was talking. "... murderous idiot. I'll never understand some people." I think I knew what I was talking about, but I couldn't be sure. Guess I should have been paying attention.

"Well, come along, miss. Let's get you dry at least."

"Dry?"

She shrugged and moved to help me stand. It was more of a challenge than either of us was expecting, since it turned out I had both height and weight on her. Being stoutly made was an advantage I was glad of in most cases, but right now, it was proving a hindrance. Still, I found my stumbling way to a sturdy rock.

Now sitting, I at least had a more prominent view of the beach. *Oh, waves*, I thought, mesmerized by my incredible vantage of not lying half-in the surf. *That makes sense.*

Vague memories started coming back to me of the night before. Krellen's face, thinking I'd betrayed him. Fleeing down the dark alleyways of the Rat's Nest. Tavers' barking orders at his two muscled goons.

Running...

Falling...

Nothing.

I didn't recognize the area where I'd landed, but it could have been anywhere south of the harbor. My companion was waiting patiently for me to get my bearings, just watching me. I wasn't sure why she was still around, but I was grateful.

"I'm Tianna." My hand trembled slightly as I held it out to her.

Her grip was firm but friendly. "Kaelyn Féanaro."

"Féanaro?" I repeated, turning it into a question by the end. "Interesting name."

"I'm not from around here," she explained.

I laughed, sort of. My ribs ached and laughing hurt, so I didn't over-do it. It was an odd name, musical and somehow foreign. Southern Lugaian maybe? Or eastern Epirsan? The isles were plenty diverse, and we saw folks from all over, but it didn't stand out as ethnically anything.

"Well, you must be new to Wellsmith, then. We don't care where you're from, so long as you don't plan on staying."

She offered a light chuckle in reply.

I took a second to catch my breath before addressing my new acquaintance again. “So, Kaelyn, do you make it a habit of rescuing scraps of people you find on the beach, or is this an unusual day for you?”

“It’s not every day you get a chance to rescue a damsel in distress,” she said with a cheeky grin.

I started to object at her epithet. There was very little damsel about me, though it was hard to argue the distress part. I croaked out something vaguely resembling a sound as my throat refused to work, so I just coughed instead.

“Actually,” she went on more sincerely, “You looked like you could use the help, and... well, maybe you can help me, too.”

I cocked my head, but stopped myself at the last minute for fear it would fall off my neck if I tried. Instead, I closed my eyes and made a roughly inquiring sound. “Uhhuhmmh?” I asked articulately.

“What happened to you?” she asked, almost as if she didn’t want to know the answer.

“Ah, well...” I started, but a moment of clarity gave me pause before I answered. Why was I even talking to this person? I mean, she was clearly not a farmer, and I think I’ve only ever met a less likely priest once. All I knew about this person was that she wasn’t an isler like me. Or at least, not one from this island. Yet, somehow, she was eliciting my trust against my will. “That’s a long story.”

“Well, I’ve got time,” she said. “I really wasn’t doing anything when I happened upon your corpse. I just landed, and I don’t plan on staying here long, but as luck would have it, I met you first.”

“Huh,” I said. “Luck. Right.” Luck and I have always had a somewhat complicated history. Right then, I wasn’t sure I trusted it to be good.

“Come on,” she said. “I’m starving and you need to get out of this sun, at least. Let’s get you dry and patched up. We can trade long stories over lunch.”

I should have just said no and been done with it, but there was a twinkling in her eye that sparked something in me.

Hot pain cut through my shoulder as she hoisted me up off the rock. I wobbled as I stood, but kept my feet.

She walked down the beach, setting a brisk pace. I followed more gingerly, watching the scenery pass in tree- and rock-shaped blurs that refused to register as landscape. She noticed and slowed, waiting for me.

I tried not to think about how hard I must have hit my head. Not that I had many thoughts at all.

If I had any of my mind left, I would have stopped to wonder why this perfect stranger had stopped to help me. I might have asked who she was or where she had come from. I might have been asking myself what it was she wanted from me. Perhaps even, had I been thinking, I would have realized that we were walking back toward the place I was trying to flee just the night before.

But I didn’t. I just dutifully followed, wondering if maybe I wasn’t still sleeping.

