

# The Moon Outlived the Sun

By : EJRylee

Risa had only ever wanted to take care of her little brother Kalauda and her mother and father; but the Justice, who has ruled over her from the time she was a small child, forbid her from doing so. After horrible act committed by the ruthless Kalpan tribe from the north separates her from her family, she claims to be the Justice she once served in order to sneak into their mountain and take revenge upon them. But some rather unexpected circumstances may end up preventing her from following through with the one final duty that she had to her family... NOTE: You might've realized by now that I start every other chapter with a similar sentence...this is because I have cut the original chapters in two so it isn't too much to read at once. (Ex. The original Chapter One is actually Chapters One and Two on this site, put together :P) There is a method to my madness...so if you've noticed it, that's the reason :)



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## The Moon Outlived the Sun : Chapter 1

Risa had never seen the moon before.

And she couldn't picture it either, though they told her of it as often as she asked. They spoke of it at times as though it lived; often of the way it moved across the sky, or of its ability to curl in upon itself, so that sometimes it was just a curved line. They told her of its origins as well; legends of how it tore itself from the sun for the love of the night, only to be cursed for its defiance by the ugly black spots that dimmed what little light it managed to shed. But the moon had outlived the sun, they said, which was an accomplishment of its own--even if only for a time.

And with their descriptions almost always came the remarks of how she mustn't worry that she had never seen it before; for it was only an imitation, a mere reflection of the sun.

But their words, (or dissuasions, as Kalauda often called them), never helped. It was like trying to put words a color for a blind man. She could never hope to conceive of it.

But despite her constant questions and insatiable curiosity, Risa's greatest wish was not to see the moon. It had never been.

Her only dream was to someday escape the person who had stolen the night from her, forcing her to live out her days in sweat and humidity like only the town of Maura could provide. Reihem--her beautiful, bottle-green mountain--never would've been like this. How could she possibly be expected to withstand such a transition, from Reihem to Kor? How could anyone?

But the final words of leaders killed on the battlefield were not ones to change, and it was common knowledge among the people that selfish complaints were a loss of pride; so Risa kept such comments to herself as well, at least in public.

But whenever she was alone, or with Hime, she would complain. She loved to rant about the sun and how hot it was, how it made her skin turn scratchy and swollen so that it eventually peeled right off and how it fried the food they planted, making it tasteless and dry; she loved whining almost more than anything else and since there was an awful lot to complain about, it often occupied her long and uneventful days on Kor.

(Pride was of no concern to Risa anyway; and anyone in her situation would soon realize that such a lofty trait was unattainable from any position in likeness to hers. But it was much more comfortable this way, Risa told herself, as it wasn't nearly as formal or tense; so she had learned rather quickly not to mind.)

Aside from her complaining, which often grew tiring after awhile, the only other distractions she had were the stories she often made up, tales of princes who lived somewhere far from Maura.

They were usually quite handsome too; they would whisk her away on particularly hot afternoons, to palaces simply teeming with ice and cool water. They would hold her trembling hands outside on the terrace, where dozens of plump green plants grew instead of the forsaken dead things that crept in the desert; and he (or whoever he was at the moment) would smile at her ever so softly. And she would smile in return, if only she could muster up the courage to; and he would hold her there in the moonlight, the blessed and cool moonlight, where she would finally be free of the sun.

But the chances of that ever happening were slim; Hime told her so every time she got the chance.

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"He'd probably die of heatstroke before ever reaching you," she'd sniff, thrusting her thin sharp nose into the air as she stared off at the distance with misted and squinty eyes. "And, if possible, in front of you as well! His dying breath but a whisper--oh! Except you couldn't catch what he said--and the light is fading quickly from his frightened eyes--wouldn't that be simply tragic?"

And, after clutching her hands dramatically to her chest with an overly exaggerated sigh, she would whisk off to sob over another awful story that tugged at her ever-so-tender heartstrings.

Hime, Hime Lumina. That was the name of the girl who had chained her to the sun. The dead Justice's daughter, the honorable and noble-blooded Hime. Last in a royal line that had survived for almost a thousand years. Fitting, that her name means 'princess'.

It was simply a pity that no one ever pronounced it right.

"Good day, High-mee," someone outside of the tent would say, and Risa would snort in the corner.

"As if Ree-suh is so much more dignified," Hime would retort, enunciating the commoner's name with a pretentious flair. "Laughter, that's all it means. What's so good about that then, hmm?"

"It sure is better than being laughed at, Lady High-mee."

Hime would then squint at Risa, and not her usual squint either, but a cold and calculating one, which Risa had soon learned was to forewarn beholders that whatever objects were within her reach were soon to go flying in their general direction. Hime was of course a very lovely name, when spoken correctly.

"Hee-may," she'd sing to herself from inside her tent each day, hoping the others would hear.

They never did.

In all honesty, no one in the town paid much attention to her at all, even though they knew she was to be their next Justice. But then again, no one ever pays much attention to someone that they never see.

There is a time before becoming a full-fledged wielder of that feared and holy magic that one must spend their time in solitude, to focus solely upon growing as a human. This is generally referred to as the Stay, because isolation often means confinement. When the Stay ends, the Justice then becomes required to perform a ceremony known as the Awakening, in which the magic that had lain dormant in the wielder would then be unleashed, and viewed by the public for the very first time.

Of course, Risa had no knowledge of just what this 'holy magic' was; but no matter how her curiosity burned, she never dared to ask--for she knew that Hime would be so very appalled at her ignorance that she wouldn't ever shut up. And then Risa would lose any chance she'd previously had to complain.

Though she had only to suffer her curiosity a little while longer before it could be satisfied. For in a few months time, on her eighteenth birthday, her lady would finally become a real Justice; and then she would no longer need Risa, or her teachers, or anyone else for that matter. She would rule the land solely with her magical powers, and Risa could visit her family on the far side of town whenever she wanted to, and without having to worry about disobeying the Justice's Law of the Stay. She could see the night then too, with all of its wonders. She would be free to do what she pleased.

Unlike now, where she was captive to her work as well as to the Law. Everyone knew that the Justice's desideria would never be allowed such privileges out of free will. Risa was to remain tied to the Law until the

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Awakening, just her the Justice would be.

But despite its iron grip and ceaseless attentions, Risa still had some secrets the Law didn't know about. Her family, though they lived on the far side of Maura, visited her sometimes at night, sneaking her little brother Kalauda into the tent; and he would visit quietly with her while the Justice slept, until it grew lighter again and he had to leave.

Kalauda was perhaps the happiest boy you could ever hope to meet, with a smile that made his bright round face light up with dimples, and a childish grin that was simply contagious. Oftentimes Risa found herself spending their precious few hours together simply trying to stifle their laughter, for fear that Hime would hear them and wake, and send her brother away.

But the Justice never stirred at the sound, not even once; she slept like a dead woman, Kalauda sometimes remarked. It was funny to him that she rested so soundly, when she did next to nothing during the day.

Sometimes Risa wished that Hime would help with her own chores, like any other able-bodied person. It couldn't hurt her--in fact, it would probably do her more good than harm. But it was forbidden by Law for Hime to even step foot outside of the tent before her Stay was over--which was, of course, why she required a desideria. Were it up to Hime though, Risa was sure she'd rather be alone.

The only time Risa ever dared to ask Hime a question, two and a half months ago, had dealt with this subject. It had been Risa's first day as Hime's full time desideria, instead of just as an apprentice in the Palace of Reihem; and while she should have been afraid, or weighted with grief, the Justice was actually quite confused, bordering irritation.

For instead of worrying about her people, who were having a difficult time adjusting to the new and inadequate farmland, or grieving over the very recent loss of both her parents and her brothers, Hime was complaining about how chilly it was, how stuffy and cold, as though entirely ignorant of the fact that the Reihimians were slaving away in the impossible heat; she whined of how the air, recycled by commoners, was horrid for her noble lungs, she shouldn't be breathing it...

"Then why don't you just go outside?" Risa had muttered, too irritated to remember due politeness.

That was perhaps the only time Hime's eyes had opened fully.

"Have you not read the Law? I would have thought you had, as it was required." Her head tilted downward thoughtfully, and a delicate hand was rested upon her chin. "I heard it said once that commoners cannot retain knowledge as we do, and that is why they toil each day with such a pitiful reward. I am wondering now if what was spoken was truth."

Risa swallowed hard. These 'commoners' of Maura were not stupid. It was true that they worked, and for hardly anything at all; but a good sum of their profit had always been 'borrowed' by the leaders, which was why they had never prospered as a country. It had nothing to do with how educated they were (or, in this case, weren't). And what right did she think she had--to mock them, as a thief instead of a ruler?

All the mildest traces of formality were forgotten by this point (if indeed there were any to begin with); and Risa obviously didn't care to remember them.

"Of course I've read it. Everyone has. But we aren't as foolish as you'd like think we are; we understand it for what it was truly meant to be. You see, for while you learned of your people's stupidity, I learned of how our Law was just a bunch of senseless words strung together by lazy officials who used fancy excuses to cover up their thieving ways. And of course, you've proven time and time again for this to be true, so I don't see why I should believe anything else either."

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A flame sparked somewhere behind Hime's eyes; and Risa was sure that much more would've happened had she been given the time to fully comprehend what Risa had said. "You...you little waste! Do you understand nothing at all?" She swept across the room, her many skirts rustling, and turned dramatically to face the wall opposite from where Risa was standing.

"I must abide by the Law, or else forfeit the magic that has been set apart for me since my birth. I am the final Justice, destined for greatness! I must not disgrace the Law, even if it means--" she turned to face Risa, pointing an accusatory finger "--having to live in this place with the likes of you, a filthy Reihem girl! I would rather walk a thousand hot sands than allow myself to be cared for by a lesser...such shame is involved in this Law, such misery upon my part! You people who toil in vain, what will you ever know of how the noble-bloods think, how they feel? How could you possibly hope to comprehend?" Her voice had risen to such a degree that Risa was almost sure the whole town could hear. "How dare you defile my presence with your dirty clothes, your filthy feet, the stench of your unwashed dress? How dare you!?"

"My Lady," Risa said finally, after a particularly long pause in which she had been attempting to control her voice long enough to respond, "do you want your clothing washed or not?"

"You will wash them," Hime smirked, the volume lowering only slightly as she straightened her shoulders, rising vindictively to her full height. "Whether you like it or not. And you will do everything I wish. For the Law is powerful, and will see to it. The Law is on my side alone."

And so it was. For the longer Risa refused to do her work, the more it felt like she couldn't breathe, like an invisible hand was squeezing the air from her neck and lungs. A tight pain would constrict her chest, and Hime told her that she would faint and stay that way unless she began her work. It's taunting grip nagged at her for the remainder of the day, as though it could react again at any second; and it released only at night, when Hime was asleep and could no longer control it. That was how the Law worked; and, being only a larva of the real magic, it sometimes made Risa wonder what the Justice's true position among the people was to be.

But she never asked.

And this was why Risa had never seen the moon before. Hime had forbidden it, saying that 'no commoner should ever be allowed to behold a beauty her superior cannot.' And since the Law was then made to watch the desideria even while it's Justice slept, it would wake and inform Hime if Risa so much as poked a finger out into the night.

And so Kalauda's visits slowly became more and more important to her. She could never visit her family in the day because the delaying of her chores meant Law, and night wasn't even an option; so they'd planned very early on to come to her instead. Hime had never once considered that Risa had a family she wanted to see; and since Risa had never spoken of them to her, it was nothing she could forbid. It wasn't against the Law for Kalauda to visit either, so it never woke Hime; and so long as she remained asleep while they met, their meetings were secure.

Risa had always felt particularly clever about this arrangement; every defiance, no matter how great or small, was considered a victory of sorts to her.

Whenever they were together, Risa and Kalauda would speak of whatever was important at the time; most usually their family, or sometimes the Reihimians. Kalauda would tell her of the meeting times Celandine had arranged, or of the new child born to such-and-such; or, (if there was absolutely nothing left to talk about), the crop yield of one farmer as compared to another. And Risa, in turn, would tell him of her stories, and of whatever prince she dreamed of at the moment; and though she wasn't always sure that he enjoyed such things, he had never spoken otherwise, so she continued to share them with him. Most often he would close

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his eyes and simply listen to her talk, as though the sound of her voice was enough to soothe him; and he would appear entirely content in every respect.

She had never complained to him though. Kalauda was one who would go to any lengths to make sure that the ones he loved were happy, and she didn't want him worrying any more than he already had.

And he had funny ways of worrying too, so very carefully concealed that you wouldn't notice them if you weren't trying to. He had the strangest ability to distract people from what was bothering them without their realizing it, steering their minds toward happier thoughts; and when they least expected it, he would tell them exactly what they needed to hear, and in such a way that it would stay with them for a very long time afterwards. If you were in a right enough mind, it was how you knew he was worried; for if he pressed a certain subject, then he definitely was.

He had shown this trait for the first time two weeks after Risa had come to Kor. She had been terribly restless and missing her home, wanting then more than ever to leave, to return to the only place that she had ever been loved and appreciated; and Kalauda had come to her specially then, for he knew that she wouldn't be expecting him, and wouldn't have time to disguise how she felt.

He'd smiled brighter than usual when he saw her, and started up a conversation before she'd even had a chance to say hello.

"Can I sing to you a song about the moon?" he'd asked, his eyes sparkling visibly in the dim light. He fell onto several pillows which Risa had stacked together and looked up at her expectantly, waiting for her response. She'd nodded, too distracted to think, and he began.

Moon is soon to rise  
In the evening  
With a midnight sky  
Dark and sleeping  
And it's whitened light  
Seems to lead me  
To the night  
To the night

Kalauda's songs were strange because they nearly always had words. Normally Maura's had none; instead they were riddled with intricate harmonies that crossed back and forth inside the melody. Risa had always enjoyed Kalauda's simple forms so much more though, and not just because he was her brother. She'd seen them as original, something only he could do, from the very moment she first heard them. He had tried explaining to her once that adding words was easy, and that all you had to do was speak your heart; but she'd never been able to write anything quite like him.

Can I hold the light  
Here before me?  
May I watch its rays  
In their glory?  
In this sleeping time  
I am mourning  
For the night  
For the night

He finished and the candlelight flickered. Risa had been staring at it absentmindedly, and it had burned a spot in her vision without her realizing it.

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"It's perfect, isn't it?" Kalauda piped, grinning. Risa smiled and turned to look at him, her eyes shining.

"Perfect for me."

"I thought so," he'd answered as they both laughed quietly. And after watching him for a moment, sighing once or twice for good measure, Risa ruffled Kalauda's unruly brown hair and helped him to stand.

"Thank you, sister," he'd said. "You've always been there for me."

She laughed. "You, thanking me? I would've lost my sanity ages ago had you not begun visiting me. Heaven knows it's hard on your legs."

"They're alright, so long as you are."

Risa glanced down, to verify his words. They were indeed swollen and purple-colored, though they usually were; they had always been that way, from the day he was born. Deformed and weak. Crippled.

When he stood comfortably on his own, she let go of him; and, leaning against the wooden crutch that Father had made for him, began limping his way toward the curtain. Risa tore her eyes from the bruises to look back at his dimpled face.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow night, sister," he'd said.

"Good-night, Kalauda."

And then he ambled off into the night, soon met by their parents, who helped him somewhere near the bushes surrounding Hime's tent. Risa knew this only because she could hear the rustling of the leaves, and the scuffling of the sand beneath their sandals.

She never watched them leave, though she wanted to; she knew they would be safe, that was never a question. It was only that she was tempted then more than ever to peer out into the night; her fingers itched to move the rough cloth aside, to catch just a glimpse of the darkened sky Kalauda sang of, and the moon.

But she never did. She would only study the curtain and sigh.

If only Hime would realize how much of a tragedy her life was sometimes; now that would be a story she'd like. Maybe that was why he treated Risa so--she was the villain in a story of her own creation.

But no one could hate a person so, and for no reason at all...could they?



## Chapter 2

Risa sighed as she gathered Hime's laundry in the sweltering heat, attempting unsuccessfully to wipe the sweat from her forehead with the back of her arm. If it had been any hotter, she was almost sure she could've seen the clothing steam.

Locking her jaw in firm determination, she began hanging the garments up one by one, pinning them slowly so as to prevent any from slipping. Laundry for Risa had always been so much more than just a chore; it was almost a science. The Law would crack down on her if so much as a single speck of sand got on the freshly laundered clothing, so Risa had to take extra measures to ensure that each garment was perfect every time.

She licked her lips, steadying her hand as she added another pin, then checked the line. Perfect.

"A lovely day, isn't it, Desideria Risa?" a voice rang out from nearby. Risa blinked out of concentration and turned to see a kindly-faced old woman standing nearby the laundry basket, her frail form bent over her cane as she watched the girl work. Her wrinkled face was curled into a tight grin.

"And to you, Celandine," Risa replied, returning to her laundry.

This woman was Risa's secret informant as to the inner workings of Maura. Their meetings were set up a few weeks after they had arrived; Celandine would come to Risa every other week to teach her of the problems surrounding the Reihimian people, or of the larger disputes, and Risa in turn would mention them to Hime in the hopes of a decent outcome.

She quickly scanned her memory for any mention of a visit, be it from her brother or another towns person; but to her knowledge, there were none. The briefest of frowns lit her face and was quickly concealed.

"How are you faring?"

"Quite well, considering all that has happened."

Risa paused mid-fold and turned her head just slightly to the side. "Anything I need to know about?"

"Yes, if you don't already; it concerns the Kalpans, my dear girl. The Korish tribe from the north--there've been sightings of them near the Middle Sands. Not too far from here either, or so I've been told."

As though not having heard a single word, Risa folded Hime's heavy, unused cloak over the line, lowering it cautiously to the ground. It pulled the string so severely that Hime's longest dress dangled a mere two inches from the sand; but if it had been any tighter, the line would have snapped altogether. She allowed herself a brief, triumphant smile.

"Is this a problem that needs to be reported to our Lady, then?" was all she said.

"Spoken as a concern, and nothing more."

"What a shame, I was hoping for a nice long fight with those barbarians to keep me from the--"

"Consider your next words wisely before you choose them," Celandine scolded. "You and I share a common..." she struggled to find the proper word "...irritation, but unlike the rest of us, you are bound by Law. I am sure that there is punishment for speaking out of hand."

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Risa paused. "You are right," she nodded. "Forgive me, I was not thinking."

"Oh, my dear girl, you've no need to apologize," the old woman chuckled. "It has been lovely to talk to you again."

"And you," Risa replied. There was a strange feeling that had begun poking in on her thoughts since the mention of the savages, and she was having a difficult time ignoring it. "Thank you for telling me of the Kalpans."

"Anytime, dear."

And when Celandine was out of sight, Risa relapsed deep into thought.

Kalpar was perhaps the most dreaded of the tribes from the Northwestern Sands, a village that resided entirely in the wall of a large stone mountain, originally designed as a protection from sandstorms and the more common of the desert monsters. They had come, over time, to be known as the most brutal of the Korish tribes, and the most violent due to their warring ways; so it was no surprise that they were the most feared as well. They had their own special brand of magics too, as Reihem once had, long ago; legend spoke of how their entire system was governed by it once, in a time before war. And though their magical power had diminished since then, they were still considered the greatest threat in Kor. The Justice herself couldn't stand a chance against them, even if it wasn't during her Stay.

Risa's mind whirled with thoughts of previous lessons, taught to her in school when she'd found the time to ask for them. Lessons of how the Kalpan never fought with the usual bronze swords, but instead with blades of rusted metal that caused all who were cut by them to die indefinitely--if not from blood loss, then from the excruciating pains of infection. Rumor had it that they loved torture as well, and would prolong it just to see how much the pain could be inflicted before eventual death.

She also remembered hearing once, in a frightened whisper among the townspeople, that they were the smallest of the tribes only because they were constantly killing their own kind; they shared stories of how they killed all thieves, no matter what it was they had stolen, even poor boys who hadn't yet come of age...and heaven only knew how harsh they'd be upon their enemies, if they were so exacting with their own...

Her fists tightened, and she gave the greatest mental shove she had ever dared to give. The thoughts still stabbed at her subconscious, and she could almost feel them growing and pulsing, but she fought to ignore them. There wasn't anything she could do about it now. It would just have to wait until after the laundry was done.

Risa gathered the empty wicker baskets into her arms and made way for the tent, careful not to show that she was rushing. She still wasn't entirely sure of everything the Law could do, and sometimes she felt as though it could read her mind; but even though that idea seemed impossibly absurd, she didn't want to risk it.

She called from outside the tent, and the curtain pulled back swiftly as though drawn by an invisible hand; and when she entered, it dropped silently back to the ground.

Hime was in the far corner of the room, having looked away while the day momentarily invaded her tent. And when she heard the crunch of the baskets hitting the sand and the swoosh of the curtain falling back to the earth, she turned around again, smiling.

Immediately seeing that it was only her desideria and not anyone important, her expression changed quite drastically.

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"Oh," she muttered.

"My Lady," Risa replied, careful to keep her emotions in check. She didn't want them unexpectedly spilling over and into her speech, which happened sometimes, and more often than she liked. She transferred the clothes from the basket to the nearby trunk, somehow aware that Hime hadn't stopped watching her from the moment she first turned around.

"Is everything dry already? You finished so quickly, for a change."

Risa bit her lip. "Yes, my Lady, your clothing is dry." A hint of annoyance and some sarcasm, so that nothing would seem out of the ordinary. "Wouldn't the Law have informed you otherwise?"

"Yes, yes, that's true," Hime answered, her eyes clouding thoughtfully. She chewed on the hem of her sleeve. "Still, you seem...agitated."

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Risa answered.

"You must've done something wrong that I don't know about," Hime declared, her head rising just a little higher. She grinned widely, as though expecting to see her desideria squirm.

"Just the...occasional concerns, my Lady."

"Concerns?" Hime echoed, raising an eyebrow. Risa fought a triumphant smile.

"It's...the Kalpans. There are rumors of sightings--"

"Oh, that. What of it?"

Risa stopped. "You already knew?"

"Of course I did." Her lips folded back into a sneer. "The Law informs me of these things, or don't you remember?"

Risa choked on the stream of retorts that had suddenly caught in her throat. "How do you propose we respond to it then, my Lady?" she finally asked.

"Respond? There's no need."

"No need!" Risa cried, then stopped herself. She took in a deep breath, glaring furiously at the sand. "No need?" she repeated through gritted teeth. "How can you say such a thing, being our Justice? Your duty is to protect us when--"

"I am the only one here who needs protecting, what happens to you Reihimians is of little concern so long as I am safe." She stepped daintily from where she had been standing, her dark eyes morphing into tight little slits. "I don't believe that I need anyone telling me what to do either, for as you just so kindly stated, I am the Justice. I am free to do as I wish."

"That's...that's not right!" Risa cried.

"Right? If that's not right, what is, then?"

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"What is right is for you to care for your people!"

"My people?" Hime scoffed. "And what says that? If I define what is right by my Law, then why should I care about you, or your 'people'? You are nothing but servants to me."

"Servants!" Risa roared. Anger bubbled in her blood and pulsed throughout her voice before she could stop it. "You can't just go around treating everyone like scum because you can! Right or wrong, it doesn't make a difference; but this, this is a matter of human nature! of that part inside of each and every person that is repulsed by the death of another!--or can you even remember such things?" Her voice lowered then to such an extent that it was almost a whisper; but it was still so terrifyingly powerful that her fists were shaking at her sides. She lifted her head to look straight into her Justice's dark and empty eyes.

"What if the Kalpans attack and capture us all? Or kill us while we sleep?" she spat. "What use will your stupid Law be to you then? For our blood would be on your hands, Hime Lumina, you so-called noble--"

Just then her chest tightened to an extent she would've have ever thought possible; lights flashed behind her eyes and she gasped, dropping to the ground.

"How dare you use my name so informally?" she scolded. "I can treat these people anyway I want; for there is nothing here to tell me otherwise. And that, foolish child, is my Law."

And then, to Risa's surprise, she got up from her throne and walked slowly past Risa without so much as a downward glance; she turned her attentions to the time-dial on the wall.

"It is almost time for my midday snack. Go and fetch me some of those Pardonberries from that cliff you once spoke to me of."

"But those...those are the townspeople's," Risa gasped, cursing herself inwardly for ever having mentioned them. She rose shakily on unsteady arms. "You can't take that away from them too, they've hardly any decent--"

Hime turned and Risa spasmed, dropping back to the sand. "What will it take for you to learn?" she scolded.

Risa scraped at the sand with her fingernails, trying to muster enough air to respond.

"Yes...my Justice," she gasped, stiffly bowing her head even lower to the ground.

"There's a good girl," Hime answered, addressing her somewhat like a dog. "Go and get my berries now, and do make sure they're cold when I get them."

Risa glowered, barely catching the Justice's words over the sound of the blood throbbing in her ears. She rose uneasily from the ground, carefully shifting her weight from one side to the other, testing the strength of her limbs. The Reihimians were almost beginning to despise her as much as Hime; some went so far as to regard her as an omen, though they knew full well that she was only following orders.

Feeling the grip on her chest loosen somewhat since she started moving again, she limped toward the curtain, every muscle in her chest aching miserably.

"Do be sure to return before sunset!" she heard Hime call as the curtain fell, separating them both.

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So Risa dawdled as much as she could without too much pressure from the Law. Irritating Hime was, of course, one of her more enjoyable pastimes; and, being as how Hime was who she was, irritating her was easier accomplished than most things.

Risa sighed and rubbed furiously at the sweat that had drained down into her eyes, but they were already stinging. Blinking furiously and exhaling in frustration, she tried to see how many berries she still needed before she could return. She was half a dozen shy of a basketful.

Pardonberries, or so the Reihimians called them, were fuzzy orange fruits the size of a person's fist; they had a juicy purple center and were sweeter and more satisfying than anything Risa had ever eaten before, even back in Reihem. But she rarely had them because of how difficult they were to pick; not only were they firmly secured to their vines, but the leaves had terribly sharp thorns, and they would send any or all of them flying at you if you so much as grazed one with the back of your hand. While a scarcity for these reasons, it was no surprise that they still remained one of the most coveted of the foods that grew on Kor.

But Reihem...Reihem once had many interesting things to eat. Risa's mountain had always been the place of her dreams; her heart had come dangerously close to breaking when Hime announced that they were to leave. For Reihem had always been more than just good food, and fertile soil. There was a sense of community there that Risa hadn't yet found in Kor, and that she longed for, even now; for though the title of desideria hung over her as clearly then as it did now, no one had changed their opinions of her because of it (although Hime didn't have quite the power there that she had here in Maura).

They would have dances and festivals in the old cobblestoned streets sometimes, always in the mornings so they could include the desiderias also; the men would gather in the town squares earlier than the rest, always excited and jittery and anxious as they awaited the partners that they had asked the day before.

And the women, dressed in their best gowns and skirts, would enter first to the sound of music, dancing and twirling down and around to their partners; and a fantastic dance would emerge, beautiful and strange and enthralling to all who beheld it. For, when viewed from the sky, (or a particularly large tower, as in Risa's case), it always seemed to form a series of complex patterns, resembling the flowers that grew on the mountainside. And the laughter would mix with the music, echoes of which still rang clear in Risa's mind...

And the teenagers...the teenagers (for dancing was a foolish act of children to them) would buy the magic trinkets sold by the merchants who always came into town around that time; they would carry with them wooden sticks that shot out flower petals, or threw sparkling colors into the sky. The smaller children would wave their homemade flags if they weren't dancing, or flew vibrant kites that threaded through the clouds; and there would be laughter, always laughter.

And there was plenty of food too, enough to feed them all for a week; and not just the common Reihimian crops but everything, from exotic fruits grown overseas to foreign meats the strangest of colors. For even with the monarchy ruling there as powerfully there as it did in Kor, there were never any problems--at least not as great as the ones they had now. Of course, more leaders were alive then, and helped to keep at least some of the corruption in check; but in Reihem, even if their people got a good sum of their crops taken from them, there was always plenty left over. That was just the way their mountain was.

Some claimed the countryside loved them, and wanted them to prosper; others said that it was their tireless work that made the plants grow when all else failed. But Risa had always believed it to be that the people's hearts were growing there in the soil, alongside whatever it was that they grew; and that was what made it give so much back, not anything else.

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Everyone had their own ideas, of course, and no two were alike--but all anyone could ever seem to agree on was that Reihem was perfect, a mountain found only in dreams.

And Risa missed it miserably.

For Kor...Kor was hopeless. Scorching summers, parched winters, always heat and never rain. No water pits to be found for miles. Nothing from Reihem grew in its humid weather either, so they had to eat Korish food instead--shriveled and flavorless vegetables, or the occasional fruits, which were often dry and wrinkled as well. Kor was predictable, except for rare and unexpected wonders, like the Pardonberries.

Risa hefted the basket up now that it was full and balanced it carefully against her hip. She walked out a little ways until she was at the edge of the cliff and stared straight out into the sun.

It was perhaps the most powerful thing she could imagine. The sun, in all of its glory, could wipe them all off the face of the earth if it wanted to, including the high and mighty Hime. But all Risa ever did was complain about it, and about how it fried their food and burned their skin, never once realizing all that it had given them. She still couldn't decide whether it was a blessing or a curse--for it felt like both sometimes--but either way it was really rather strange, and not something easily explained.

Her mind wandered back to a conversation she'd had once with Kalauda, as it often did when she thought of the sun.

"You know, the sun really is beautiful, even though no one admits it," he'd said.

"Yeah?"

"I always think that it's silly that you only ever want to see the moon, when you already have the most beautiful star in your presence." He turned over, folding his arms behind his head so he could gaze more comfortably at the ceiling. "Stars are very underappreciated, did you know that?"

"If all stars are like the sun then I'd understand why."

He laughed. "Of course they aren't, or we'd notice them more. Besides, if there were thousands of suns out at night, why would we ever need a moon?"

"I still wish I could see it," Risa sighed.

Kalauda turned back over. "Sister, I want you to promise me something, alright?"

"What?" Risa replied, turning to face him.

"Promise me you'll only look at the stars the first time you see the night. You'll realize what I meant when you do. The moon is nothing compared to them; people are often so easily distracted by the bright and shiny things of life that they never realize they were nothing special to begin with."

"The stars can't be all that amazing."

"They are, sister, they are. Think of the sun, except so far away that it's not nearly as hot; and it's so small that you could hold it in your hands if you wanted to." He motioned up to the ceiling, spreading out his hands so she could understand him better. "Hundreds of them, just like that, looking almost like holes in the sky. They make the beauty of the night what it is, and not the moon. And sprinkled in among the colors of the night-clouds--"

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"Night-clouds?"

Kalauda sighed, his arms dropping back to his sides. "You'll just have to see what I mean, when you get the chance."

Risa smiled faintly as the rest of their conversation trailed off in her mind, none of the other things he'd said that night standing out to her as much as that had. Kalauda always did have a way with her, cheering her up and distracting her from the things he knew she'd rather not be thinking about. He was her sole consolation most of the time; and whenever she was sad, or didn't wish to work, she would think of him, and of what he'd say. She had almost wanted to see the stars more than the moon that night, almost. And the night-clouds.

"Kalauda, I won't ever forget our promise, okay?" she whispered to the sun. And after clutching the basket even closer to her chest, she ran for the town.

Hime's Pardonberries were delivered to her impatient hands somewhat on time, and she was slurping on the contentedly as Risa tended to the new set of blisters that had formed on her feet. The only reason Hime was allowing the smell of the salve inside the tent while she ate was because the sun was setting over Maura; and apparently, even the ghastly stench was better than a desideria being allowed to witness a dying sun for a couple of minutes.

After an eternity of silence in which Risa found something of an uncommon rest, Hime spoke, entirely at once and without the usual warning of a cough or a sigh. Risa jumped in spite of herself.

"You know, you shouldn't worry as much as you do about the Kalpans."

"And why not?" Risa asked, relaxing somewhat.

"Because they're not coming after you people, they're coming after me. I should be the one who's worried, and not the lot of you."

"I suppose that's true." She paused, allowing these words to roll around in her head for a moment. "But then again, we are the ones who hazard our safeties just to secure yours. That counts for something, does it not?"

"Mmmm," Hime murmured through a Pardonberry. "Which is why I'm not worried in the least, as you should be."

Risa frowned and continued wrapping the blisters.

Just then, a rustling sound caught Risa's attention; something was moving behind the curtains, causing them to quiver unnaturally. Her eyes widened, first out of surprise, then alarm; and, in an attempt at being inconspicuous and quick at the same time, she inched her way toward it.

A pebble dropped from the time-dial on the wall, and Risa froze, eyes wide as the sound echoed dismally around the tent. Hime yawned, tossing the remaining Pardonberries in the pit to be burned.

"Don't wake me now, you understand? I'm tired I had extra studies today."

Oh, you poor child, Risa thought. An almost undetectably wry smile spread across her face; she was very nearly tempted to crash something particularly catastrophic on 'accident', just to ensure that Hime woke again.

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But instead, she sighed and said "sleep well, my Justice," hoping to appease the Law. She heard a grunt in reply and let well enough alone; she was satisfied for at least a response.

Risa sat completely still for what seemed like a very long time, just watching Hime and listening to the whispering sounds of the nightwind from outside; and when the rise and fall of her chest steadied and a slow and shallow breathing could be heard, she jabbed at the bump that had formed in the curtain.

"Kalauda!" she hissed. "Not so early next time, she wasn't even thinking of sleep when you called!"

"Sorry," he whispered, and the curtain lurched suddenly forward, giving out a pitiful yelp. Risa gave an irritated sigh; Kalauda couldn't ever be stealthy, even if he tried.

Fabric wrinkled and folded every which way as she wrestled with the curtain, trying to loosen its grip on her brother. She was careful not to look outside as she untangled him from the mess of cloth and led him in; and once both her brother and his crutch were safely unraveled from the knot, she arranged some pillows and blankets for the two of them to lie on.

"Well, Kalauda? What is it?"

She lit a candle and moved it toward his face so she could see him better; but instead of the warm smile she'd been expecting, she found that there were tears streaming down his cheeks, small and pearlescent, shining as the fell to the floor.

"Kalauda! What's the matter? Are you hurt?" she asked, alarmed.

He sniffed, giving a weak smile. "No, I'm not hurt. But...you've heard of the Kalpans by now?"

She nodded slowly.

"Oh, sister!" he cried. "What'll we do? You're the only one in our family--out of all our neighbors, of everyone!--who can fight even halfway decently...but instead of protecting us, you're stuck in this...this..."

"Careful," Risa warned.

"Place, then, there isn't even a terrible enough word!" His bottom lip was quivering with determination as he stared at her boldly with his watery-blue eyes. "You've got to help us, you've just got to!"

"I know," she whispered, raising a hand to brush a few of the wilder strands of hair out of his face. They curled stubbornly back into place, as they always did. "And I will. You, and Mother, and Father...you are the most important people in the world to me. I would trade the chance to see a thousand moons for the sake of my family. I would never let you die; I'm almost hurt that you would suggest such a thing."

Kalauda wiped his nose, which was red, and smiled. "You are?"

Risa nodded, gathering him into her arms. "Don't worry. I'll always be there for you."

"Promise?"

She nodded softly. "Promise."



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And she sat there, holding him for what seemed like a very long time, though she knew it wasn't really; the feel of having someone close was more comforting than she'd remembered, and she soon found herself unable to move, sleep having come upon her at last.

...

Risa awoke several hours later to the sound of a pebble dropping from the time-dial. At first she found the tent startlingly warm; but she realized rather quickly that it wasn't the tent, but her sleeping brother still caught in her arms. She smiled softly at him and sat up, bleary-eyed and disconcerted from her rest; yawning, she noticed a glimpse of something bright glinting under the curtain to the outside.

Startled, she crawled over to it. There were floods of the light now; and they were quickly melting the night away, erasing the shadows and everything else she once had to hide behind. Morning had crept up on her, and she hadn't even seen it coming.

She whipped the blankets off of her brother and threw them into the corner. Her thoughts became more and more frantic as she rushed, hiding the spare pillows, gathering her brother's belongings. "Kalauda, get up," she whispered, shaking his shoulders. He stirred. "Up," she urged.

"I'm awake, really I am," he mumbled, turning over.

"You've stayed for far too long this time," she scolded under her breath, watching as the light grew brighter, illuminating the far corners of the tent.

Kalauda threw his hand out blindly for his crutch, but instead of finding it, he found his sister, who thrust it toward him with a low and impatient grumble. He sat up, yawning.

"Quickly," Risa prodded, grabbing him by the arm to help him stand. "You need to get outside before Hime--"

"Before Hime what?" came a voice from somewhere deep inside the tent. Kalauda's eyes grew wide and he froze mid-stretch; he looked as though a snake had just stared him straight in the face.

"Well, well, what have we here?" Hime sneered, creeping toward them like a lioness would her prey.

## Chapter 3

Risa had never prayed before.

She was sure, because of how anxious and rushed they were, that they now made up easily for the previous seventeen-and-a-half years worth of silence; and they helped to distract her mind from the guilty feelings that often find a person when they are caught. For all she knew was that she couldn't let Hime realize the amount of control she'd gained within a single moment.

"Kalauda, go," Risa whispered, leading her brother toward the curtain. He moved it aside without so much as a backward glance and limped away, where he was met by the hushed and hurried whispers and the scuffling of sandals from more than just his parents this time.

When she could hear no other sound than the frantic beatings of her heart, Risa turned to face Hime, her feet planted firmly in the ground.

"So you have a younger sister?" Hime asked. She looked as though her Awakening had come early.

"Brother," Risa corrected. "I've always told him that he needed to cut his hair."

"And there's something wrong with his legs."

It wasn't a question. "You're very observant today."

Hime beamed. "So that means...he wouldn't be much use fighting, would he?"

Risa felt her face grow hot.

"And your father and mother...they're still young yet, aren't they?"

"Not really."

"Then that means there's no one to protect your precious family here but you, hmm?"

Risa kept perfectly still, glowering at the ground near her Justice's feet.

A sickly smile spread across Hime's sharply-featured face. "You must be very important to them, then."

"As important as they are to me. Wouldn't you have given anything to save your mother back in Reihem, had you the chance?"

"No," Hime answered tightly, and Risa stopped. "She was supposed to die for me, not the other way around. I'm only to carry on what she left behind for me--the Law of the Justice, and nothing more than that."

Risa didn't quite know how to respond.

"I have been waiting here ever since my faithful Law woke me, deliberating upon what to do...so now I suppose I need to forbid you from talking to...no, from even seeing or speaking of your family until my Awakening." She sighed, folding her fingers daintily onto her lap. "This is, of course, your due punishment, as you have disobeyed the Law."

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"Disobeyed...?" Risa cried. "I have done no such thing!"

Hime's snake-like mouth curled into an even tighter smile. "You said that your brother was the most important person to you, and not the Justice. You would protect him over me. Such a statement is a defiance of the Law."

Just a simple string of words that had seemed so very important at the time--and yet they had just cost her five months worth of visits from Kalauda.

An acidic feeling had entered the pit of her stomach and was slowly making its presence painfully real, rising through her lungs and tightening in her throat. It was stabbing at the back of her eyes.

"You can't do that. I must be allowed to see my family."

Hime laughed, a nasty sort of whooping noise that made Risa's hair stand on end. It almost reminded her of the sound one of the rogits made when she killed it the other day, for breakfast.

"If you love them half as much as you say you do, five months won't seem nearly so long. And just to make sure you don't do anything silly, I'll send you on a little journey today...for some fresh air. How does that sound?"

Risa's eyes darkened. "Journey?"

"Yes, doesn't that sound exciting?" Hime grinned and gathered her skirts as she glided down to the trunk where her more prized possessions were stored. "I'm afraid I'll be needing a new ceremonial gown, my old one isn't nearly as...nice as it once was. Fashion does change rather quickly out in the middle of nowhere, doesn't it? It's quite the surprise. And since the Caravan is nearby I thought I'd send you to them. The journey isn't so far that you wouldn't be back before nightfall; you needn't worry about violating the Law again, so long as you hurry." She retrieved a silk pouch full of coins and tossed it at the ground near Risa's feet. "Do be sure to watch for Kalpans," she said with a sneer, "I hear they're running about up there."

The acidic feeling was melting now, forming instead into a massive flame that seemed to swell all over. She stooped down and took hold of the pouch, her hand tightening into a fist around it. Hime couldn't keep her from her family; not now, when they needed her most. Her heart ached powerfully for what she wanted, though she knew it did absolutely nothing; and yet, it was all that she could seem to do. It was a very helpless feeling, sort of like falling; and she didn't like it much.

"You can't send me away, in case the Kalpans attack. I'm your desideria, remember?"

"I can do whatever I wish," Hime retorted. "Besides, I don't need you to protect me. There are plenty of able-bodied people in this town besides you."

Risa's head snapped up at the retort, and even Hime winced at her glare.

"Good luck getting them to do anything for you then, when they aren't even bound by Law as I am!--I'm sure those 'plenty' would give their very lives just to take yours, had they the chance!" She rose abruptly and threw the curtain aside, barely taking into account the mortified look that swallowed Hime's pinched face, and stormed out into the blinding sunlight.

Risa was somewhat grateful that she'd left before saying anything further, and given the Law a chance to react. She hadn't even bothered with listening to whatever it was that Hime had screeched to her after she left,

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for she knew it might've compelled her to return. As it was, her heart was already wrenching in her chest; she could feel the old urges to complain rising to her throat again, mingling with the acidic taste still left in her mouth. But even that was at a loss now, for she wouldn't know where to begin.

...

The Northern Deserts where she knew the Caravan would be really weren't that far, as Hime had said; but they were still quite a ways, so she laced up her only pair of sandals to prepare for the journey. Risa normally wouldn't have used them; but the blisters she'd gotten from picking the Pardonberries hadn't yet had time to heal, so she didn't feel like adding new ones. She wrapped her scarf around her head, hoping to shield her eyes from the sunlight and dust-wind, though they burned already; but she knew that this had nothing to do with those. So long as she kept her mind blank, she knew it would go away eventually.

A flask was filled with water and strapped to her thin leather belt, along with Hime's pouch and some dried meat and vegetables; and now that she was satisfied with her preparations, she turned to look back at the quiet town one final time. Not wanting to leave, and yet not finding a reason to delay any longer, she set off slowly but deliberately, her worn brown clothing fading quickly into the billowing sands that now lay all around her.

The sun was hot as ever, and the sweat from it poured down Risa's face, neck and arms, seeming at times like an extra layer of clothing. Whenever she wiped some off, more would form in its place; and so after a time all of her clothing had been removed, except for her work-dress and sandals. Even the scarf had gone, now tied with her belt around her waist--for she had discovered soon after Maura had melted out of sight that there was no dust-wind in the air.

There were no sounds in the vast desert save the lonely crunches of her sandals in the sand, so Risa had taken out a few of Hime's coins just to hear them clink noisily in her hands. Before, she would've gladly sang a few of Kalauda's songs to drown out the silence; but singing made her think of him now, and without her realizing it. Her throat would tighten in this times, which had never happened before; and she found after a while that she couldn't sing at all.

Whenever she allowed her thoughts to drift to Kalauda fully (which was usually when she was too tired to stop them), Risa would tell herself (and him) that had the Law not existed, she would've done away with the Justice herself, for practically ripping him and their parents from her side. She had no right...

And then the urgent thoughts of the Kalpans would resurface in her mind and she would push them back out, not wishing to acknowledge them any more than she already had. Were no thoughts welcome in her head? She would just have to trust her family to be safe.

Perhaps Father could learn how to fight. Anyone could be taught; it had never been such a difficult skill to master. You just had to be quick. She knew that he was faster than Kalauda, which was a start; maybe she could find someone to teach him for her, when she returned Maura. She would have to talk to Celandine about it.

And Mother, Mother was always good at losing things in the strangest of places. She'd find some decently obscure place for Kalauda to hide if they ever found the need for him to...

She thought of battle, and of the long years she had trained to be a desideria before actually becoming one. Swordsmanship had always been her best class then, and she was her tutors favourite, despite being a girl; and she'd even been given a blade of her own upon passing. She cursed herself silently for not having remembered to bring it along. I could've gotten some good practice out here, she thought, where no one else could see.

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But the memories of the work it had taken to train made her thirsty again; and much to her chagrin, she realized that her water flask was empty this time, its contents having dried fully into the animal skin that once held it. She glared at it furiously and tried to rein the craving in; so she steered her mind toward more distracting thoughts (whatever they might be) and continued trudging her way forward, her feet now dragging somewhat in the sand. All she could think of to amuse herself was what to get for Hime, whether to choose a truly beautiful gown or a hideous and murky-colored one. Wouldn't that be simply the best trick, out here where the Law couldn't reach her?

But knowing Hime, she would probably be sent out again because it didn't meet with the Law's satisfaction; and Risa would find herself once again under the wrath of the townspeople of Maura. Though theirs was an understandable response, of course; most of Hime's spending funds came straight from their pockets. So she sighed and forced herself to think of another way to annoy Hime, some other loophole in the Law that she could find so she wouldn't have to continue thinking about Kalauda and Mother and Father, and everything else she had lost.

...

By the time noon rolled around, Risa was not only tired and thirsty, but also having to deal with the sun beating down on her from almost directly above. Not to mention that her head felt swollen to ten times its original size, and itched furiously. A dull ringing sound had stirred up somewhere in her ears as well; she was starting to get a throbbing pain in her temples because of it, and it was difficult to keep herself from walking to its beat.

When she was almost certain she was to go mad from itching because everything that was exposed had turned scratchy and red, she suddenly realized that the movement she'd spotted several minutes ago was not another mirage but the Caravan, with its enormous load of wares.

"Hey!" she yelled after it, waving her orange scarf high in the air. She half-ran toward it, skipping partly with relief (but mostly because of the blisters).

"Ah, Desideria Risa! How is you?" a darkened man called out when she was close enough to be heard. He was perhaps the only person in the Caravan who spoke understandable Reihimian--and even then it was still thick with the rugged Korish accent.

"Doing quite well, thank you very much, Kadin," Risa replied, grateful to hear a voice other than her own. She lowered her scarf, a weary grin spreading on her tired face.

Kadin nodded, pleased. "Be there any things I can for you do?"

"For Hime, of course; I wouldn't have come all this way for my own sake."

But at this comment his eyes darkened; so she added, "I'm out of the Law right now, so there's no need to worry about demands."

His expression altered somewhat. "What needed her?" he asked flatly.

"A new ceremonial gown. It doesn't have to be expensive; it just needs to look like it is. I'll still pay full price for it, of course." She pulled Hime's money pouch off her belt and wound its string around her index finger, twirling it a couple times in the air. "I might buy something too, though," she added before Kadin left to find the fabric.

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The Caravan wagons were strung out into a long line as they usually were, trailing off somewhere far in the desert, toward the horizon; it had grown so large that Risa could no longer see where it ended.

It was said that the dozens of peaceful tribes that were displaced by Kalpar and the other warring territories had formed this Caravan many years ago; the families that no longer had homes to return to became wanderers who sold their possessions in order to provide for their families. Whenever news of the newly displaced tribes reached their ears, they traveled specially to those areas; so oftentimes the people that had once lived there also followed them, selling wares of their own.

After about five years, when they had grown to a more formidable size, people began to acknowledge who they were, and what it was that they did; many came to buy the goods they sold, and that was the start of the Caravan.

The people that lived in it worked tirelessly day and night to create the wares they either sold or traded, their products ranging from colorful and intricate baskets to meticulously carved swords and daggers. There was not a single person in all of Kor who didn't know what the Caravan was, for it was like a nation in itself; and it was a powerful one. It had been something of a symbol of hope for Kor, and Risa had always thoroughly enjoyed her visits there, from the first time she had arrived.

Risa weaved her way through Kadin's section of the Caravan, careful not to lose her place amid the thousands of other tribes that marketed there. They had gained two wagons more since the last time she had visited; one of them sold scarves (not at all a rarity, so Risa skipped past it) and the other held what looked like a dozen or so small wooden sticks.

She wandered over, mildly curious, and quickly realized that it was manned by a girl perhaps half her age. She was darker than Kadin, her short black hair curling fiercely, and somewhat frazzled by the sun; and it contrasted rather sharply with her smooth and jewel-like eyes. The sticks she sold were actually handmade flutes and whistles, each of them carved with a simple yet appealing design; and they reminded Risa very much of Kalauda.

Intrigued, she walked over to them at once, ignoring the girl's wide-eyed stares as she approached. She appeared to be frozen in place, or else quite unsure of what to do.

"How much are you asking for one of these?" Risa asked without turning, pointing to the flutes; but the girl didn't respond. Instead she shook her head very quickly; and when Risa turned to look, she scampered behind her wagon, peering out very cautiously at what Risa guessed to be her first foreign customer.

She smiled softly and examined the whistles, blowing quietly into a few of them, trying to see which sounded best. And when she had decided on the grey one that had stars carved into its sides, she left five shiny gold coins on the stand (which she knew would be more than enough). She looped it with some of the threads that had frayed off of her scarf and tied it very loosely around her neck; and after staring at it awhile, smiling very slightly, she began to explore the caravan once again, gawking at all of the curious and interesting things that were sold there.

"Ah! Desideria Risa!" Kadin called above the mull of the people. Risa yelled after him, following the sound of his voice past a stand of arrows and mysterious bottled potions.

"What did you find?" Risa asked, finding him near a stand that sold shiny sword-sheaths and wooden arm-braces.

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Draped over his arms were several fabrics of ostentatious colorings, ranging from blues more vibrant than the oceans to yellows that rivaled the sun. All were very expensive looking, so Risa was skeptical at first; but after hearing that they were really only (as Kadin put it) 'deceptively hand-crafted,' she chose a combination of the Pardonberry-dyed purple and a green like the grass that once grew back in Reihem.

Fixing the dress to an appropriate size for Hime based off Risa's features had never been an enjoyable experience. In the past, Hime had complained that the clothes were too thin, too long and unshapely; she whined of how unappealing Risa was, and how it came across in the dresses and affected the way they were made. This always made Risa feel miserable, tall and gangling and common in looks, with too thin and calloused an appearance in a world of soft and ivory skin; and not even her hair or her eyes could compensate for all that she lacked, for she had dry and overly-curly hair that always looped in the wrong directions, and homely desert-brown eyes. She was ordinary and she knew it; and though she would never admit it, she still got a stinging feeling each time she remembered Hime's ignorantly blunt remarks.

The seamstress let out the fabric quite drastically in the middle; and instead of estimating how short Hime was compared to Risa (she'd been making dresses for the Justice far too long); she let the fabric pool on the floor, creating an elegant train of sorts. The sleeves were too short, and the only part that fit decently enough; for everything else seemed baggy and large. She struggled with removing the gown after the seamstress had finished, feeling at times as though it were alive and fighting back; and it eventually took three additional girls besides herself to get it safely removed. Everything about the dress was heavy and not at all what she was used to, so when it was finally off she couldn't wait to get back into her light and convenient work-clothes.

"Hope have I that Hime dress is good for she," Kadin remarked upon seeing Risa again.

Risa nodded, dropping the silk pouch into Kadin's hands. "As have I. And I'm sure that many others besides you would be disappointed if it didn't meet to her satisfactions."

Kadin smiled, more out of understanding than amusement. Word of Hime's noble pick-pocketing had spread to farther places than the Mauran surroundings, though no one did anything more than sympathize.

Risa shifted around in her dress, getting her belt and things resituated.

She looked up when she had finished and paused; the young girl who had worked the wagon with the flutes was running toward them, a water skin tucked under her arm. Kadin began speaking to her at once; he introduced her proudly as his daughter, who had just begun working this past year. The girl then presented the water to Risa with a wide and toothy smile; and she accepted it gratefully, not ever having realized that it had gone. Once the cold water was rushing down her throat, she remembered just how thirsty she had been; for it was like quenching a fire. She had to stop herself from drinking it all at once.

"Kara ne," she said when she had finished, carefully sounding the Korish words for 'thank you.'

The child beamed, appearing to have understood, then ran back in the direction of her wagon, quickly disappearing within the crowds of foreign people.

"You good sound have, for Korish speak."

"Kara ne to you too, Kadin," Risa grinned, turning to face the merchant once more. He was smiling.

"No mention," he laughed. "Safe travel home. Careful no Kalpan."

"I'll be alright, don't you worry."

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Kadin nodded reassuringly; and Risa, with Hime's dress folded over her arms and Kalauda's whistle secured around her neck, left in the direction of Maura.



## Chapter 4

She'd stayed longer than she'd originally intended; the sun was now behind her instead of above, meaning that she didn't have long before sunset. And though this wasn't very good as far as time was concerned, it did make her path easier to see, which was always helpful. It was of course her fault that she'd lost track of time; but she had always rather enjoyed her visits to the Caravan, as well as with Kadin, so it often lay forgotten.

It wasn't long before she could no longer see the Caravan; she had a very empty feeling inside at the prospect of being alone yet again. Her left hand fingered the whistle as she tried to think of how best to send it to her brother without the Law realizing. She was sure he'd love it; maybe that was how he would start communicating with her again, through the songs he'd write for the whistle. Hime couldn't easily send away a song-bird, now could she?

Risa glanced down at the dress as she felt a fold of the greener fabric slip from her hands. She grabbed it, tucking it carefully back under, and held the bundle even closer to her chest.

It really was a very nice dress, even with how heavy it was. She wondered if Hime would like it; she never did know with the girl. One thing was for certain, though--that the Justice would detest the fact that a 'commoner' had touched it. If there was nothing else to complain about, then she would resort to that.

Hime didn't like it when Risa touched any of her belongings; but she couldn't simply make it against the Law, as nothing would ever get done. It had taken a very long time, but the Justice had eventually gotten used to the fact that she wasn't in Reihem anymore.

An idea came to Risa as suddenly as a thrown dagger and she laughed aloud, wondering why she hadn't considered it before. Chuckling quietly to herself, she ran toward a group of rocks that she saw in the distance and began stripping off her dress, pulling Hime's on instead. Even now she could picture the Justice's angry face, scrunched up into a tight knot as though to burst; she grinned wildly as she tied the purple sash around her waist, draping her thin work-dress over her shoulder. Risa was sure she'd be furious; she had never done anything this defiant before. Maybe Hime would become so angry that she would try to make her leave--only to realize that it was nighttime, when she didn't want her desideria outside!

And then Risa would make a deal with her, saying that she would never do such things again so long as she was allowed to see her brother. She felt as though the dust-wind had gotten caught up in her insides; she could scarcely breathe. It was the perfect plan, and it just might work; it had to work. She would be able to see her family again--her entire family this time, and not just in secret.

Someone shouted something in Korish and Risa jumped, not having expected the sudden noise. Giving her sash an extra tug and hurriedly pulling her unruly hair up and out of her face, she scrambled up to see who had spoken.

Five or six men in dark green clothing and dull metal armor were riding side by side, slowly moving closer to where she had been walking only moments ago. One of them had a flask of something and was passing it around, as though in celebration; and they were all drinking and laughing, without a care in the world.

Risa's eyebrows furrowed. She didn't recognize who these people were, so she couldn't know what they were doing in the deserts so close to the Middle Sands; she had never seen such a uniform in her entire life.

A rhythmic pounding noise, and another man came riding toward them; he must've been someone important, because they all silenced when he approached. He was holding something up in their direction, but Risa

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couldn't see what it was; it reflected the sunlight excellently though, glimmering blindingly in her eyes.

The men let out a sudden and riotous cry; they raised their fists to the sky, cheering on the man as he thundered toward them on his majestic white horse. He was close enough now that Risa could see what it was that he held.

It was a sword. Even now it was still bright, though not as Risa had expected it to be; for there was something covering it that dulled its shine, something she hadn't noticed from far away. A closer look...she could almost see it...

Blood?

Risa swallowed a gasp, dropping down behind the rocks. She clutched Hime's dress, feeling her heart pound audibly in her chest. She knew who they were now.

How? her mind whispered frantically, dropping the thoughts almost as quickly as it picked them up. How are the Kalpans in the desert already?

She tried to listen to what they were saying; but they spoke only in Korish, so it was difficult to understand.

"Did ne skraah her?" one of them asked. Risa gritted her teeth in concentration and peered up above the rocks again.

"Foreigners cannot zadha," the one with the sword replied, wiping his blade on his uniform.

Foreigners? Risa's mind whirled. She knew that the Reihimians weren't the only foreigners on Kor; but they were the first to form a town, which certainly would be reason enough to earn such a title. She'd always thought it Hime's fault that they'd had so many problems in blending with the rest of the tribes; they should've become one themselves, for maybe then they would've avoided the Kalpan's attention.

"Where ke njale, Aasir?" a thin man ask, his mouth twisted into a sneer. He looked oily, like a desert rat.

"Kalpar," the man replied, confirming all of Risa's suspicions.

"Teila," came several nods.

She was slowly returning to her senses as her mind began to wrap around the situation, carefully deliberating on what to do if they found her. Adrenaline pumped violently through her veins; she fingered the sand blindly, never taking her eyes off the soldiers as she searched for a sharp piece of rock. They were close enough now that she could see the colour of the sword-man's eyes; they were green.

"Such an easy Leihmajin," the desert-rat commented, trying to stir up conversation again. "Kalpar jahrari its Ahnma kyopi."

"Shantar ke jahra their crops. Are dyar their lives raysko kora?"

Risa gripped the rock she'd found even tighter, anger coursing through her body as rapidly as the adrenaline. By the tint of disgust in their voices, it sounded almost as though they spoke of a herd of foul animals instead of a group of people. It took nearly all that she had to keep from attacking them, despite being unarmed (the rock didn't count--how she wished for her sword!) and her teeth were clenched now that she held her breath; they were scarcely a few paces from where she was hiding.

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"One kayno boy didn't even shantir," a bald but bearded man added, laughing in such a way that it caused Risa to shiver. "He only arfadi ji his crutch, to zadha. Kyoje child!--Kalpar had swords!"

In Risa's mind flashed a perfect picture of her smiling Kalauda; but it was ripped from her memory as quickly as it had appeared, and she saw nothing but red, the colour of the stains on the Kalpan's swords. She was filled momentarily with a deep and heavy nothingness; her whole body shifted, and her eyes grew blank. Kalauda...he couldn't be...

A rage consumed her so suddenly that it was like a jolt of lightning, roaring it's way to her core. It flamed in her hands, her chest, her eyes; she saw nothing but her brother, her family, and everyone in Maura that she had loved. It was almost as though she was no longer herself, for everything had gone frightfully numb.

Had she been more aware of her surroundings, she would've realized that she had been gripping the rock so tightly that the blood was now draining from the palm of her hand.

Her feet acted of their own accord; she stood as though controlled by strings, staring blankly at the men on the horses. Her mind was empty, and she couldn't breathe. Or maybe she didn't want to breathe. She couldn't decide which it was. For there was nothing left to think, nothing else that mattered--except that the murderers paid.

She let out a war cry, running toward them with a fearful speed despite her constricting dress, and threw Hime's sash around the nearest man's neck, giving a strong tug. He fell to the ground, sinking through the air like a rock; and he had not yet landed when he felt her foot push hard against his side. She had managed to grab a hold of his sword was pulling at the handle, struggling to loosen it from the sheath.

When she finally managed to pull it free, she aimed it at the nearest horse; it balanced solidly in the air and she looked up, as though daring them to challenge her.

But her sweaty hands fumbled with the weight of the sword and she felt it, her eyes breaking focus for half a second; and she tottered to the side, falling with the blade.

The men were yelling now, realizing only that someone had fallen. Two of them had jumped from their horses and were drawing their swords, the silver blades glinting in the sunlight; one of the others had rushed to the man on the ground, pulling out a small glass bottle as he kneeled on the sand beside him.

One of the two stepped forward, the first to meet her gaze; his green cloak billowed around him as he drew his sword, directing it powerfully to his side. He watched her, his mouth pulled into a tight line; he studied first her position, her expressions and surroundings, then lowered deep into a fighting stance.

His confidence was irritating. She threw her rock as she would've done a dagger; but he seemed to have expected this, because it bounced off his arm and disappeared into the sand. He didn't move after that, calmly waiting for her to attack again.

She glanced around briefly at the other men, expecting them to be closing in on her now.

But they weren't. Instead they sat around, watching the two with as much interest as one would place in a lesson, or even a sport. Her hold on the rough handle tightened; she let out a second war-cry as she drove her sword straight at the weak spot in the man's breast-plate, her arms shaking with a powerful anger.

"Zadha her, Tanmar!" one of the Kalpans called, breaking Risa's focus. "Leihmajin ke ne!"

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Out of the corners of her vision Risa noticed the man with the green eyes shake his head, placing a hand on the man's shoulders.

"She's only a kayno girl, he will Leijin soon enough," he said. "Ano does it matter if he zadha?"

The tone of his voice struck a nerve, and she growled with anger, driving her fist into the side of the man's back where there appeared to be no armor. But it was like hitting a stone; he didn't even flinch. In fact, the briefest of smiles lit his face as she pulled her hand away, staring at it in surprise.

"Why don't you just give it up?" he whispered. His words were oddly familiar, but her mind was too preoccupied to think about it.

She clenched her teeth and swung her sword around in anger, aiming a second time for his back. Again he blocked; but this time he threw the dull end of his blade against the side of her leg.

Risa didn't have enough time to move as she was still dealing with the momentum of her own weapon; it hit her leg full-force, and her knee twisted sharply to the side.

An enormous pain knotted and swelled; it paused, and in that moment it was almost as though Risa couldn't feel a thing. She gripped her sword, lowering a second time into a fighting stance...

And then it hit.

A startling wave of pain came roaring through her as though the very ocean was coursing her body and she screamed, dropping to the ground.

Her knee was in such agony that it was almost numb; she clutched at it, wincing when she realized that the bones were now disconnected and aiming in opposite directions. Tears streamed down her face, and she was in no position to stop them; there was no appropriate reaction to this sort of pain.

The men, who were slowly beginning to talk among themselves now that the battle was over, appeared to be disappointed that it had ended so quickly. Was she only important to them so long as she could fight?

Her mind allowed her to think once more of Kalauda, of his face the last time she had seen him. Tears were falling then too, though they were not her own. Were these same as his?

No, she realized, they weren't. He had been afraid for his life, afraid that the one person he loved would be leaving him. Her promise stabbed her in the back like a rusted Kalpan dagger and she doubled over with the grief. She would always be there for him, she'd said.

But where was she now? She was on the ground, crying shamelessly at the face of his murderers. Was that what she'd meant when she'd promised to protect him?

She gritted her teeth, reaching for her sash. Slowly but deliberately she wrapped it around her leg, pulling it tighter and tighter until she could no longer feel it's throbbing pain. Sheer will allowed her to move, and nothing else; she grabbed a hold of the sword she had been using and thrust it into the ground with every last bit of strength she could muster. Shaking it a little to insure it's sturdiness, she began pulling herself up, leaning upon it with all of her weight.

A wave of gasps and hushed chatter fell across the men as they watched the foreigner emerge from the sand, leaning against her sword, the sweat dripping visibly from her face. The one who had been tending to the man on the ground stood suddenly; he began running toward her, but the man in the cloak blocked his path. He

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said something, shaking his head; so the boy backed off, but he didn't stop staring.

Risa watched the Kalpans as she stood, making eye contact with each and every one of them in the hopes that it would be burned in their memories for as long as they walked the sands; for this was, in her mind, a silent testament to all who had died back in Maura. She was sure that they had done everything within their power to fight the Kalpans when they had fallen; but she needed to prove this again now that they were gone. Maura wouldn't become just another triumph for Kalpar, another notch on a wooden stick. She would preserve their honour.

One man in particular was watching her already; and she recognized him immediately, for his uncommonly green eyes were hard to forget. He was glaring at her, his eyes squinting in frustration, as though trying to see through her; and it was almost as though he recognized her, but couldn't place who she was.

She quickly tore her eyes from his and moved on, feeling somewhat as though something had been taken from her.

And when she had finished, Risa pulled her sword from the ground, holding it high in the air. She could almost feel her right leg throb again now that the blood was coursing through it; but as she shoved every last rational thought out of her mind so as to let her emotions take control, the thought of it quickly faded.

Her attack was silent this time; she feared that if she cried out, she would only be wasting her strength. She hurled her sword at his, and he dodged it with almost no effort; her blade fell to the sand like dead weight.

"Don't fight me," the man in the cloak whispered, seemingly begging this time. His words were so familiar, so soothing; they were nothing like the Korish that the Kalpans spoke. Risa couldn't understand why she still recognized their meaning, and couldn't spare a thought for it; but had she been thinking more rationally then, she would've realized that he had been speaking perfect Reihimian to her at the time.

She only shook her head, raising her sword high above his. Her face contorted with pain as she raised it higher and higher, lifting it over her head; but before she had the chance to bring it back down again, he used his blade to catch the grip and throw the sword out of her hands. He reached up and grabbed her by the wrists at almost the same moment; he lowered her cautiously to the ground, where she watched him with wild and confused eyes.

"You can't...you can't kill me," she spluttered, staring straight into his almost apologetic expression. She didn't understand what was happening, for the pain in her leg was greater now; it was like fire consuming ice, then freezing back over every second. Her head throbbed mercilessly.

"Ana dyar?" the man with the green eyes asked, and the one in the cloak stopped; he moved quickly to the side, allowing the man to crouch down in front of her. He was watching her again, studying her; and she turned her head away from the sound of his voice, not even wanting to understand. His was a hard and rough sound, the same as that of a Korish native, of a Kalpan.

"It is...against the Law for you to kill me," Risa rambled, her words slurring together haphazardly as she thought of what to say. A hush fell over the men; she paused for a second, wondering if they knew of the magic she spoke of. Perhaps it meant something entirely different in Korish.

"Law?" the green-eyed man echoed. She nodded after a pause, and looked up at him with a sudden and strangely confident gaze.

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In her mind she heard over and over the stories they once told her of the moon and the sun, and how it tore itself away for the love of the night...how it was cursed to be nothing more than a shadow, a mere reflection of the sun...

A reflection...

"My name is Hime Lumina," she declared, her voice unwavering and surprisingly strong. "And it is against the Law to kill a Justice during her Stay."

## Chapter 5

Risa had never been a very good liar to begin with.

At least the man with the green eyes had stopped watching her now; for a split second Risa had been worried that Hime's position wasn't powerful enough to keep her alive. His eyes had widened after she had finished speaking, then clouded over, as though he had tasted something terrible; and he had turned away then, so she couldn't see his face anymore. She wondered if he believed her, or even understood what she had said.

The man rose softly, turning to address the Kalpans that had gathered behind him. He kept glancing back at Risa as though afraid she might disappear; but when the boy who had tried to help her before came rushing back to her side, he turned away for the final time, walking back toward the horses.

Risa relaxed now that he was gone. He had a forceful air about him that was rather unsettling; it was suffocating, and she couldn't think properly around it. She glanced around momentarily; none of the other men he came in contact with seemed to be bothered by it. Perhaps they had grown accustomed to it.

But Risa had never grown comfortable with the grip of Hime's Law; so she thought that it was something you could 'get used to' didn't settle quite right with her. Besides, this man's power was much greater than Hime's ever was; she could feel the magic rolling off of him in waves. She watched him curiously from far away as the thoughts mulled around in her head.

"May I unwrap that?" a voice asked, and Risa flinched involuntarily. She hadn't noticed the boy sit beside her.

He pointed again to Risa's knee when he didn't get an answer. "I'm afraid I can't do much so long as it's covered." His voice was surprisingly high, and it had the same soft sound that she'd heard earlier in the cloaked man.

Risa squinted at him. She couldn't see his face; it was completely covered, except for his eyes, in the same green fabric as the uniforms. A wisp of hair, extremely blond and curled, had escaped from somewhere beneath it, and was floating softly with the wind.

"Why would you want to help me?" Risa growled; but the boy had already begun unwrapping the cloth, completely ignorant of everything outside of his work. Risa clenched her jaw in frustration.

"Ooh, that looks terrible," he said suddenly, pointing at what Risa quickly realized was her bone, though it looked as though it was about to break the skin. "There's no way you're getting out of this without a potion or two."

He began rummaging through the many pockets of his cloak, studying the glass phials carefully as he pulled them out and set them down. "You're lucky that Ponne is my specialty," he said, he cloth over his mouth stretching into a grin.

"Ponne?" Risa asked. She regretted it almost immediately, for the boy turned to her so suddenly and with such a look of surprise that Risa couldn't help but blush in embarrassment.

"You haven't heard of Ponne? How have you lived?" He clicked his tongue. "Maura must've been even more uncivilized than Juris thought." He paused to think, and Risa froze at the reference to Maura in past-tense. "Well, no bother. Watch me for a moment, you'll see soon enough."

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He pulled the stoppers off two bottles of liquid, one lumpy and the other very smooth, and poured them both into a large and empty bowl. Fumes colored differently from their mix emerged; and once he had let it set for awhile he added roots and plants and other ingredients, changing first the color, then the amount, and finally the texture. He whispered the formula quietly to himself as he worked--his focus was incredible. It looked practiced, almost to an artistic extent, and his movements seemed fluid and simple (though Risa was sure that they weren't). She became almost entirely mesmerized, though completely without the intention of it.

"That's about it," he announced, tossing the empty bottles away. It changed colors three times as he poured it into another bowl, which he handed carefully to Risa. "Drink it up; I'll start my work on your knee when you've finished, alright?"

Risa didn't want to trust the boy; but seeing as how she had no other choice, she nodded, taking the bowl from his hands. It was a murky purple color now; and clots of roots and things she wasn't sure she wanted to know about were surfacing to the top and falling back out of sight as it bubbled, despite the fact that it wasn't hot.

"It won't taste bad, trust me--I created this one myself just a few months ago. Forced several people to drink it too, and they all survived. If they hadn't, then of course I wouldn't be telling you it tasted good, because it probably wouldn't--wouldn't feel too good going down either, I suppose--but in any case, I'm still completely confident in it's taste!" He looked very proud of himself.

Risa paused; she didn't know why, but she believed his words. This feeling swelled and stung--a proud Reihimian, trusting a savage?--but her very life was in their hands now, so she buried the thoughts deep inside. She glanced at the mixture one last time, not entirely sure that its flavor would be the greatest of her concerns; but just to be safe, she squeezed her eyes shut, drinking it all at once.

To her surprise, it tasted of absolutely nothing at all. It had been more like inhaling instead of drinking; only she was swallowing the air instead of breathing it. She paused after she had finished, waiting to see what would happen; the tips of her fingers began to tingle, and then her nose and mouth. Realizing after awhile that the potion invoked more sense than simply the taste, she kept very still so as to understand what they were doing.

"Oh!" Risa gasped, suddenly wishing very strongly that she had refused the potion before ever taking a drop.

It smelled of Reihem, of its trees and its river. It tasted of its food and drink, and Risa could almost feel its biting wind rush past her fingertips. She couldn't see it, nor could she hear it; but everything else about it was alive and real, and it was with her.

And these were all the things she had fought very hard to forget since she had come to Kor; but now that they were with her again--albeit against her will--she remembered them stronger than ever before.

The boy began reorganizing his potions, humming as he did so. Risa reached out blindly and grabbed at the sleeve of his uniform.

"Oh, has it begun to work already? That's good." He smiled. "Just so you know, I've shut down your sense of touch so your body doesn't register the fact that I'm working on your knee. That, and the smell of the potions can be quite nauseating at times--you'll move if you start throwing up, so I didn't want to risk it. You'll just be feeling something else for awhile; and this potion's a crafty one, it sifts through your memories and replaces your dulled senses with ones it detects as your favorites. It took me the longest time to create, you wouldn't believe how often I failed...oh, those poor people, they couldn't feel anything for the entirety of the Sah-Maar Zhadi..."



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Risa only nodded, entirely unable to speak. Her mouth didn't seem to want to move. Everything was coming back to her in a rush with the memories this potion had reminded her of, and the thoughts of it polluted her mind.

This boy was nothing more than a filthy Kalpan. He had been involved in the murder of her people--the slaughter of her beloved Reihimian people, whom she had loved so dearly and would've give her very life to protect had she the chance...

"It'll only be a while, the potion's already fading. I have to work quickly so you don't start to feel it." He began humming an aimless tune, pushing Risa's knee around, poking at it and rubbing herbs and lotions into the massive purple and green bruise that had budded on its surface.

Risa didn't want to look at the boy anymore; his kindness made her sick. She glanced around the area, catching sight of the man she had fought earlier talking with Green-Eyes; but she dropped her eyes when they caught her looking. That man had fought her alone earlier, while the others simply watched; they'd had the perfect chance to dispose of her then, as they had so many others...but they didn't. Why?

"That should do it," the boy said. Risa turned, somewhat surprised to hear that the work on it was already completed. It was a sickly blue color now; and she winced, trying not to imagine how it would feel in the morning.

"Don't you worry, it'll be nightfall soon, and I'm sure Papa will let you sleep if you ride with me on my horse. You remember Papa, right? He's the one who fought you earlier; his name is Tanmar, like the sword. I'm really very good at riding, better than everyone my age, even some that are older; and I doubt there's anything Papa wouldn't trust me with when I'm riding Shantari." He stopped, squinting at the labels on the bottles before putting them back in his pockets. "In your language, I think that means...something like...oh bother, what's that word again?"

"Runner," Risa offered absentmindedly.

The boy's eyes widened and he stopped, gawking in evident surprise.

"You know Korish?" he asked. He rolled his eyes up to the sky. "Of course you know Korish. Curses, I could've avoided using Reihimian again. It's harder to say exactly what I want to say when I'm using a language I barely remember." He laughed suddenly. "Did I just say remember? Lan's been teaching me, it's not like I ever lived in Reihem or anything..."

Risa's heart stopped cold for a second. "You mean...you've been speaking to me in Reihimian all this time?" She scolded herself inwardly. How could she not have noticed it earlier?

The boy's eyes widened even further (though Risa had thought this physically impossible); his eyebrows disappeared entirely into his uniform, his jaw dropped partially. "Ha...you're joking, right?"

Risa's expression changed rapidly; it turned first from shock to shame, and then a very deep shade of red.

The boy laughed, the sound throaty and high, like that of a rogit in flight. "You're pretty dense, aren't you?"

Risa glared at the sand around her feet, the thoughts whirling about her mind at an unrealistic pace. Who was this boy, to talk to her in such a way? Hime never would've permitted it.

The boy turned his eyes back to the sky, still smiling, and appeared to be very much amused.

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"Sure is getting dark now, isn't it? I love the nighttime, it's so much nicer than the day. The moon's supposed to be real pretty tonight, Juris told me it's gonna be a full--"

"Moon?" Risa exclaimed, launching back into reality as quickly as if someone had doused her in cold water. She groaned, feeling something pull deep within her leg.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing? You can't move yet, I just healed you!" the boy cried.

"We have to make shelter," Risa argued.

"Make shelter? When we're so close to Kalpar?" he whined. "We're almost there; you can wait just a little while longer to rest, can't you? Oh...oh, just stop moving, okay?"

Risa didn't answer; she was too busy trying to drag herself away from the boy and towards the horses, where the cloaked man Tanmar and Green-Eyes were. "I need to talk to him, to that man I saw earlier. We can't continue traveling at night."

"Oh, oh, but why not?" he pouted.

"Because!" Risa answered sharply, so irritated with the boy that she felt as though she was going to develop another headache. "I'm demanding it. And you had better stop whining and do what I say, or my Law will find you; and then you'll be sorry that you didn't listen to me."

Her eyes pierced the boy; and he flinched, withering visibly under her glare. If he had been expecting any sort of reply, it most definitely wasn't that.

"Oh," he answered finally. "I'll...I'll go get Papa for you, then."

His voice was detached and impersonal now, void of the lightheartedness it had held just moments before. Risa felt a small tinge of guilt, but she ignored it. That boy was a Kalpan, after all; he didn't know anything of how the Reihimians felt.

The boy remained for a while, talking only to his father; but in the end neither of them returned.

Risa watched with a sudden nervousness as the man with the green eyes came storming back toward her instead. She bit her lip; she could tell how agitated he was simply by the way he was walking. He was watching her as well; and when he got close enough that she could see the brilliant color flashing in his eyes, she turned away.

"Ano un Thali ahntra?" he demanded, stopping right in front of her.

"I don't understand what you're saying," Risa replied, an edge of irritation in her voice. She understood his words even less than the others. Why didn't he just use that boy from earlier, as a translator?

The man squinted in frustration and crouched down beside her. "Ana can je dyar shara ke-fuune?" he repeated, enunciating everything clear and slow, as though speaking to a child.

"I don't--"

"Shanari yn dyar long--ei yn only two Kalani ne Djan'dyale, je can laan de."

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There was a sudden forced kindness to his voice that she didn't understand, which only confused her further. Her temples throbbed; she didn't wish to hear anything more, especially in that harsh and rugged Korish. She only wanted...what did she want? There was nothing anymore.

He opened his mouth to speak again, and she powerfully wished that he would stop.

"I said I don't understand what you're saying!" she exploded, slamming the sides of her fists into the sand.

The man with the green eyes glared down at her, locking his jaw; he drew his hand back and, with forbidding determination, slapped her hard across the face.

The sound of it reverberated throughout the suddenly silent desert. Risa's hand jerked up involuntarily, cautiously touching the place where he had slapped her; and she quieted, watching him with wide and disbelieving eyes.

"Now, kyoje, ano yn ei ne need?"

Risa stiffened. "A tent," she replied quietly, hoping he understood. The intensity that followed the man had returned, and it was suffocating her again; she felt almost like a small child that had been publicly disciplined, and the shame of it was almost unbearable. "I can't be out at night, it's against the Law."

"Fahnrir the Law?" His eyes never left her face.

"Yes," Risa nodded, her eyes stinging with inconvenient tears as she wished he would stop looking at her. "A great many things are against the Law for me; and the night is one of them. Have you never read the Law?"

This final comment reminded her slightly of Hime; but she ignored the unsettling feeling it gave her.

"He hasn't read yours," Tanmar offered; and Risa recognized the Reihimian more readily this time. Green-Eyes turned to glare at him, though Risa didn't understand why. Tanmar bowed his head submissively back to the ground and fell silent after that.

The man gave an irritated sigh, watching them both. "Dya sharar de, kayno girl. Je laan ke-fuune."

Tanmar's expression lightened, and he looked at Risa as though to translate; but he apparently thought better of it, because he quickly returned to his previous stance when he noticed the man glaring threateningly in his direction. Green-Eyes turned to look at her once more; but since he obviously had nothing more to say, he went storming off back toward the horses.

Risa sighed after he left, hoping that neither he nor the boy from earlier came back. She didn't want their kindness, or their help. Especially their help.

The men began to slide off of their horses one by one, none looking too pleased with the prospect of waiting a little while longer before returning home. Some took longer than others, protesting very openly; but when Green-Eyes came around, they quieted and fell to the sand with the others, grumbling discontentedly.

When all the horses were unloaded and fed, the men began tethering them together, securing the ropes to the sand with their swords. The Ponne-Boy went around soon after and gave the animals a potion that he'd made; and Risa didn't have to wonder very long what it was supposed to do, because they fell asleep moments after taking it. And once they were all taken care of and a fire had been lit, the Kalpans spread their blankets in the sand and prepared for the night.

## The Moon Outlived the Sun

After her bout with Green-Eyes (which Risa assumed that everyone had seen), no one went near her, or even looked at her; and though she did sometimes catch Tanmar and the Ponne-Boy glancing in her direction, they always looked away soon after.

The camp was close enough to her that they could stop her if she tried to escape (though technically she couldn't); but they were far enough away now that she couldn't hear what they were saying anymore. Was it really such a terrible thing, to have yelled at the Green-Eyed man? They didn't treat him like a royalty, so it couldn't have been that.

The sun was already beginning to set, massive and great, on the far side of the desert. Though Risa wasn't looking, she knew; for her sight was already growing shadowed when she had purposely turned away.

The realization that the night was suddenly hers--and that her greatest dream had finally come true--burned in her mind like a wildfire, and she felt a the heavy weight of it settle on her chest. Kalauda's words echoed in her head, slightly warped, like a distorted memory she could scarcely remember; and she grew frantic at the sound, a little afraid she was forgetting him already. She kept expecting him to show up, appearing like a pinprick in the distance; but she knew he wouldn't. It was simply her mind settling into its new reality; but it was painful not to fight it, to deny the truth for what it was.

But she still couldn't see the moon...not now. Though her dream had finally come true, it was too much to bear--for it felt empty now that she had no one to share it with. That single thought throbbed in her brain, pulsing through her being; she most definitely wouldn't see the moon. Not until her brother was beside her again.

She grabbed a handful of the material from the bottom of her dress, ignoring the sudden ache in her knee when she moved. It tore very easily, to her pleasant surprise; and she folded it around so that it was thicker in the middle and easier to control. She took the cloth in both hands, closing her eyes with a sigh; and after a moment, she began to wrap it carefully around her head.

It took a couple of tries, but she eventually fixed it so that it wouldn't slip. There was something unnerving about opening your eyes to darkness; but she knew that she'd get used to it soon enough. She shivered, wishing that Hime's dress had been a bit thicker (how was it so heavy!?) and shifted around in it a couple of times.

Something pulled at her throat; the dress had tangled around the whistle she'd bought at the Caravan earlier that day. She pulled a little too hard trying to untangle it and heard the fabric tear somewhere; sighing, she dropped her head back to the sand, too tired to care.

Kalauda would've laughed at her right now. "Do you remember the time," he would've said, "when we had that staring contest? Whoever could watch the sun the longest was the winner. You look now like you did then, with your head all wrapped up like that."

Risa smiled very softly, her hand tightening around the whistle.

"You couldn't see for three suns because of your stubbornness. And remember how angry Hime was when she found that her only desideria couldn't do the chores anymore? I did them for you then, and you would sit and talk to me for hours. I loved those days, sister."

"I did, too," Risa whispered.

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"You were scared that you'd never be able to see again. Tried hard not to show it, but I knew. You never were very good at lying."

"You should hear the one I came up with today," Risa half-laughed. She was so tired that she was almost convinced that Kalauda was right there beside her, as he always used to be during the nighttime. "I told the Kalpans that I'm Hime. I only hope...I only hope that they believe me."

"I'm sure they do. I believed you too, almost," he smiled, "when you said that you wouldn't mind being blind so long as you got to stay with me. A very convincing argument, if I do say so myself." He chuckled. "I never did forget that, did you?"

"No," Risa said, "I didn't."

"Oh Risa," Kalauda laughed. "I can barely understand you, you're mumbling so much. Maybe you should rest now."

"It's alright, I can stay..." she yawned "...awake."

"No, you need your sleep." His voice was stronger now; softer still, but somehow demanding. Had he just put his hand on her head? She couldn't tell.

"You're always...there for me," she whispered. "Thank you."

The hand that was brushing her hair back stopped.

"Good-night Kalauda, I love..."

Her voice trailed off, her throat tightening too much to finish the sentence. She was sure he'd understand her anyway.

Risa turned back over, barely recognizing that the cloth covering her eyes had somehow grown damp. Subconsciously rubbing her thumb over her brother's whistle one final time, she fell into a deep sleep, dreaming that she was talking with her brother again, and had started their conversation right where she had just left off.

## Chapter 6

Kalauda reached out and poked his sister on the arm.

"Ow!" she cried, confused. "Kalauda...that hurt!"

But her brother didn't say anything; he only jabbed her in the arm again, twice this time. She turned him, but still couldn't seem to see his face.

"Ow...ow! Stop!"

She grabbed hold of his hand and held it firm so he couldn't poke her again.

But his finger was rough, solid, and cold as a rock. She screamed and threw it away from herself, frantically opening her eyes--only to find darkness. Panting almost hysterically, she reached up and ripped the cloth from her eyes, throwing it to the sand. A dream, she realized, her thoughts shaping too slowly in her mind. It had only been a dream.

Or had it?

"Taroh laan'karu, eh?" a voice asked. Risa squinted at the sudden sunlight, almost surprised to see the Ponne-boy staring down at her. He was smirking; there was a stick in his hand, and he was twirling it between his fingers. "Merka, je yna sharar ke Kalpar."

His voice was stronger today, commanding and harsh. Risa rubbed her eyes to ensure that she wasn't still dreaming. How much of that had been a dream?...and how much of it hadn't?

"Merka," he ordered again.

She nodded as though in understanding and sat up, hoping vainly that merka meant 'move.'

Her back stiffened suddenly as a searing pain spread throughout her body; she clenched her teeth in frustration, cursing herself inwardly. She had entirely forgotten about her knee.

Deciding to examine the bruise, she drew her dress back cautiously; but she soon wished she hadn't, for it throbbed visibly and looked hideous. She fought the urge to retch at the sight of it and glared dourly up at the boy.

"Ano yn ei?" he asked, smiling amusedly. "Ano yn ei ne brahka?"

Risa exhaled sharply. She thought the boy was being childish--using Korish, when he knew Reihimian perfectly well! And the Kalpan wasn't bothering to make the necessary potions for her knee either, when she was quite sure that he knew how to; so as far as she could tell, he was deliberately placing her in a position that she would have to ask for help if she wanted it. It was a battle of wills, one that she didn't plan on losing.

Risa turned her head away, her nose thrust up to the sky.

"I'm fine," she answered, hoping she'd given the correct response. She knew the boy understood her either way.

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"Teila," he said, crossing his arms as his mocking smile spread. "De merka."

Risa clenched her fists tight to her dress and her eyes widened, more out of disbelief than anger. This boy was crafty and cunning, and he almost reminded her of the way she used to be around Hime. The shadow of a smile lit her face; and it might've shown through the anger, had her eyes not been empty. No wonder the Justice had always been so irritable.

And yet she was somehow certain that had met under different circumstances, they probably would've been friends.

She picked her leg up and moved it to the side, carefully letting it fall to the sand beside her. Her jaw clenched as she began to push herself upward, leaning quite heavily on her arms; she could feel them shake almost violently with the strain.

And it took awhile, but she eventually stood. The blood rushed down into her leg as it straightened, and she almost gasped at the pain of it; but one glance at the boy's expectant sneer and she swallowed her complaints, beginning instead a rather unsuccessful attempt to breathe normally again.

"I'm just as stubborn as you are," Risa announced, more for herself than for the boy. His smile widened under the cloth that still covered his face.

"Teila," he repeated mildly. He turned and began walking effortlessly back toward the horses, taunting her with every step.

Risa gritted her teeth. She had never been good at self-motivation to begin with; normally she would complain if she couldn't seem to accomplish something, which strangely would help her to finish. But she didn't want this boy to see her complain, not even once; for it would be too great a damage to her pride to let him win.

She sucked in a tight breath and began limping her way slowly in the Ponne-Boy's direction, feeling her leg give a sickening lurch whenever it touched the sand.

As she neared the horses, realized suddenly that more than half of them were gone. Where there had been about eight the day before, there were only three of them now. She recognized the first, which the Ponne-Boy now rode; a deep red mare Risa guessed to be Shantari.

An old grey war-horse held the cloaked man Tanmar, whose face turned ashen-colored when he caught Risa was walking on her own, unassisted. His expression grew grim with a silent wrath as he turned to face his son, obviously expecting an explanation; but the boy was looking stubbornly in the other direction.

Risa, her face as red as an early sunset, was gasping with furious effort as she neared the horses. Her mouth was gaping open rather unattractively, and she knew it; but she was in too much pain to care about appearance.

"You seem to be doing...well," Tanmar said awkwardly. Risa snorted under her breath.

"Oja!" the boy hissed, leaning over. Shantari whinnied at the sudden movement and began shifting a little to the side, prancing light in the warm sand. "Dya Raiheem'yin!"

Tanmar continued, and Risa wondered if he'd heard the boy. "We are not far from Kalpar, so you will be able to rest again soon. The others have gone on ahead of us, and will meet us when we arrive."

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Risa nodded in understanding as she rested her hand upon the third horse, an unattractive brown mare who was obviously the youngest of the three. She had just thought of asking Tanmar for help (most women needed it even when they weren't injured) when she realized, quite disgustedly, that the spare she had assumed to be hers was in fact a pack-horse. She glared up at the Ponne-boy and he met her gaze defiantly, as though daring her to complain.

Tanmar turned his head to see what was the matter, for neither of them were moving; he first noticed that Risa scowling, then followed her gaze his son's.

"Thali must not have asked Aasir for an extra horse," he commented, a hint of disapproval in his voice. "You may ride with me, if you wish."

"I'd rather walk," Risa answered.

Tanmar raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure?" He gazed at her thoughtfully. "I had meant before that it wasn't far for the horses."

"Oja!" the boy hissed again, louder this time. "Aasir ahntri dya Raiheem'yin!"

"Which was why we suggested that he leave early in the first place," Tanmar said, his scolding voice offset by a strange softness. "But that didn't seem to stop you earlier now, did it?"

The boy's eyes widened, and his face began to flush.

"Now, seeing as how Thali seems to have gained a bit of a likeness to Channa overnight--" the boy's eyes widened even further "--I shall insist that you ride with me, for you won't survive even a couple paces like that, no matter how stubborn you are."

Risa nodded, inwardly relieved (though she refused to let it show), and reached for Tanmar's hand. He pulled her up with almost no effort and situated her carefully in front of him, taking special care of her injured leg. Risa knotted her hands tightly into the horse's mane, almost to the point that it whinnied; she had never ridden a horse before in her life.

The boy looked as though he was going to be sick; but when he caught sight of Risa watching he glared, and Risa's expression altered to match his. She hadn't expected the start of the horses because of her attentions to the boy; so when Tanmar yelled "Merka!" her head slammed against his chest, catching the bottom of his chin. He grunted, and she apologized; but at least now she knew that merka did indeed mean 'move.'

There was an uncomfortable silence that followed the three of them upon their departure; Tanmar attempted once or twice to stab at what always turned out to be an uncomfortable conversation, but each always remained as unsuccessful at the last. His son ended most of them, silently glowering at the back of Shantari's head; and Risa would try to ignore him, but every so often she caught the boy watching her again, and would instinctively send a glare or two shooting back in his direction.

By the time it reached noon, when the sun was high in the air above them, the uncomfortable itching that begins at the burning of one's skin had returned, and Risa could feel it poking at her face and arms again. With it came the elusive hints of mirages, of things in the distance that never actually turned out to be there; and once or twice Risa saw things come and go--but this time, if she was seeing correctly, she was noticing hints of something visibly gathering in the distance--though she couldn't tell what to make of it.



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"Ah...Iuste?" came a quiet voice from behind her head. Risa realized that Tanmar was addressing her and turned her head just slightly to the side, to let him know that she was listening.

"About your accommodations upon reaching Kalpar...am I right in assuming that you know of no other place to stay?"

Risa nodded slowly.

"Aasir and I were speaking, and we...I mean, I...I was hoping, or wanted to know, rather...if you would...I mean, if we could possibly..."

He was fumbling over the words so terribly that Risa could scarcely make out what he was trying to say. It contrasted his usual air of confidence rather sharply.

"I would...that is to say, we would--" he gathered himself a final time, sitting up very straight and tall "--We would prefer you to stay in Kalpar until your Awakening, as your country is no more. For there you will find all you could possibly need to suit your...requirements, and your skills would be of great use to us."

So they did know of the Law. Risa had to work to remain calm, feeling a mix of anger and despair bubble up inside of her chest. He had implied a great many things, which were all suddenly weighing on her heart; and she hadn't even managed with the first dozen thoughts that sprang recklessly into her mind when the Ponne-Boy cried out, startling them both.

"Oja!" he cried, a look of betrayal shining clearly in his eyes.

"Yes, Thali, she will stay in Kalpar." He turned to face Risa. "Am I right in saying this?"

Both of them turned their attentions toward her, and her face flushed almost immediately. She, of all people, residing with Kalpans? Living and--heaven forbid--depending upon the ones who murdered her brother, and all of her people? Had they no shame in asking such a thing of her?

But then a thought entered her head so suddenly and deviously that she could scarcely believe it to be her own. Wouldn't this be the perfect way, her mind whispered, to take your revenge? To pay them back for all the grief they've caused you? Suffer them long enough to gain their trust, then strike them down when they least expect it. Wouldn't it be simply divine, to hurt them as they hurt you?

Risa grasped tightly to the idea, which seemed to give her the first sense of direction she'd had since she learned of Maura's demise; and she ducked her head shyly, nodding as she did so.

The boy slumped back onto his horse almost immediately, grumbling loud enough to be heard but not understood; and Tanmar relaxed a little, setting his horse walking again. Risa kept her head bowed so as not to be seen, fearing that her eyes would betray her thoughts.

"Ah, there she is. Look," he said, softly nudging her shoulder. "Kalpar."

Risa did as she was told, her eyes flickering slowly in the direction of the mountain.

Before her stood perhaps the most glorious thing she had ever witnessed in her entire life. The mountain, stretching beyond even the heights of her beloved Palace at Reihem, stole away the horizon, appearing powerful and ominous as in the stories of the Reihimians when the Kalpans were only a lesson taught in school. It stared down at her forebodingly; and she could feel the reality of it weighing upon her, heavy and

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great and almost too much to bear.

They were closer now, and she could see it fully--the mountain, whole at one time, looked as though it had been cut in two, half of which was no longer there. It was darker than the sand, though it had a similar texture; and in darkness it would be indistinguishable from the rest.

"See that great dark shadow at its center?" Tanmar asked, pointing up ahead of himself. Risa could almost see it if she squinted. "That's where Zarkera Niche is, the largest of the cities of Kalpar--the pride and joy of our people. More than half the population lives there now--for that's where the Library is, and the Palace too."

"Library?" Risa echoed. She saw the boy freeze out of the corner of her eye.

"Juris works there," he said, glancing back over at his son, who looked fit to burst.

"Juris?" Risa asked, casting a curious glance at the boy.

"He's the wisest Kalpan who ever lived!" he finally blurted, a massive grin breaking out on his face.

"Wisest," Tanmar added lightly, almost teasingly, "except for perhaps the Yonshu, and the Seer Mordevi."

"No, I'm sure he's wiser, even than them! Juris taught me everything I know about Ponne, and we all know how vast and great that is." He leaned toward them with a passion in his eyes. "Think about it, honestly--how many people would be still lying on their deathbeds if it weren't for me?"

"And how many more are still suffering from the side effects of your 'experiments'?" Tanmar teased.

"Fifty-three!" the boy cried as what skin was visible turned a light shade of red. "Fifty-three lives I've saved. Fifty-four, if you wish to include that." He swung his arm around to point dramatically at Risa, who glared back from beneath the arms of her captor.

Tanmar chuckled. "It seems as though my Thali, who just this morning was a bright ray of sunshine, has chosen to become a fiery wielder of hate."

"Hate?" the boy said, his bright eyes clouding over. "You accuse me of hate, Papa?" And then his words lowered to the point that Risa couldn't have understood them even if they hadn't been in Korish.

But Tanmar only shook his head sadly. "I have neither the right to meddle in her affairs, nor the wish to; but I do not blame her, for I do not know her story. But you--you I understand, and it is because of this I try to stop you before you inadvertently grow to be as those you so generously despise. But hatred leads to nothing more than hate, Thali; and if you learn nothing more than that, then I will be satisfied. For hatred what started this all in the first place, is it not?"

A heavy sadness fell upon them like a blanket; and Risa looked back and forth between the two, confused under the weight of something she didn't understand. Neither Tanmar nor his son said anything after that, shifting awkwardly in the silence; for Risa alone was content with it.

They had come close enough now to the flat-sided mountain that Risa had begun to take note of something rather curious. Dark patches, similar in shape to the one that Tanmar had pointed out earlier, were dotting the side, each irregular in form and easily distinguishable from the rest. She counted twelve at first; but they were appearing too quickly now for her to keep up with them. She could see the shadows of something moving through them also; and while they were much too large to be mistaken for birds, she couldn't think of anything

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else to explain them.

She wished earnestly that she could ask about whatever she wanted; never before had her curiosity burned so, as a foreigner in a foreign land. But she did not have the nerve to break the icy silence that had formed between the boy and his father, so she kept quiet, careful not to settle back against the cloaked man Tanmar (for the heat had made her tired).

"There they are," Tanmar said suddenly, pointing straight ahead to something at the base of the mountain. "The Kalpan Gates."

Risa's eyes widened, seeking them out with a sudden sense of urgency. Here...here was where she would have to leave all her memories behind. She ducked her head, hiding in Tanmar's shadow.

But no. If she truly wished to continue on the path she had chosen, she had to do more now than simply leave her memories behind. She could no longer be herself. For she had chosen to become like Hime now, and Hime showed no fear. She would never have cowered in the shadows like a child.

A horse was thundering toward them; and now was the time to act, if ever. Risa hesitated for a second, breathing a sigh so shaky and slow that she could feel Tanmar's head tilt to look at her; and she slowly lifted her eyes to face the rider, her chin jutting definitely forward. For Lady Hime, pride would stoop to no one. She would carry no regrets.

The rider, another Kalpan soldier whom Risa judged to be in charge of the gates, rode quickly up to them, steering his horse expertly next to Tanmar's. The two of them shared a few words; and if Risa had been at a better position, she would've noticed Tanmar's brow darken more than once during the conversation. The Ponne-Boy called after his father in Korish; and when the man replied, the boy's eyes grew wide with shock.

"Oja, dya!" he gasped, drawing a hand to his mouth.

"Ei is the brohna way," he answered softly. "Dya Kalpan will jahra her, dyar fhin the Yonshura morar."

Risa's head tilted upward; and Tanmar noticed, nodding. "Yes, Iuste. You have been rejected by the Yonshu, the leader of Kalpar. So you will be brought with me to the Kuro Niche, to the city of my people, to live with Thali and Channa until such time as we can find you a more...suitable place to stay."

Risa glanced over at the boy, whose face was buried in the mane of his horse. A deep sinking feeling had entered the pit of her stomach, which was dropping rapidly every second.

"Is there nowhere else?" Risa asked quietly.

"No, there is nowhere else--for now. But," he added, "if you prove yourself worthy of such a grace, and are grateful for what you have now, perhaps the Yonshu will reconsider."

"I have nothing to be grateful for," Risa spat, more out of fear than anger, like a cornered cat or dog. For on the inside, she was trembling at the silence and the thoughts of the place she would have to call home; but then Tanmar laughed, and startled her out of her misery.

"We'll just have to try a little harder then, won't we?" he chuckled.

Risa's heart stopped. This man is so strange, she thought. Why won't he dislike me? And it gave her an unsettling feeling; for it was somehow more difficult to be vengeful toward a person who cared.

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As they neared the gates, they were told to halt by several soldiers, who seemed to be guarding a procession of some kind. Tanmar's son was craning his head over the top of his horse to see what it was; but Risa was still too lost in her thoughts to care.

"Ano is eitu?" Tanmar asked, pulling his horse to the side.

"Djuler ne Djan'ardria. Teira Raiheem'yin," one of the soldiers answered. Risa felt Tanmar stiffen behind her.

"Ana?" he asked, his voice betraying no emotion though Risa noticed his hand tighten on the reins.

"Yonshura morari. Brahki ji Iuste."

Risa wished she understood Korish. Perhaps she would ask Tanmar to teach her; she couldn't sulk forever. It wasn't healthy, and it was too damaging to her new appearance. Besides, she now had too much honor to protect now; and no captive with any sense of pride at all would hang their head for a lack of courage at learning things they didn't know. She sat as straight as she could, as though understanding every word perfectly; and she wished that her heart wouldn't beat so loudly.

"Iuste," Tanmar whispered, "One of your people is beyond the soldiers. They want her to identify you before they let you inside."

If winter-water from the lake at Reihem had been suddenly poured down the back of Risa's neck, she could not have been more stunned. She wished the world would stop, stop to let her think; but it didn't, and she found herself unexpectedly unprepared. They rode past the soldiers without so much as a pause (though Risa had willed them not to) and she found herself praying silently for the second time in two days as a woman with a sack over her head was presented to her.

Tanmar lowered her slowly from the horse; the ground was spinning, and her leg was throbbing again, but she still somehow managed to hold her head high. The sun beat down on her as always, and she was strangely aware of it though her thoughts lay somewhere else; for it felt at times as though it was only her shadow securing her to the ground. She willed herself to fly with the dust-wind, to soar beyond all the problems she had yet to encounter; but she couldn't seem to will it hard enough to make it happen.

For such things only happened in the silly stories she once made up for her darling Kalauda--legends from a different time, which now seemed so very far away. Stories where the outcome was never a question, where good and evil were as sharply defined as night and day; stories where the heroes always won.

## Chapter 7

Risa had never seen her reflection before.

Once, when they were still living back in Reihem, Hime had made it a Law that Risa alone was never to look at herself in the mirror. She had said at the time that it was to "prevent any uprisings of vanity for her own good"; but Risa knew better. The Justice was only afraid of her lowly desideria becoming more beautiful than she--which was not a very difficult thing to accomplish, even if the desideria was homely and plain.

But Risa had never minded this Law, not until now. She had been free then to imagine what she looked like, replacing the ugly traits the Justice had told her about for pretty ones; but no amount of imagination could save her from the recognition of the person who stood before her now, with a brown sack cloth over their head.

The soldiers stepped forward, and Risa's hands clenched tight at their sides; the sack was removed, and she took in a sharp breath.

For she found herself staring into the eyes of the one she once remembered as kindly and soft-spoken old woman.

"Celandine," she breathed, taking a small step forward. But she hesitated; she had no hope now, for Celandine of all wouldn't fail to recognize her.

But the old woman simply watched her with a stern expression on her haggard face; and though Risa expected it, the look of recognition never came. The woman nodded instead, slowly but firmly.

"Yes, that is her. I am...honored, that she has remembered my name." A strangely cold shadow of something tainted her voice.

But she...she wasn't the Justice. She looked nothing like the Justice. Celandine should have recognized her...she should have revealed her. Why had she not?

But she couldn't betray these scattered thoughts now, after her fate had been so easily secured. She calmly lifted her head, wracking her mind for something to say.

"I have a favor to ask of you," she stated at first, slowly drawing her hand to her neck. She unfastened a string and held it tight, drawing it forward. "Deliver this to my desideria's younger brother, that he may find peace in the absence of his sister."

Her heart ached, but she dropped the gift into Celandine's expectant hands.

The old woman stiffened, her eyes growing wide with a silent wrath. "A bird-whistle?" she spat. She threw it into the sand with a powerful sweep of her arm. "Do you honestly think that this will replace her in his eyes? She was everything to him. He loved her!--though you would care nothing for that."

"Do not speak to me so informally," Risa demanded, her voice growing strong, though it threatened to crack. But she was not angry; she wished only for Celandine to stop, for her heart was wrenching terribly in her chest, and the weight of Hime's identity was almost too much to bear.

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"You do not deserve to be spoken to in any other way; and since I do not feel your Law here outside of your tent, I will do as I please," Celandine retorted.

"Then I must take my leave of you," Risa answered simply. She longed to ask more of Kalauda, but turned her face away instead, tightening her jaw so as to prevent herself from speaking any more. She feared the worst--almost believed it--but it was still too early. Hearing it spoken aloud by someone else somehow made it more...real. She looked up to the gates, away from the wrathful glare of the old woman Celandine; but that served only to anger her further.

"You coward!" she screeched, brandishing her wooden cane like a sword. "You dog! Your desideria died the death you deserved, and yet you dare to turn your back upon her memory!?"

Risa took hold of Tanmar's outstretched hand and pulled herself onto the horse. Her vision was blurring and her hands were shaking, so Tanmar had to steady her more than once.

"As for that--" she said, pointing at the sand where Kalauda's whistle lay "--you deliver it to the boy yourself; I will not apologize to him in your stead. Though I could not, even if I wanted to--for that boy is no longer of this world. He has gone with the others--though you would care nothing for that!"

The tears escaped Risa before she could stop them--but she nodded to the others, motioning quickly for them to leave. Tanmar reared his horse, and it whinnied and threw its front legs into the air; and Risa, her head held high despite the tears that streamed visibly down it, stormed through the open gates, leaving the final pieces of her old life behind. She would not search for them again--not as long as she remained in Kalpar. For she was to be Hime Lumina so long as her heart was in the ground, buried with the only person it had ever belonged to; and it would stay there until the revenge she saw due was brought about.

The Ponne-Boy watched her curiously as they rode, a puzzled expression on his face; he didn't understand her sad eyes, somehow mixed with a forced sort of pride. His expression softened toward her, if only a little bit; and he turned to face the looming mountain.

They neared a contraption Risa had never believed before in her life, that looked almost like magic but was too real to be such; it was to take them up side of the mountain and to the Kuro Niche. It was manned by five thick Kalpan men who eyed Risa with cautious and shifting eyes, murmuring to one another in a heavily accented Korish; Risa didn't bother with translating, for whatever they had to say didn't amount to much anyhow. She only watched whatever was in front of her with eyes as dark as night, the tears having left cold trails down her face.

They slid off the horses one by one (Risa last, so they could help her with her leg) and the three of them shuffled onto the platform of the strange contraption; Risa stood quietly facing the rolling sands, her weight balanced entirely to one side. The man began to turn a lever that jutted out of the side of it, and the platform shifted.

Tanmar laid his hand carefully on her shoulder and she flinched, as though having awoken from a dream. He smiled down at her kindly.

"It may not be wise, Iuste," he said, "to stare at the ground as it leaves you. It is unnerving to all at first; but there is nothing to stop you from getting sick."

He looked toward his son expectantly, but the boy sighed, shaking his head. Tanmar never once took his eyes off of him, watching him with an insistent glare; and so the boy sighed a second time (though much more reluctantly) and turned to face Risa.

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"You know, I...I always used to sit, so that I didn't have to worry about falling." He looked cautiously down at the girl, as though afraid his words might hurt her. "It might be better for you to do so also, especially with your leg."

Risa nodded without saying anything. She lowered herself to the ground, her bad leg hanging over the side of the platform; it jolted, and she gripped the edge of it tighter now that it started to leave the ground.

"Good girl," Tanmar said, ruffling her hair. She ducked her head away from his touch.

"But my, Papa, she's like a scared dog," the boy remarked, just loud enough for Risa to hear; but the harshness from before had left his voice, and was replaced by something else entirely. Risa didn't say anything in response, and neither did she move; her eyes, though still quite alive, had a very distant look to them, and the boy had the unnerving feeling that she was somewhere very far away, where he couldn't get to even if he tried.

The platform rose from the ground at a faster pace than Risa had expected, swaying lightly back and forth with the wind and creating tension on the ropes that held it; but Risa didn't seem notice. She hadn't even noticed the boy studying her the entire way up, taking note of every sigh, every movement, every shift of her position; and he seemed almost as though he was searching for something, for an answer to a question buried deep inside the girl. He knew that it wouldn't be found, though he watched for it carefully; but he had only to be patient, for it would eventually show all on it's own. Of that much, he was certain.

The platform jerked to a shaky stop at the smallest crevice to the mountain's right side. It was just big enough for two people to fit through at once; and the boy climbed expertly into the opening, turning back to reach for Risa's hand.

"Here, let me help you," he said.

"I can do it on my own," she retorted sharply, the fierceness having suddenly returned to her eyes (the boy could only wonder what for).

"Fine then," he said. "Papa, you shouldn't help her either; for you heard her, she can do it on her own."

He watched the Justice's eyes go wide, for the girl had begun shuffling quietly toward Tanmar; and it took everything he had to resist a small triumphant smile.

Tanmar caught the joke. "But Thali," he grinned, "Don't you know, I never help anyone? I only...direct them."

"Yes," added Risa, but neither of them missed the relief in her voice. "Directing."

Tanmar lifted her up and through the opening, and she scrambled to get away from the platform. Once she was safely inside, she dusted off her dress (which was somehow still brightly colored despite all it had gone through) and looked around.

The Kuro Niche was much larger than she had expected, stone buildings dotted every direction she could see; she couldn't possibly have judged such a magnificent size from outside, and the thought of being inside a mountain almost made her dizzy. The homes and stores looked to be a part of the mountain themselves, carved from it once as the Niche had been; they were sturdy, as though capable of withstanding almost anything.

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There were no other openings to the outside, except the one she had just entered; but it was somehow very well lit, almost as though they were still outside. She looked to see if there was a fire somewhere, but there wasn't any that she noticed.

"Magic, it's all magic," Tanmar said, as though having read her mind. "We may look uncivilized from the outside, but our strength lies within. We have revived almost half of the lost magics through our studies, and recovered the ancient texts."

He looked down at Risa with a slight smile. "I myself re-discovered the magic once used in battle, known as ShÃ´ran; Thali and a few others are studying day after day to recover the ancient art of Ponne. And you yourself hold a special power; but that, we have not recovered yet. Our scholars are impatient for the day of your Awakening, in which we hope to learn something of the powers of Law."

Risa's eyes widened. The Awakening? She felt her insides churn with dread. How could she have forgotten such a thing?...how could she ever hope to trick them now? She wracked her mind for anything she possibly remembered about the Law; but she knew nothing, except how it had affected her back in Maura. How she regretted not having asked the Justice before!

"I await that day also," Risa replied. "For then, perhaps, I may be allowed to return to my people." Those who are left, she quietly thought.

"Shall we continue on then?" Tanmar asked, as though he hadn't heard her at all. He turned to look down at the girl. "Is there anything in particular you'd like to see?"

"I want to see Mama!" the Ponne-Boy exclaimed.

"Ah, yes...but of course," Tanmar replied. "We should probably see her first."

Risa noted a tinge of something strange in his voice--almost like hesitation, but she knew that couldn't be that.

"Then let's go!" the boy cheered.

Tanmar's home was a fairly large one, better even than Risa had expected and located close to the opening; there were two floors, the upper of which smaller than the lower, and the roof sloped down and touched the ground after it peaked at a flat spot near the top. There was something bright floating next to the door; and when they neared, Risa realized that it was a shock of snow white hair belonging to a young man who appeared to be waiting for them, an irritated expression engraved on his face.

"Tei'-issch gna dgi'r krohn rae-ynah," he called as he noticed them, shuffling over to Tanmar. Risa furrowed her eyebrows; she had never heard such a language before. "Juris nje Aasir ynah dgi' ro-ohha mne esschi, ra."

Tanmar grimaced. "Thali," he whispered, bending down so only his son could hear, "Take the Justice inside and show her around. And try to make her feel welcome."

"Alright, Papa! You can count on me," the boy nodded.

The young looked around, as though thoroughly bored with the proceedings; but then he stopped, having taken sudden notice of Risa. At first he only saw her ostentatious clothing, which stuck out in the dreary brown city like a shining lake in the desert; but then he noted the proud expression on her face, and the way her chin seemed to tilt upward without affecting the way her shoulders fell. He paused, his dreary eyes alight.



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"Nje s'si...?" he began.

Tanmar placed a hand protectively on Risa's shoulder.

"Thali," he said, softly but firmly.

"Ku, Oja." He turned to face the white-haired boy. "N'jar esscha, Aya. Tei'-isstcha Juris nje dgi' rassa," he said, grabbing Risa's hand. "Merka, Iuste," he whispered before dragging her toward the door. The white-haired boy called after them, but Tanmar took him by the arm, leading him away.

"Sorry about that," the Ponne-Boy said when they were safely inside, the door shut tight behind them. "That was Aya Moshe, Juris' understudy. He can be a bit of a downer--and I have never met anybody so lazy in my entire life." He removed his cloak and laid it carefully across the table next to the door, muttering something about a disgrace to the name of Ponne.

"Come inside," he motioned when he realized that the girl was still standing in the doorway.

Risa stepped cautiously into the room. Unlike the air outside the city, where everything was bright and visible, the inside was dark and shadowed. There were few decorations, if any; it seemed almost like something Risa would picture a poor family to live in. She had expected something more regal, more befitting to a Ponne apprentice and ShÃ´ran user; but at least it didn't smell (for it certainly looked like it should).

"There are six rooms in our house--four down here, and two upstairs. That's where the guest rooms are, where you'll be staying--Papa, Mama and I sleep down here." He paused. "Well then, shall I take you to your new room? It's my favorite; I begged Papa to let me have it once, but he wouldn't."

There was a silence, which Risa found peaceful; but the boy, who didn't seem to like such things, interrupted it with an irritated grunt. "You can't keep quiet forever. Come on, at least tell me your name."

Risa paused. "Lumina," she answered quietly. "But don't call me that."

"Okay then, what should I call you?" he asked, a hint of happiness in her voice, as though he was pleased to finally hear her speak. This made her sort of self-conscious, but she tried to ignore it.

"Hime," she stated. "You should call me Hime. It's my title, my first name; it means 'princess'."

"Really? That's funny, because you sure don't act like one." He grinned. "But that wasn't so hard now, was it? You acted almost as though I asked you to scale the mountainside with your bare hands." He chuckled to himself, and Risa looked very cross. "Now for my name. It's Thali. Thali Tanmar. Tah-Lee," he repeated, enunciating the accent more heavily, "Tah-n-mar. There now, you try it."

"Why should I?" Risa glared. "Just show me to my room, I don't care about your name."

"Oh, so grumpy! Well, I'll fix that," he grinned. His happiness made Risa sick. "I can't stand grumpy people. My life has been far too depressing for that. But I'll make you laugh one of these days, just you wait."

Risa's face darkened. What did this boy care whether she laughed or not? Did he not stand by even as they killed her brother?

"This is Papa's room. Do you see those swords up there, on that shelf? Those are his ShÃ´ran swords, don't ever touch them. They might cut you; and because they're magical, you won't ever stop bleeding. I used up

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most of my Ponne ingredients on you earlier, so I wouldn't be able to heal you. Hey, keep up! You're going to get lost." He looked down at her mischievously. "Or do I need to hold your hand again?"

Risa's face reddened in silent fury. The swords...so they weren't rusted, as the teachers once said them to be. It was magic that caused the infection, not anything else. No wonder it couldn't be cured.

"Huh? What did you say?" he yelled, cupping his hand to his ear.

"I didn't say anything," Risa growled.

"I thought so. Speak when spoken to--or didn't you ever learn that? Where in Kor are your manners, 'princess'? Or do you even have any?"

Risa's face grew sour, and she glared at the boy with all her might. Who did he think he was, to talk to her in such a way? She was the Justice of Reihem!

"I guess you don't," he muttered, and Risa's eyes widened in fury. "Now this is Mama's room. Don't you dare treat her the same way you treat Papa and me, unless you want your face smashed inward. And trust me when I say I don't know how to fix that."

He tiptoed quietly up to the door as Risa seethed behind him.

"I don't hear anything, so she must be out. You're lucky," he remarked, walking quickly away just in case.

The two walked a little farther until they got to a room just across the way from the stairs; and here Thali stopped again.

"This," he said proudly, "is my room? Want to see?"

He pushed the door open and stepped inside.

A conglomeration of bright colors and vibrant patterns hit Risa's eyes as she walked into the room. The sight of such ostentatious colorings in what had originally been a dark and dreary house almost made her dizzy. Pictures of all sorts covered the ceiling, and recipes for Ponne potions were tacked upon the walls next to the bed; and even that had bright pink sheets, with flowers and birds on them. Risa was appalled.

"Are you...are you even a boy?" she asked, her nose crinkling.

Thali's eyes widened, and his face screwed up tight as he let out the loudest laugh Risa had ever heard in her life. "A boy!" he gasped, "you thought I was a boy? Ha!"

"You mean you're a...you're a girl?" Risa stammered, even more surprised.

"Of course I'm a girl! What else would you expect me to be? Well, besides a boy," she chuckled. "A boy. My, isn't that depressing. What did I tell you? My life is a tragic comedy," she said, shaking her head.

"Well now, shall I take you to your room before you say anything else that turns out to be terribly embarrassing?"

Risa nodded enthusiastically, and Thali grinned.

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"Alright then, let's go!"

Risa followed Thali up the stairs that were opposite her room, her head spinning. She could barely believe that the Ponne-Boy was actually a girl. It was understandable that she had made such a mistake--for the girl had been covered entirely from the moment she'd first met her, except for her eyes and the skin that shone around them--but now she felt a strange twinge of guilt creep up and down her spine. It had been one thing to be angry at a noisy Kalpan boy; but a girl her age? It didn't settle right.

"Here we are," Thali said. She motioned to the farthest doorway from the stairs, down at the end of a long and very dark hallway.

The room was modestly furnished, with a bed and a table and an empty set of bookshelves. There was a vase full of flowers sitting on the windowsill; and a mirror hung on the wall opposite the bed, which Risa decided she would take a firm look into after Thali had left.

"These are my favorites," Thali said, carefully picking one of the little blue buds. "They're so sweet." She paused, twirling the flower between her fingers. "Were there many flowers back in Reihem?"

"Of course," Risa replied, somewhat surprised. "Our mountain was the pride of the mainland because of them. We had all sorts of flowers there--some colorful, some plain, others too beautiful for words. My favorites were the Cloudflowers--they had no stems or leaves, but looked just like little clouds that had settled in the grass. I used to pick them--lots of them--and take them home to mother, who would sew them together for me so I could wear them like a cloak. I used to pretend that I--"

She looked up, as though suddenly realizing where she was, and who she was talking to.

"Never mind," she whispered, shaking her head. "You...wouldn't care to know anyway."

"That's not true!" Thali exclaimed; but it was too late. The proud look had entered the girl's eyes again.

There was a silence, through which Risa remained stubbornly quiet; and after awhile Thali said, "Well, I think I had better see if Mama's home yet."

But just as she was about to leave, she whipped around again, startling Risa.

"Just one more thing before I go. Remember my room? If the door is closed, don't enter it. Ever."

Risa watched her leave with a puzzled expression on her face. The girl was so open, so trusting--what could she possibly have to hide?

But it didn't matter. Why should Risa care anyway? Of what importance was an overly talkative Kalpan girl?

Though the silence was lonely now.

Risa shook the thought of it out of her head. Lonely? The notion was laughable. Since when had she been lonely? She was fine the way she was. Besides, the only person she ever needed was Kalauda; and he was gone now, so she would just have to learn to cope with it.

She paused, taking note of the mirror for a second time; cautiously, she walked towards it. She didn't want to look directly into it at first, for she was mildly afraid of what she should find there--of what was she afraid though?--and yet she needed the answers. Her eyes snapped upward, and immediately she caught those of the

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face that stared straight back at her.

The eyes in the mirror widened, and the face grew pale; and Risa drew a hand to her mouth and stumbled backward. For it was just as Celandine had said--and the Great Lady Hime was in that mirror...

Her mind flashed back to a memory of something that occurred once in Reihem, something she had long forgotten; and suddenly it all made sense.

Many years ago, when the Prince Tarashir was still alive, Hime had held a certain affinity for one of his friends, a boy by the name of Lan Kadon. Lan was several years older than she, as was Tarashir; and the two were inseparable, closer even than brothers. The boy was an impossible flirt; and he had made the terrible mistake of convincing Hime that he was madly in love with her. Hime would follow him around the castle whenever he was there; but he never paid much attention to her at all, for there were plenty of other girls, and she was one of many.

Then one day Lan caught sight of Risa. It was the first time he had seen her; but he had thought she was Hime (Risa wondered to herself why this had never seemed strange before). He had told her that she was more beautiful in that moment than he had ever remembered her to be before, and she had blushed, not knowing quite how to respond; but little did she know that Hime had followed him, as she always did when he was there, and seen them both together. That was probably why she had forbidden Risa to look in the mirror, and teased her mercilessly about her looks--the girl was heartbroken.

And yet there was nothing she could do about it. Risa supposed that Hime had begged her parents to let her desideria go, for it was no secret that she had plenty others at her disposal; but they must have purposely chosen a servant with a likeness to their daughter, that they could trade off the two if there ever was a need to. It was the surest way of securing the Justice's life.

Risa sighed, sitting slowly on the edge of her bed. It had been a very long time since she had thought about Lan. After his mistaken compliment, the two of them had become very good friends; and though she never would've admitted it to anyone, she liked Lan too, for a time. Then the boy fell passionately in love with Tarashir's betrothed, the princess Rithe; and everything fell apart after that. The prince had killed himself soon after giving her up to him (though no one knew why--there were too many rumors to decipher the truth) and Lan and Rithe had left the castle shortly after, never seen or heard from again. The King and Queen struggled with the loss of a son and the betrayal of a servant, and their kingdom crumbled; and it was only a matter of time before the people of the forest waged war on them, taking back the mountain they had always claimed to be their own.

She laid back on her bed, folding her arms behind her head. It had been a terribly long day; and a dull ache had settled into her leg, making it so that she didn't want to move it anymore. After a while, her eyelids grew heavy, tired of watching the plain ceiling above her; and she fell into a fitful sleep.

## Chapter 8

When she awoke, the room was darker than it had been before. It was light enough for her to still make out the shapes of things in the darkness, but just barely. She was sure it was sometime in the middle of the night outside of the mountain; she couldn't hear a single sound, and the door to her room was closed where she had originally left it open.

She eased her way out of bed, careful of her leg--for it was throbbing again--and she suspected it to be the reason why she had woken up. Her feet hit the cold floor, and a shiver ran up her spine--yes, it was definitely nighttime.

Quietly, so as not to make any noise in case someone really was awake to hear it, Risa tiptoed out of bed, grasping her way through the dark room for the wall. She followed it to the door, which she pushed back as cautiously as she could, fearful of sound; she'd had too much experience with the rustling of cloth to treat it any other way. She crept noiselessly into the hallway and down the stairs.

Risa barely allowed herself to breathe when she reached the bottom step, peering out into the darkness. Her knee cracked with strain halfway to the door and she grimaced; she didn't let herself move for a very long time after that, waiting for the silence to swallow and forget the sound. Silently, and after she was sure that everyone was still asleep, she left the room, wandering her way toward the door.

The Niche at night wasn't much different from the day; it was the same as her room, just darkened a little bit. Risa didn't dare escape--she would never be able to get past that contraption with her limited knowledge of Korish, assuming she even made it that far with her leg throbbing so. She sighed, looking for somewhere to spend a few minutes before she went back inside.

The roof of the house sloped down at such an angle that Risa could lean on it comfortably if she wanted to; but she would be easily spotted there, and told to return to her room. So she crawled her way up it until she reached the flat section that she guessed to be right above her bedroom; and there she sat, one leg dangling over the side while the other was curled up under her chin.

The wind, while mostly outside of the mountain, could still be heard, howling quietly over the sands; it sounded almost like a voice, mournful and sad. She closed her eyes and listened to it, humming alongside it.

Moon is soon to rise  
In the evening  
With the midnight sky  
Dark and sleeping  
And it's whitened light  
Seems to lead me  
To the night  
To the night

Kalauda. Oh, how she missed her little brother. There were so many things she wanted to tell him, things she wished she had told him before...but now she'd never get the chance. He hadn't always been a part of her life; but it was strange, how irreplaceable he had become in so short a time.

She could still remember the day she first saw him--was it really only three years ago?--when he was no older than eleven years old, cowering silently in a darkened corner of the ship that had carried them all away from

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their defeated mountain. His legs were battered, as though they had been recently bruised; and he was gripping them and sobbing silently to himself, rocking slowly back and forth. She remembered hearing stories of how he was found that way, crying for his parents; and she had stooped down and gathering him into her arms, her heart aching miserably for him. She held him as he cried, whispering promises of a new life, better than the one that they left behind.

At this time back in Maura, Kalauda would've been by her side now, holding her hand, comforting her. He had devoted his life to her since the day she took him in. She gripped the rooftop. It was so lonely without him now.

Can I hold the light  
Here before me  
May I watch it's rays  
In their glory?  
In this sleeping time  
I am mourning  
For the night  
For the night

She hated the Kalpans; she hated them like she had hated nothing before. Angry tears streamed down her face, and she didn't bother stopping them. Kalauda had told her once that hatred led to nothing more than hate; and she knew she shouldn't do it, but she couldn't help herself. Someone else had told her that too, but she couldn't seem to remember who it was...

And then, as suddenly as if it had been sung aloud, a third verse came to her, riding on the wind.

But the sky is dark  
Where they left me  
Will I smile again  
At their memory?  
I am here alone  
Softly crying  
For the dawn  
For the dawn

"Kalauda?" she whispered, her voice cracking through her tears.

"No," said a voice, and she froze. Risa turned around very slowly, afraid of what she might find; but it was only Tanmar, and he was smiling. "Who is this Kalauda?" he asked.

"My desideria's little brother," she answered quickly. "He used to sing that song to her sometimes; though I am unfamiliar with the verse you sang."

"It is the third verse of a Reihimian poem, written by the Prince Tarashir. I know of that melody, it is a famous Korish tune; but I had not realized before that the words fit so perfectly into it. I am surprised that this Kalauda knew of it--most of Tarashir's works were said to be lost after his death--though I suppose it is fitting," he remarked, "for the younger brother of a desideria to remember the 'Desideria's Lament.'"

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His knowledge of Reihimian history surprised her, and she wondered how he knew of it. She opened her mouth to ask, but he chuckled, interrupting her. "The rooftop; what a silly place for a princess."

He sighed as he settled himself down next to her, throwing his legs over the side as she had done. She pulled herself closer together, so as to make sure that he didn't accidentally touch her; but he didn't seem to notice.

"You must have been tired, Iuste," he said suddenly. "You were asleep for two whole days."

Risa's eyes widened. "I...had been traveling for a long time," she stammered.

He laughed. "There are no need to make excuses, one would not sleep for so long if it was not needed."

"How...how did you know I was here?" Risa asked quietly, feeling suddenly ashamed.

"My wife, Channa, used to steal away to this very place many years ago; she knew I would've caught her if she tried to leave, so she used this as a 'hiding place.'" He smiled up at the roof of the Niche; it was as far away as the ground. "I used to have to search around for hours before I found her. She was always in a different place; and it eventually got to the point that I had to tell the men at the Lifts not to permit her if she came calling." He laughed. "Those were hard times."

"Your wife did that?" Risa asked, puzzled. "But why?"

Tanmar gave a sad smile. "She was hiding from me, in a way; she hated me then. She still does, only she shows it differently now."

The idea that someone could hate Tanmar seemed impossible, for even Risa found it difficult at times. "But why..."

"Why did she hate me?" Tanmar said, finishing her sentence. "Well, for a number of reasons. I kidnapped her and her daughter from their hometown. In doing this, I stole her away from the only man she had ever loved, a man by the name of Zeyar. And then I forced her to marry me in order to bring her and her daughter into Kalpar, thus separating her from her beloved permanently." He smiled, his eyes shining with a strange light. "It is perfectly understandable that she hates me."

Risa looked up at him, horrified. "Why would you do such a thing?" She shuddered, feeling strangely glad that she knew this. It gave her a reason to hate him; after all, the Kalpans really were the same.

"Channa's daughter, Thali...something was happening to her there, something horrible, and the only way I could stop it was if I kidnapped her. I feared for her mother's life also; and I didn't wish to separate them, so I took them both together. Channa never knew about this, of course; Thali was much too strong for that, and loved her mother too much to tell her. Aside from myself and the person who told me, we are the only ones who truly know of what happened to her then." He sighed. "And I couldn't bring them into Kalpar alone, for they were not one of our people; so I had to marry Channa to make her and her daughter acceptable. Here they have been safe. But Channa has hated me ever since."

"And Thali? Whatever happened to her?" Risa asked.

Tanmar bowed his head. "That is not for me to say, though Thali might tell you in her own time. But as for you...she has grown close to you. She sees a lot of herself in you, I believe. There was a lot of hate in her too, before she changed. She is hoping...that you will change also."

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"But she had a reason to," Risa said before she could stop herself.

"She didn't until she met Juris. Had it not been for him, I don't know where she'd be right now. She probably wouldn't even be alive."

Risa couldn't seem to say anything. Could she ever find someone to replace her brother Kalauda? She didn't think she could, not in Kalpar.

And what if she didn't want to replace him?

"Your words are falling on deaf ears," she said slowly, after a pause. "I have no one here who believes in me."

"I am sure that you will be surprised to find that you do. I believe in you," Tanmar said, "and so does Thali. There will be others, though you won't see them when they come; and even then they will remain hidden to you. You are a very strange girl, Iuste; you have a way about you that is unlike anyone I have ever known before. You say one thing, and yet I can't help but feel that you mean something entirely different. And what could have ever called for such a feeling as this?"

Risa's face reddened, and she looked away.

"And yet it is not my place," Tanmar said, as let out a long breath, "to ask of such things. I am sure you will tell me in time, as Thali did."

He stood, stretched, and softly ruffled Risa's hair. "I will be waiting for that day, Iuste," he said quietly, before sliding off the roof and out of sight.

Risa stared back at the ground after he left, her mind heavy and clouded with thoughts. She could never tell them the truth; that would ruin everything she had planned, so that the sacrifice of her people would mean nothing.

And they all treated her as though she had the problem, as though she had something she needed to recover from. But what? And for whom? Had they forgotten so soon that they had caused this hurt in the first place?

And who was Tanmar kidding? There was no one who cared about her now.

Her thoughts of her brother thoroughly spoiled, she slid down the side of the roof. If only she could talk to Kalauda again; he'd always seemed to know exactly what she needed to hear. She felt that if she could only hear his voice again, everything would make sense in her mind.

But perhaps he was teaching her even now, after he had gone. Perhaps he was helping her now to learn independence--to rely solely on her own strength, something he never could've taught her so long as he was alive. She took solace in the thought of how proud he would be at how strong she had become; and with that she entered the house, closing the door softly behind her.



## Chapter 9

After her meeting with Tanmar the night before, Risa hadn't been able to sleep at all. His words kept rolling around in her head like a mountain echo that wouldn't die off; and so when that magical light began to fill her room again like a silent messenger of the coming morning, she sat up with a sigh and slid quietly out of bed.

She padded down the hallway, pausing at the top of the stairs to peer down into the darkness of the lower floor. She wondered just how long it would be until they woke again; perhaps now would be a good time for her to go and explore her new 'home'. (After all, she didn't want to see them if she didn't have to; so what better time would she have than this?)

She crept down the stairs, looking around cautiously when she reached the bottom step. Nothing stirred in the darkness except her own figure as she stepped out into a second hall, scanning her surroundings; and she felt as though the sound of her heartbeat could wake them all. She could see into Tanmar's room, which was empty; so only Thali and Channa were home, and quite obviously sleeping. But since the person she feared to wake more than any of the others was gone, she shuffled her way to the closest door, careful not to be heard.

The second she reached Thali's room, a warning sounded in her mind, as though it had been spoken aloud. "Remember my room?" it echoed. "If the door is closed, don't enter it. Ever."

Seeing as how she did not want to get kicked out of the only place that would take her in now that she had been disgraced by the Yonshu of Kalpar, she moved on.

The only rooms (other than Tanmar's and Thali's) were the second guest room (which Risa found to be a library of sorts, filled with all kinds of dusty books) and Channa's room.

Risa had spent most of night contemplating everything Tanmar had told her about the woman instead of sleeping; and so she couldn't help but think of it she stood in front of her room, feeling the insistent tug of her endless curiosity pulling her closer and closer towards it. She felt an odd sort of connection to the woman, almost as though she understood her without having met her; and she felt quite certain that if she ever did get to talk with her, she would find in her a kindred spirit.

Risa crept up to the doorway, careful not to make a noise. She was tempted to push the door open and take a peek into the room, but she didn't dare to, not after Thali's comment the other day.

She had only meant to listen for a little while, to see if Channa was awake or not; but just as she was straightening to leave, her knee seized and cramped and she gasped and fell, her head banging smartly on the wall next to the doorway. Her eyes widened and she froze; and she gripped her leg as though it was all she had left in the world, her head spinning wildly though she willed it not to.

The door flew back with a bang and a person emerged, her steps on the floor beside Risa resounding powerful and angry. She had a proud tilt to her head also, and her harsh black eyes shone fierce as the sun.

She took startlingly quick notice of Risa, who flinched under her gaze; and in the briefest of moment she had swooped down over the girl, her face mere inches away.

"Ane fadya you!" she screamed, her voice hoarse from a lack of sleep. There was a venomous fire in her eyes; it contrasted fiercely with her long dark hair, which swept its way past her shoulders and down around her waist.

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"Ane fadya you!" she repeated, spluttering with agitation. "You kjera, you tantir me anu I was lannar! Has eitah kyoje raj Tanmar stolen you ne Djan'kera ki? You are na dyari worth, I kara ana he kept you. He is ki kyoje je teilami."

Thali appeared then at the top of the stairs, yawning and stretching; but her eyes widened with sudden horror as she took in the sight of her mother towering over the Justice. The girl was cowering on the floor in front of her, her white hands gripping her leg; she looked positively terrified.

"Ona!" she gasped.

"Tajim, Thali!" Channa roared. "I am feir her, dyar you."

"She is Raiheem'yin!" Thali persisted, rushing down the stairs. "She does dyar anahta ano you say ke her!"

"Oh?" Channa laughed. "De I can say ano I want!"

"Ona, djaila," Thali begged.

Channa paused. "Ji my taram, eitana," she said reluctantly, backing away from the Justice. She began running her delicate fingers through her hair, sweeping it all to one side. "I must shara today, I won't kana ke Kalpar ji awhile. Tell Tanmar, re he jahna. Yn keep eitu kyar out na my lera, I do dyar want her hanantra my tana."

"Ku, Ona," Thali said calmly, grabbing Risa by the arm and roughly helping her up.

"Teila," Channa said with a firm and sharp nod. And with that, she sauntered out of the hall and out the door to the Niche.

Thali tightened her grip on Risa's arm. "Come," she said firmly, pulling her into her room.

Risa blinked back the color. She didn't know what to expect; was Thali angry with her? "What were you doing at the top of the stairs?" she asked, hoping to deter her. "I thought this was your room."

"It is," Thali said quickly, closing the door. "But Papa asked me to sleep in the room next to yours last night so I could catch you in case you tried to sneak out again."

"Which I couldn't do even if I wanted to," Risa muttered, wincing at the pain that had been growing in her knee since the fall. Thali looked down at it guiltily.

"I'm sorry about that, I'll try to fix it up today."

"I don't want your help," Risa snarled.

"Nobody seems to!" Thali exclaimed, throwing her hands in the air. "But that's just too bad, because you've got it anyway. Listen, I don't know what happened this morning, but you've got to start watching your attitude around Mama."

"I tripped in front of her door!" Risa cried, exasperated.

"And woke her. I heard every word she said--rather, screamed," Thali said sarcastically. "I'm sorry she treated you that way, even when it wasn't your fault, and I'm sorry that she called you those names, but--"

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"What names?" Risa interrupted.

Thali's eyes hardened. "I'm not going to repeat them if I don't have to."

Risa remained silent; was that a hint of shame she heard in the Kalpan's voice?

"Now I know you're not going to want to," Thali said, "but we have chores to do, and Papa's expecting them to be finished before nightfall."

"Chores?" Risa echoed, mortified. Had she really escaped Hime just to do more chores?

"Yes, chores," Thali repeated, grinning at Risa's expression, which only served to irritate the girl further. "So long as you're here, you might as well take a share in the work. And heaven knows I could use the help around here, with Mama leaving all the time."

"But I can't!" Risa cried, motioning toward her knee. "And besides that," she added, pulling her shoulders back and tilting her chin in the air as she had seen Hime do many times before, "I am a princess, and princesses do not do manual labor. That is what the desideria is for."

The irony of the situation was almost amusing; here she was, having finally escaped Maura (albeit not in the way she originally intended), and being told that she had to go to work again--Risa would've found it funny, had she not already been so irritated.

"Oh, stop your complaining. I offered you my help, but you refused it. And I won't give you anything too terribly difficult to accomplish, so you shouldn't even worry. I mean, why would I? You'd probably just end up messing it up anyways, and then I'd have to do it myself."

Risa stood there, glaring at Thali; but the girl's eyes were just as fierce and challenging as her own, so she eventually dropped her gaze, disbelieving the situation she was in. "What do you want me to do," she finally said, not bothering to hide the disgust in her voice.

Thali grinned. "Change the lights."

Risa frowned.

"The lights?"

"Yes; you should've noticed them by now. They float in the corners of the house, suspended by a string; they are magicked to the walls, so we can have some sort of light in case Land-Light dims (highly unlikely, but there's no risk in being safe). There's one in your room too, above the flowers." She paused when she saw the look on the Justice's face. "You...are a magic-user, aren't you? Because of your Law?"

The words caught in Risa's throat, and she appeared to be quite unsure of what to say; and Thali, who hadn't been expecting it, took sudden and careful note of it, catching the subtle hints of fear now shining in the proud girl's eyes. Her eyebrows tweaked upward. Of what was she afraid?

"I won't do it," Risa said firmly. If she was afraid, Thali couldn't hear it in her voice.

"Why not?" she asked innocently.

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"Well," Risa replied, absentmindedly fidgeting with the hem of her sleeve, "Ever since I left...Maura, I haven't been able to use my magic. At all." Her face flushed. "But if I had, not even your father would've been able to stand against me; of that much I am certain."

So she was ashamed of her sudden loss of power? Thali thought. The Justice doesn't like feeling weak. Understandable, as she was (at one time) an authority figure among her people. "A battle magic? Similar to the kind Papa uses? Is that what you control?"

Risa sneered, but it didn't hold any power to it. "Why should I tell you?"

Thali paused, unsure of what to say next. There were so many thoughts in her mind now that she couldn't pin them down, and she felt that she had pressed the matter enough. "Well," she said after a while, "I suppose you could sweep--for now."

## Chapter 10

It had been almost three days since Channa left, and no one had seen or heard anything from her during that time. Thali was almost sick with worry, often talking of her mother while she did her chores as though to keep herself company; and even Tanmar could be found on occasion pacing the hallways, pausing every so often in front of the door to his wife's room. Risa would watch them, a pitying expression on her face; for she did feel sorry for them, despite the fact that they had wounded her far greater than the grief they now had to bear. But why should she care if Channa returned or not? She almost felt that they would be better off without her.

She had come down the stairs one morning without looking where she was going when she bumped into Tanmar, who had been staring absentmindedly at the door to the Niche. He looked down at the girl in surprise, who returned his stare with an equally wide-eyed one.

"Iuste," he said politely before turning to leave.

"You must really hate her," Risa mumbled to herself as she continued on her way.

But Tanmar had heard her; and he stopped walking, turning his head slightly to the side. "Hate her?" he echoed. "Why would I do that?"

Risa stopped. "Well...well," she stammered, wishing she hadn't spoken at all, "doesn't it hurt you when she leaves like this?"

"Of course," he answered, turning to face her.

"And isn't this selfish, that she's thinking only of herself? She doesn't care the least bit what happens to you, or her daughter."

"True."

"So shouldn't you hate her for that? Or, at the very least, make her stay?"

There was a pause; Risa couldn't seem to read anything from his expression.

"Iuste," he began, after a time, "How do you love people?"

"What?" Risa asked, taken aback.

"How do you convince people that you love them? What shows them this, if they do not believe your words?"

Risa ignored the stinging feeling this comment gave her. "I would know that I loved them through the things I'd be willing to do for them. I would do anything for the people that I loved," she stated, a tinge of something painful in her voice.

Tanmar nodded.

"Anything?"

"Yes."

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"Even if it hurts?"

Risa paused. "...yes?" she answered, though strangely inconfident.

Tanmar smiled sadly down at Risa. "And that is why I let her go."

Risa then stood there and watched him in the silence that followed, studying the ever-patient look that seemed engraved into the corners of his face. Never once had she heard him raise his voice; and she probably never would. Within that moment, she had more respect for him than anyone that she had ever known in her entire life.

And yet she could only watch him walk away, the thoughts that stopped her from comforting him coming almost ashamedly to her mind; for he deserved nothing more than this, as a son of the Kalpan nation.

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Risa was the first to see Channa return that night; so naturally, Channa was the first to see her as well. Her expression was a mixture of so many different things that they were indistinguishable at first, one from another; but they eventually merged into one of unmistakable hatred, that was pointed straight at Risa.

She came stumbling up to the doorway, hollering something in Korish; her eyes, swollen and red, half watched and half scorned Risa as they swept over her, visibly judging her movements. Her clothes reeked of perfume and alcohol, which tickled Risa's nose and made her gag; and small red welts, like overly large bug bites, dotted the underside of her chin and scattered their way down her shoulders. She yelled a bit louder, her words slurred and incoherent; and then she collapsed on the ground, her hair splayed out all around her.

Risa, who didn't know what else to do, watched the entire scene with a look of disgust on her face.

Thali came bursting out of the house first, alarmed at the sudden noise and wondering if something was the matter with the Justice; but then she caught sight of her mother lying in a heap on the floor in front of her, and she cried out for Tanmar, dropping to the ground beside her.

"Mama...Mama..." she whispered over and over, shakily brushing away the hair from her mother's face. The cloth that covered her lips was trembling, and her eyes were threatening tears. "Djaila, djaila, don't leave me, Mama..."

"Channa!" Tanmar exclaimed as he threw the door open, rushing outside with a look of alarm on his face. He knelt down beside his daughter and took hold of his wife's hand, massaging it reassuringly. "Channa," he repeated, almost sadly.

"Zeyar?" she murmured.

"Dya, it is your husband," he said, quietly but firmly. His grip tightened on her hand.

An understanding lighted her face and she lashed out at him, her eyes darting back and forth like a wild animal. "Leave me! Leave me!" she screeched. "I want only Zeyar!"

Tanmar bowed his head. "Thali," he said quietly, "take your Ona inside."

"Ku, Oja," she nodded. She pulled Channa's arm around her neck and began to lift her slowly off the ground, leading her towards the house. "Merka, Ona," she said softly once or twice.

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Channa grunted incoherently, her head swaying back and forth. Her long black hair was a mess of tangles.

"Zeyar...Zeyar..." she moaned as she walked. "Ane could you leave me na, Zeyar?"

Risa watched the two of them amble back into the house, unsure of what to do; and when they had disappeared behind the door, she turned to look for Tanmar, remembering that he had been standing there also. But he had already gone.

She hesitated, wondering if she should wait for him to come back; but she decided that it would probably be best to return to the house, and leave the door open for when he returned. With a sigh, she began walking toward it, weighted down by a heavy tension in the silence.

Thali was just leaving her mother's room as Risa entered. She could almost hear the woman's gentle sobs from behind the door as it closed, and she couldn't help but stare. Thali turned to see Risa standing there, watching without meaning to; her face reddened as she ducked her head uncharacteristically and tried to move past her to the door on the other side of the hall.

"Excuse me," she said quietly.

"Thali, wait," Risa called, stopping her. "I...I wanted to ask you a favor."

Risa's heart pounded in her chest. She didn't know what she was trying to do; she wasn't even sure what had made her call out in the first place. But there was a strange ache in her heart at the sight of the girl looking so dejected...she felt it would be inhuman of her to go on as though nothing had happened, even if the girl was a Kalpan. She couldn't do it, not again.

If only she could distract her from her problems, in the way Kalauda once had so very long ago...

She fumbled over her words, barely able to grasp their meaning before they left her mouth.

"I...was wondering, if you...if you could..." she took in a deep breath, closing her eyes in concentration. "If you could teach me Korish."

Thali had braced herself, as though for a blow; but if there had been anything she had been expecting the proud-faced Justice to say, it most definitely wasn't that.

"What?" she said, disbelief shining clearly in her voice.

Risa could feel her face grow hot; and she opened her eyes, but only to stare at the ground. "Could you...I mean, would you...teach me Korish...please?"

Thali blinked. "Of course," she answered. "But why?"

"Well, the next time your mother decides to create a commotion," Risa said awkwardly, "maybe I could talk to her and calm her down too, instead of just standing there doing nothing. And I'd like to be able to defend myself also, in case she calls me those...names again."

Thali paused, and then the widest of grins spread the cloth that covered her face; and Risa felt a sudden swoop in her stomach, a certain sort of satisfaction at having succeeded in her task. The sinking feeling that had been occupying the base of her heart since she had first arrived left her all at once, and quite without her realising it.

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"I would be happy to help you," Thali gushed excitedly, "Really I would. We can even start tomorrow, if you like."

Risa nodded, hiding her happiness by turning away; and Thali watched her go, listening for the click of the door upstairs before she entered her own room. She closed door slowly behind her and leaned up against it for awhile, before letting out a very long sigh.

And immediately, as though a light had burst in her mind, she began formulating exactly what she was going to teach her new student, and how she would successfully present a useful amount of Korish each day to an ignorant Reihimian girl without becoming too overwhelming. She pulled books off the shelves, flipping through them excitedly for anything that could aid her in her teaching.

She would never forget the look in the Justice's eyes as she spoke those words. There was of course that ceaseless pride, both in her countenance and in her voice; but her eyes had betrayed the first hint of kindness than she'd ever seen in the girl since they first took her in seven suns ago. She closed her book with a sigh and flopped down on her bed, holding it close to her chest. That girl was so very strange.

For the more she got to know her, the more she felt that she was beginning to understand her; and then she would go and do something entirely unexpected, and Thali would have to rethink everything, ending right back where she had started. She was a strange girl indeed.

But perhaps that was why she was beginning to like her so much.



## Chapter 11

Risa never could've imagined that the capital city of Kalpar was so large. Or so beautiful.

She stopped at almost the same second she emerged from the opening (which was wider than the others, as it was made to fit horses, and lined with a smooth white stone)--and her mouth fell open in awe of the beautiful city. It was beyond her wildest imaginations, grand and regal and somehow inspiring--like something out of a storybook, or a tale of legends. Great white buildings stood in every direction she looked, testament to the power of the Kalpan nation; even the homes had an air about them, this strange sense of pride. Everything shone clear in the light, the windows made of colored glass that she had never seen before, the people dressed in clothes worn only in the ancient paintings...such splendor, such grandeur was in this capital city...!

Thali had to shake her several times to get her attention, because calling her name hadn't seemed to work. "Stop staring," she teased, grinning, "and start moving. You're blocking the entrance."

Risa blushed and shuffled quickly to the side, where busy people grumbled at her as they passed her by.

Zarkera Niche, the capital city of Kalpar, was located in the very center of the mountainside, and it swelled to such heights that she couldn't see where it ended. It was larger than any of the other cities, and brighter as well; though this probably had something to do with the giant glowing orb that rested above a massive and stone-white castle. It looked almost suspended in the air, like a smaller version of the sun.

The castle above which the light rested was, by far, the greatest of the wonders in the Zarkera Niche. It stood tall in the center of the city, looming over the other buildings and strangely visible no matter where you stood; the surfaces of its walls were almost like water, and rippled in the warm glow of the billowing light.

Thali caught Risa's gaze with a smile and followed it.

"Ailis," she said, speaking the word carefully so Risa couldn't mistake it for anything else. "What you watch is called the Ailis."

"Ailis, ailis," Risa murmured quietly to herself, taking a small step into the vast and bustling city.

"The Zarkera Niche," Thali said, sidestepping carefully to avoid a lady who pushed past her with two squirming children, "is the greatest of the twenty-four Niches. But as it is home to the Ailis of the Yonshu Aasir, this is of course no wonder."

"Aasir?" Risa asked, her eyes wandering all over the buildings and the places that surrounded them. She couldn't mask the air of wonder that seemed to light every inch of her face. "That...is Yonshu...name?"

"Yes; Aasir Kalevi, in full. He took the throne ten Yaru ago, in the Time of the Two Stars. It is a celebrated time now, for Kalpar was in ruin before his reign. We usually spend most of the Kotsch celebrating it, for in the other times, we are too busy."

Risa stopped walking, a confused expression written on her face as she visibly fought to understand, and Thali sighed.

"Don't ask me to explain it to you, I don't know know hardly anything about it as it is. And since I never did learn the differences between the Reihimian time systems and the Korish ones, I couldn't even begin to explain them, even if I did understand. You can probably ask Juris or Lan though, the two of them know

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everything about the Old Reihem."

"Juris of...of...An'nada?" Risa asked, wincing.

Thali frowned, shaking her head. "No! No more Reihimian, remember? You're never going to learn if you keep using it."

"I...not remember word," Risa said slowly, a hint of frustration in her voice. "What...word for it?"

"Library. Say it slowly--"

"Libry."

"No! Li--"

"Lirary?"

"Library."

"Li...Librariy," Risa stammered.

"Close enough," Thali sighed. "But I want you to see it, so you can--"

Just then, the rolling ball of fire above the magnificent Ailis gave a powerful spurt; and Thali stopped, studying it intently. A second light flashed, and her face fell.

"Ah! We can't now; it's nearing midday, and we haven't even started the chores."

Risa's eyes widened in despair. "No more? But...I want...see...Libary!"

"Library," Thali corrected. "And we've already been to two Niches today besides this one, aren't you tired?"

Risa shook her head emphatically; but Thali raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "Well, you will be by the time the chores are finished; and if you aren't, then we can go after. I don't feel like exhausting myself just before work."

Risa nodded in understanding, her gaze falling to the ground; but there was a strangely longing tug on her heart, and she wished she could stay, if only to gaze at the wonders just a little bit longer. Ever since Thali had begun teaching her almost twelve suns ago (had it really been so long?) she had been soaking up the information like a drop of water in the desert, learning everything and anything she could wrap her mind around. And there was no limit to her curiosity, which Thali discovered fairly quickly (and used often to her advantage); she took delight in telling the young foreigner of all the strange and wonderful things she'd learned about the proud and mysterious mountain within her time. Risa of course would pay the utmost attention, even when the words whistled by her ears like the whispers of the wind; for she never knew what she was going to hear and understand.

Like the time Thali spent half the day telling her about the mysterious twenty-fifth Niche. No one knew where it was, but even so, many believed that it existed; there were rumors of those who had found it while climbing the other side of the mountain. But each time they returned to it, they found that it had disappeared--or so the people would talk, speculating over the truth.

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But such things were always happening, Thali said; and if she ever found the Niche herself, she'd go and explore it before ever leaving to tell someone about it. She told Risa that anyone who did any different had no courage (or perhaps no curiosity) and therefore never deserved to discover such a marvelous thing in the first place.

The two boarded the central lift (much larger than any of the others, and gated off, in the case of horses), and Risa gripped the railing, gazing out into the everlasting desert that seemed to roll under an endless blue sky. She had grown much more comfortable with riding these things, as she had to use them to get anywhere; and Thali had once made them ride up and down one of the smaller ones just so she could get used to it (she gave a very generous tip to the men who worked the contraption, who weren't used to such constant requests).

The Lift swayed in the wind, but Risa steadied herself; she realized suddenly that it had been awhile since her leg hurt her. The color in it had died many suns ago, but not the pain; and she supposed that all the work she had been concentrating on distracted her from realizing that it had healed.

She wondered if it was perhaps because of the fact that she had once worked as a desideria that she was always so restless; for Thali would try her hardest to tire her out, but never could quite seem to. "Perhaps my magic will return to me here after all," Risa would say proudly then, though she knew full well that it would not.

Usually, Thali assigned her to all of the chores that consisted of simple things not requiring magic; sweeping, dusting, and washing the dishes and clothing. Thali handled all the magic-related chores, changing the Lights and the Darks (which were what was used to darken the lights in the nighttime), working her shift at the Library, and repairing simple fixes, like holes in the walls and ceiling; and with her extra help she found that the normally long and uneventful days went by much faster now, for the two girls would sometimes finish their chores early and sit and talk to each other, mostly in Korish, though sometimes in Reihimian (if Risa was too tired to do otherwise).

The general trust for Risa had grown over this time as well; for she did her work quickly and efficiently, and hadn't done anything untrustworthy up to that point. Thali had granted her permission her several suns ago to clean her room; but today she told Risa that she could begin her work on Tanmar's as well. She said there wasn't much to do there, but just enough that she didn't have the time to do it herself anymore; and she knew that the Reihimian girl wouldn't do anything stupid, so she decided to give her a chance.

They entered the Niche, and Thali smiled politely to the people as she passed them by on her way to the house; and they smiled back at her, but ignore Risa entirely. She thought at first that it was because they didn't know her; but Thali had explained to her later that they held a fierce loyalty to their Yonshu, and would disregard anyone that he had disgraced. Risa was glad she understood this--for now she wouldn't have to worry about making more ties than she wanted to. Formulating her revenge was getting difficult already, with how close she was becoming to Thali and her father.

Tanmar was home early that evening, and greeted them at the door. Thali returned it cheerfully; but Risa kept her head bowed, and her eyes to the ground. She had been avoiding him ever since their accidental meeting, when Channa was still away; for ever since then, she had grown strangely afraid of him, and afraid of getting close to him. For if there was anyone who was going to discover her true identity, it was going to be Tanmar; and so she distanced herself, in order to protect it.

Thali whisked away almost at once when her father told her that one of the Lights was behaving strangely in the upper rooms, blinking on and off; he assumed that the Dark had gotten too strong and was fighting it, but he needed her to check. Once she had gone, that left Risa suddenly alone with him; and so she hurried off to the nearest room before he could call her over and begin saying things to her all the things she had been trying

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so hard to forget, morals she once had valued that now only made her head hurt.

She closed the door and sighed, only to realize that she was in his room now; face reddening in embarrassment, she decided to make the best of it, and got to cleaning anyway. The bedsheets were already folded, as they usually were; so she had only to gather the dirty clothes and clean the swords.

Risa eased her way around the room, picking up the clothes that lay haphazardly all over the floor; for Tanmar never did have the time to organize them himself. A pile had already been left near the doorway in what she assumed to be an attempt to try and gather the clothing himself; but he hadn't gotten all of it, so at least there was something for her to do. She worked slowly, hoping that Tanmar would be gone by the time she finished, when she was ready to take the clothes out to the Water-Wells to wash.

She dropped the last shirt in the pile and sighed, stretching out her back as she leaned over. Only the ShÃ´ran swords were left to be cleaned now.

She pulled a rag out from the pocket of her dress (Thali thankfully had some clothes that didn't cover from head to toe) and padded quietly over to the shelf, which was on the wall opposite the bed. Pulling them down carefully one by one, she unsheathed the majestic swords and began running up and down their faces with the soft side of her rag.

Thali had told her that this was necessary at least once a day; the blades had already been magicked so that they didn't rust, but that didn't mean they couldn't get dirty. The better the condition of the blade, the more power Tanmar could put into them; and so she had to take special care not to forget about it.

The blades were very beautiful, even to her standards--and she'd seen many a craft back in Reihem. There were ancient letterings in a language she couldn't identify that threaded their way up and down the blades, which grew warm to the touch when she moved over them; and the handles were carved from different stones--one of them being clear as water, some as though the insides were constantly moving (though they were solid to the touch). Risa sometimes sat them down on the bed and stared at them, wondering what it would be like to fight with one; and only when Thali yelled at her to hurry did she remember where she was and put them away.

Already she could hear Thali stomping around upstairs; and she sighed, picking up the sheaths. One by one she replaced them back on the shelf, organizing them carefully in the order which Thali had taught to her.

But somehow her mind became distracted with the glint that came off the hilt of the last one; she stared at it too long without placing it down and it became suddenly heavy, slamming down with a magnificent force upon the shelf. The sudden impact shook it, loosening it from the wall; and the swords, with a violent crash, went thundering to the ground.

Risa froze, her eyes wide; the culprit sword was trembling in her hands, and a bright red light glowed from inside the sheath. Her blood throbbed in her veins. What had she done? What had she just done?

The door opened, and she flinched at the light; and sure enough, Tanmar was standing there. His careful eyes took in the girl, the broken shelf, and the swords lying in a heap on the ground; and while his face was stern, it was not unkind.

"You are unhurt?"

Risa nodded, visibly trembling.

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"Well, that is a relief. Let us get these somewhere safe before we get Thali to put the shelf back on the wall."

She could hear a hint of something in his voice...disappointment? She shuddered. What was going to happen to her? She couldn't afford to get kicked out of this house, not now. Her mind cursed her. Stupid, stupid, it said; she had just ruined everything.

Tanmar took a table near the door and moved it to where the shelf had once been; and Risa handed him the swords one by one, which he took from her and arranged in a different order than the one she had previously known. When he got to the last one, which Risa had been holding, he noticed that it was warm, and unsheathed it, just to see; but he had not the faint red glow of the letterings. He sat there for awhile, studying it; but he eventually resheathed it without a word, and placed it on the shelf with the others. Now that he had finished, he stood and paused to look at her, raising his hand suddenly; and Risa flinched, squeezing her eyes shut.

But the hand only rested softly on the top of her head, and ruffled her hair; and she opened her eyes confusedly, looking up to find that he was watching her still. A sad sort of gleam lit his eyes, while that ever-present smile graced his weather-beaten face.

"Iuste, if I had wished to harm you, I would have done so already. You have no reason to fear me now."

Risa's face reddened. Silently, she was grateful that he hadn't hit her, as she had expected; but she said nothing about it, and refused to look at his eyes. For a second the proud tilt to her face had left; and only the desideria, small and terrified, had been left behind.

But then it returned, stronger than ever; another thump sounded upstairs, and they both heard Thali growl and curse in frustration. Tanmar chuckled.

"Well, you should go and see to Thali; I will finish the work here myself," he said. Risa nodded stiffly; and she turned to leave.

There was some more commotion upstairs, followed by a bump and a clatter; and then Thali let out a scream. That was all the excuse she needed. Risa went flying down the hall, and sprinted up the stairs.

There was one room at the end of the hall, next to Risa's, that was blinking furiously with light. She crept toward it cautiously, biting her lower lip with hesitation.

"Thali?" she called after a time.

"Don't come in!" the girl cried. "It's too dangerous in here! I've been overexposed to the light, and it's...it's..." There was another painful wail.

Risa looked around frantically, feeling a strange sort of restlessness build inside of her. "What...what I can do?" she stammered.

"Help me...help me when I am outside!"

Risa waited, quietly pacing the hall; and slowly the flickering light dimmed, until nothing from it was left. The room was darker than it had been before, but the flashing had stopped, so Risa assumed it was okay to go inside again.

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In the room she found Thali, curled up in the middle of the floor, leaning on her arms; she was shivering, and the sweat had gathered into the cloth around her face. Her eyes were wide and trembling.

"Thali?" Risa asked. The girl smiled weakly and looked up.

"Hime," she whispered, rising shakily to her feet. She almost fell, but Risa caught her before she hit the ground.

"You...too hot. Why no...take off?" Risa asked, pulling at her clothes; for the the girl was, as always, entirely covered in them.

But Thali's eyes became suddenly bright, and they flickered almost angrily in Risa's direction. "No. No. I cannot. I will be fine...like this." But her voice was hoarse, and Risa could hear a rattling in her chest. Was an overexposure to magic really so serious?

"Is you...sure? I...help you," Risa offered.

"Are you. And I'm positive."

"Oh...oh, why no? You...look like dead. Why no...take off...this?" Risa insisted, reaching for the cloth that covered her face.

But Thali snapped her arm up, and pushed her hand away. "Don't you touch me!" she cried. "That is none of your business. Don't you know not to meddle in other people's affairs?"

The softness that had formed (though she wasn't sure when) suddenly left Risa's eyes; and the coldness from many suns ago began to seep back into them, filling them with anger.

"Fine. Why...care I...for Kalpan?" Risa retorted; but the words burned in her mouth, and Thali could hear the hurt in them. The Justice spun around, leaving the Kalpan girl behind.

Risa's vision blurred as she stormed to her room, slamming the door behind her. She willed it not to, but her mind seemed only to think about it; for Thali had seemed hurt, very hurt, and not just because of the light. Her mind wandered to the conversation she'd held with Tanmar many moons before, on the rooftop, when they spoke about his past. Could this, perhaps, have something to do with Thali's secret?

## Chapter 12

As the days progressed, Thali's condition only got worse, much to Risa's chagrin. She had expected the girl to get better, and be back to her old ways, nagging Risa to do the chores and practice her Korish; but every day, as Tanmar emerged from her room (for only he was allowed inside now that Thali had closed the door), he would only shook his head sadly, and go to fetch more of Juris' potions.

Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Risa could hear the quiet moans from downstairs, which were almost always followed by the calm and reassuring voice of Tanmar. Channa, strangely enough, either didn't care to see her daughter, or wasn't allowed to. Risa would always fold over in bed and try to block her ears in those times; the sound of Thali in pain was somehow very difficult to hear.

This went on for several suns, a little less than a week (according to Risa's time, which she was trying to be more careful with now); but there eventually came a day she hadn't expected when Thali was so sick that Tanmar was afraid to go and leave her. Risa could hear her coughing as though something had caught in her lungs and was trying to make itself free; but even her voice was weak, and couldn't be heard past the door. She had always been a fighter, capable of putting up with anything; but this sudden change had shaken this, and the uncertainty of it worried her.

And it must have been worrying Tanmar also, because two suns after that day he walked up to Risa with a determined stride and told her, "I want you to go inside and watch Thali, to make sure she doesn't get any worse while I am gone. If it had been anything other than a call from the Yonshu, I would have stayed; but this is not something I can ignore. Bring her cold water, and cloths for her head...and administer the medicine, when she asks for it."

"But...but she say...never to go--"

"She is too sick now to care for that anymore. She will be angry at me when she is better again; but it is for the best. If anything were to happen to her now..." he stopped, as though not allowing himself to finish the sentence. He looked down at Risa, the glint of something fierce behind his eyes.

"Do whatever it takes to make sure that Thail is still here when I return."

"Yes," Risa answered, though her hands were shaking.

The fiery look melted from Tanmar's eyes, replaced quickly by an hollow and empty stare of worry. "I will not be gone long," he said. "Now go."

And with that he left the house. Risa could hear his feet as the hit the ground outside, running with all urgency in the direction of the lifts; and she prayed that nothing would happen while he was gone.

She stared forebodingly at the closed door to Thali's room. Even more than making Thali angry, she didn't want to disappoint Tanmar...and she herself was beginning to understand what it was that he meant, for if anything did happen to Thali, she was sure that she herself wouldn't be able to bear it as well...

So she took in a deep breath and marched to the door, pushing it open with grim determination.

She glanced quickly around the room, searching; but her breath caught in her throat suddenly, as her eyes fixed on Thali.

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The girl was quaking with heat; her face was red and feverish, and the blanket that covered her up to her waist was drenched in sweat. A wrap covered her chest, though not as much as it usually did; and Risa could see now what Thali had fought so hard to hide, though she wished she hadn't. For there were grotesque wounds covering her entire body--from the top of her head down to everything Risa could see, all except for the skin around her eyes.

From the right side of her face down to her shoulder, there was the remainder of the effects of a burn that still looked fresh; and bright red scars that looked like knife wounds wrapped their ways around her neck, making it so that the skin around them could never be whole or smooth again. Both her arms had various scars, most of which looked like mild burns--but her left arm was entirely discolored, so that it was purple and permanently bruised from the elbow down. Thali looked up at Risa, her eyes obviously tired but somehow still fierce--but Risa could see now, in the dim light, that one of her pupils glinted a milky white color, a sure sign of blindness from very long ago.

Risa closed the door and tried hard not to show that she wished she never had entered. The sight of Thali was almost too much to bear; and she could feel her gag reflexes kicking in, along with a nagging urge to throw up. But she swallowed that feeling and held her head high; and she looked down at Thali, her arms folded.

"I know, what you say once...but Tanmar tell me, watch you now. He with Yonshu. So...no think I worry over you, Kalpan."

Thali nodded, and to Risa's surprise, a small smile lit her face.

Risa stayed standing for awhile, refusing to meet Thali's eyes; but she eventually could stand no longer, for the aching of her muscles would not allow it, and she settled down next to the girl, curling her legs up under her chin.

"So, all of...that...how...?" she asked slowly.

Thali frowned.

"What...do you...care?" she retorted, breathing heavily as she glared up at Risa.

The Justice turned away; but her face had reddened, and her eyes were darkened. Thali wrestled at once with herself, her father's words returning to her like the desert wind--for even though the Justice may treat her like such, she had no right to return the actions.

She sighed, though it sounded more like something had caught in her throat; and after coughin fidgeting in her spot, trying to get comfortable, she began to speak.

"Back home...in Nishem..." she said, the words struggling to escape her mouth, "there was a man...named Zeyar."

Risa's head tilted back toward Thali; she felt as though she had heard that name before, but she couldn't remember where.

"He...was a student...of Ponne. They all called him...a master. I...I looked up to him too, once."

"Was he...one who...do this?" Risa asked in spite of herself. Thali nodded.



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"There was a time...when he was kinder. We all loved him...even I loved...him...but then he changed." Her expression hardened, and Risa could hear the disgust in her voice. "He needed money...and someone told them they would...pay, if...if he...conducted experiments..."

Risa's eyebrows furrowed. "Experiments?" she sounded out quietly, unfamiliar with the word.

"Experiments...untested magic...used on humans...to create...medicines, on...on how to cure burns...how to fix broken bones...how to...how to heal a sunburn..." She gasped, and her chest rose and fell. "They...didn't exist before...before he researched them. The light...it was too bright for me. I am still...too sensitive."

She shifted around, and Risa noticed that the pillow beneath her head was damp. But she couldn't seem to move; everything was slowly making sense in her mind, and she couldn't seem to think properly.

"The experiments...went on for...several months. By that time, my health...was diminishing. I could...tell no one though..."

"Then one day...a young woman came...from Kor. She...she told me that...her husband...was a good friend...of the Kalpan Yonshu. He would...rescue me, she said...once she...told him. But...she died, before...before that ever happened..."

Risa's expression had frozen. She wasn't sure what to feel; pain, sorrow, pity. Anger. They were all swelling together inside of her, and after awhile she almost couldn't tell most of them apart. But she knew that they were not the right responses. She wasn't sure what the right responses were anymore.

"Juris...was the one who...who told Papa. I still don't know how...he knew, but...but he did, and Papa...came to kidnap me...and Mama, to...to save me."

"But Mama...she wasn't allowed...in the gates, because...because she was...an outsider, an enemy...and I was too sick...so he...he married Mama, to protect...to help me. But he...he really loves her," she said fervently, her eyes shining in the darkened room.

"I know," Risa said quietly.

"And he loves her," Thali repeated, "but she hates him. He stole her...from the man she loves..."

And then the tears welled up in her eyes, and they ran in droves down the sides of her face; and she cried, turning her face away from Risa.

"What...what? Have you...pain?" Risa asked, startled.

"No...no..." she moaned, her words barely audible. "It's just that...the man Mama loves...is Zeyar..."

"What?" Risa asked, dazed.

"That man...is Zeyar. I never told...I never told Mama. She never...she never would have...forgiven herself. But I fought...hard, after that...to learn Ponne. I wanted to...to cure myself, and help...the others that might have been...like me. Ponne is...not such a terrible thing, but he...he twisted it..."

"Juris, when he found me...was so shocked...it was almost as though...as though he blamed himself...for not knowing...how to help. He worked tirelessly...he taught me everything he knew...he gave me the strength...to keep going on, even when...even when it hurt. He spoke often of the man...who ordered the experiments, for

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he knew him...saying...that man deserved to die...for what he had done...

"I will never...never tell Mama, or anyone...what happened to me. Because someday...someday, I will be normal again. But until then, I have to...fight it...just like...everyone else. Just like...you."

Risa's eyes glinted of surprise. "Me?" she echoed.

"Yes...you. You have been...hurt, just as...just as I was hurt. Betrayed. You had to...to give up something important...just as...just as I had to...didn't you?"

Risa opened her mouth to say something; but she closed it soon after, and her eyes shifted to the ground.

"Never...never give up. Okay? Keep...fighting. You will find your answers...when you need them most, when you are...ready...to accept them."

Risa swallowed, feeling her throat tighten painfully. "I think...I think you...need water," she said, turning around and stumbling out of the room.

And she broke down the second she was in the hall, crying as she had not allowed herself to cry in over a month, mourning the loss of her brother, her family, her people. She cried for everything she had lost, everything she once had cherished, that she had given up for the sake of someone else's pride.

But somehow, within that moment, she knew she had been given a gift. For there were times when she felt as though this young Kalpan girl had treated her kindly for this reason, inadvertently telling her all the words she had ever needed to know, like someone else used to do when she was tired and afraid...all the words she had ever needed, perhaps, to move forward.

## Chapter 13

It had been a very long time since either of the girls left the house. Tanmar would hear them chattering away no matter what room he went into; and now that most of it was in Korish, it never ceased to make him smile. The young Reihimian girl was making a lot of progress--though most of this was, he knew, due to his daughter, Thali. That girl could chase away any stormcloud, making it so that even the sadness itself seemed impossible.

He was on his way up the stairs one day when the Justice bumped into him, almost completely unaware that he'd been there. She looked up at him, at first shocked, and then a little afraid; but suddenly a huge smile sprang onto her face, and Tanmar was completely taken aback by its sincerity. While Hime was very close to Thali, she ordinarily wasn't inclined toward anyone else.

"Where are you headed?" he asked, smiling kindly in return.

"Oh, Thali say of something she have want to share with me. She have told me go up stair and get it." She held a well-worn book out to him.

"It seems as though you two have grown close," Tanmar said, taking it from her and smiling at the cover. Risa grinned in response; but there was a hint of something else in it, something deeper that Tanmar couldn't quite identify. It left him puzzled.

"She remind me much of someone I once have known," the girl answered softly, noticing the confused look that Tanmar had given her, and his fidgeting with the book. He studied her, looking for a hint of something in that look again; but she had brightened once more, and any trace of it was long gone.

"Well, Thali wait for me!" she piped, and flew down the rest of the stairs, turning a tight corner to the girl's room. He chuckled.

"What a strange child," he commented before disappearing up the stairs.

There were some days when neither girl would emerge from Thali's bedroom; and Thali began to send for Juris' potions less and less now that her recovery seemed to be speeding up. It was almost as though the Justice brought laughter with her everywhere she went; and in those times she seemed truly like a princess, one that loved her people and cherished them over herself. Hime though, while a lovely name and suitable to her position, did not seem to fully suit her. For she was too kind and understanding to be just another princess, too cheerful now for who they knew that she should have been. It was confusing to all who met her, especially Tanmar; and it only served to do so further when he sat down next to Thali one day, while Risa was upstairs practicing her Korish (for Thali had insisted upon it) and spoke to her of the girl.

"You would never believe it, Papa. She told me that she was only staying inside with me so I could teach her Korish; but I know it's so much more than that. She's lonely, Papa, terribly lonely."

"I know," Tanmar said, patting his daughter softly on the head. She smiled

"But even though she says such things, they never hurt me. Do you want to know why? Because sometimes she says one thing, and you almost believe her; but her eyes will say something else, something entirely different, and you can't help but believe them instead of her words. They never lie, I don't think. And even when she's the proud and stuffy Justice of Reihem, she still has this sadness about her, this weight, like a heavy cloak." The girl stared off at nothing in particular. "And I can't help but wonder why."

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"She has not told you?" Tanmar asked, surprised.

"No, of course not. She's very close-mouthed about such things. There are times she asks me about something, and I ramble on and on about it without remembering to ask her something too; but this never seems to bother her, because she just sits and listens contentedly. I always have this nagging feeling that she hears me then, but not really--like my words are reminding her of something else, and she's lost in it. And even though we talk a lot now, she never tells me of Reihem, or her people, or her family. It's like she doesn't even remember them."

"Perhaps she doesn't want to."

"That's true," Thali mused. "But why?"

"I suppose that it is something," Tanmar said, rising slowly, "we shall just have to wait for her to tell us on her own time, when she is ready."

"Aww," Thali pouted, "But that's so difficult!"

"It can be," Tanmar answered, chuckling, "but it is well worth it in the end. So long as you look at patience within the grand scale of things, you will never have the strength to push on; but if you take it one day at a time, you will somehow find that you have all the strength you need, even if only for that moment."

"Hmm," Thali said, her eyes reflective. "Thank you, Papa. I think I needed to hear that."

"You're welcome," he said, bending down to kiss her on the forehead.

"Now Thali," he said, when he had straightened up again, "Hime has to go outside sometime soon. She has been cooped up in this house with you far too long, and I can scarcely stand to hear her pacing around upstairs because she has nowhere else to go. I know not of what she did before she came here, but that girl has too much energy to be doing nothing."

"But Papa," Thali said, "she's already doing all the chores for me, even the lights. And I'll be up in a couple of days--can't it wait?"

"I suppose it could." His eyes suddenly twinkled mischievously. "But...I heard that some new books came out in the Library just yesterday...and I figured that, since Risa obviously needs to stretch her legs out a bit, we could send her out to fetch them for you..."

"New books?" Thali started, sitting up suddenly in bed. A knowing smile spread across Tanmar's face, and he knew he had already won.

"Yes, that's what I said."

"Any more from the Djenna War Series?"

"You shall just have to wait to hear that from the Justice now, won't you?"

"Papa!" Thali cried. "That's...that's not fair!"

"Is it now?" he chuckled. "Especially when the girl wants to leave so badly anyways?"

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Thali sighed, rolling her eyes up to the ceiling. "You win," she groaned. "Hime!" she called, glaring at the sound of Tanmar chuckling as he left the room.

"What is it, Thali?" Risa called, surprised by the unexpected sound of excitement in the girl's voice. She trotted down the stairs and to her room, passing by a strangely satisfied Tanmar in the hall.

"Papa just told me that some new books came to the Library yesterday! And I'm not well enough to go out and get them just yet...but I know you've been itching to leave the house for quite some time, so this would be the perfect opportunity for you, not only to get some exercise, but also to practice your Korish...but Hime, whatever is the matter?"

For Risa's face had turned a chalky white, as though she had become very sick all of a sudden.

"You have want me...travel...to Zarkera capital city...by self?" she repeated, mortified.

"Not really wanting; this is more like begging. I've been waiting a very, very, *very* long time for those books," Thali said. "And you know how patient I can be."

"But, but," Risa stammered. "Alone?"

"You'll be fine!" Thali encouraged. "If I didn't think you would be, I wouldn't entrust my new books to you."

Risa somehow didn't find this very comforting.

"Now listen," Thali said sternly, as though to wrestle the very fear out of Risa herself, "The Library is a little while away from the Ailis, which you saw the last time we were there together. It is made out of the same stone, and has a large symbol shaped like this--" she traced her finger wildly about the air "--carved into the front, above the doors. You can't miss it."

"But, but," Risa pleaded.

"No! You can do it," Thali said. "I believe in you."

"No you do not. You just have want for book," Risa cried.

"That's not true!" Thali protested. "Though I do admit...they do have something to do with it," she added sheepishly, after seeing Risa's sarcastic look.

There was a pause, in which Risa watched Thali; but the girl only glared at her irritably. "Well? What are you standing around for?"

"I was...hope you not mean what you say," Risa said slowly.

Thali raised an eyebrow. "Go," she said finally. So Risa went.

She felt as though her legs were going to go out from underneath her almost the entire way there; and when she got to the lifts, she had to sit while riding them for the first time in several months. When she reached the opening to Zarkera, she paused, peering nervously inside the wide and gaping opening, and wishing she had just told Thali no.

"Are you going to move? I have people waiting," the man on the lift said impatiently.

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Risa nodded, wishing for a second that time would stop, to wait for her mind to catch up to it; but it didn't, and she knew it never would, so she took in a deep breath, and placed a shaky step inside.

The capital city was much busier than she had expected it to be. People were hurrying here and there with an air of business surrounding them, scarcely aware of the stranger that walked alongside them in the streets; though they would've had to look hard to notice her, for Risa was trying very hard not to be seen. She ducked her head and was careful not to run into anyone; and her eyes remained constantly downcast. Somehow, she had the strangest feeling that no one would respect her here, even if they did know of her title.

She was halfway down the bustling path to the Ailis when something strange began to happen. There was a thundering as though a storm was brewing from the outside; and the ground began shaking wildly. Risa wondered if it was an earthquake, and she fought to keep her ground.

And then the dust started kicking up from somewhere in the distance; people began to fall to the ground, their foreheads touching the stone floor as though in reverence. Risa watched them, a confused expression on her face. What were they doing?

It took awhile for her to hear it over the sounds of the thundering, but she soon realized that the people were yelling something; and they seemed to be yelling it to her. She couldn't understand the words they said due to the thunderous roar of the dust-cloud, and her heart began quaking like the ground beneath her; oh, how she wished that she had stayed at home, and ignored Thali's protests about the books!

The dust was stirring up too quickly now, and the ground trembled to such an extent that Risa closed her eyes and wrapped her arms around her head, as though to shield herself from anything that might come at her. She silently prayed; it seemed to be becoming a habit as of late.

But then the thundering ceased; the dust-wind died down, and Risa cautiously lowered her arms.

She opened her eyes, her ears barely picking up the sounds of the horse hooves as they stamped the ground before her; she lifted her head, squinting.

She took in the sight of the horse hooves as she blinked, and her eyes widened. Eyebrows furrowing in confusion, she followed the hooves slowly up to a regal and muscled white horse, which stood tall and proud before her; for this was a royal horse, a horse fit for a king. She swallowed, understanding slowly and fearfully why the people had been falling to the ground; and then, even more hesitantly, she allowed her eyes to rest upon the man who sat atop the horse, and on his face.

She gasped when she realized who he was, and her hand went flying out of instinct to cover her mouth; for out of all the people she knew within Kalpar, she had not been expecting him.

For there before her sat the Yonshu Aasir Kalevi, the ruler of the Kalpan nation; and he stared down at her with a suffocating gaze as his bright green eyes pierced straight through her heart.

## Chapter 14

Risa had never felt more irritated than she was in that moment.

Aasir squinted down at her, his green eyes seemingly glowing with energy. "Why, if it isn't the Lady Justice," he commented sarcastically. Risa was almost surprised to find that she could now understand his heavily accented Korish, even though it had been only a few months since she heard him speak it last.

She could feel her face reddening under her gaze, and a memory returned to her that only served to discolor it further. Only a short time ago, back in the desert somewhere between Kalpar and Maura, she had yelled at him, making absolutely no sense to him or anyone else (excepting perhaps Tanmar and Thali), and had been duly slapped. Slapped by the leader of the Kalpan nation. That time seemed so long ago now--but she was sure, by the way that he looked at her, that it was still fresh in his memory. No wonder she had been disgraced.

Protests were building on all sides of the Yonshu; people were rising, shaking their fists at Risa and shouting curses to her name. Half their words were not understood by her--for Thali, while set on teaching her as much of the Korish language as she could, did not find it useful to teach her the obscenities. Helpless, she looked up at Aasir, her eyes silently pleading.

He only watched her with a cold stare, a battle of wills ensuing; but then he sighed reluctantly, his upper lip twitching in disgust. Slowly he reached his hand out to her; and she took it, but only because she had no other choice. She felt that if such a thing were possible, she could die in this moment from embarrassment alone.

"You are perhaps the slowest person I have ever known," he muttered to her as he pulled her up in front of him. "Asking for help from the very person that caused you to need it in the first place. Why, it's almost pathetic! Have you no shame?"

Risa seethed, straightening out her back as she settled into place so as to prevent herself from touching him. His Korish was very refined; it had strange endings on many of the words, which Risa had never heard used before. It was difficult to keep up with them sometimes.

"Only you probably still can't understand what I'm saying, can you?" He sighed. "Convenient."

So he thought she didn't know Korish? She knew that she should tell him that she did, and had a feeling that he would become quite angry with her if she didn't; but she didn't think that it was currently the best of times to reveal it. And she was beginning to think that she liked it better this way anyhow, for then he wouldn't try to cover up what he said about her just because he knew she understood.

She scrunched up her face a little further to feign confusion, and began throwing equally disgusted looks at the people who dared to glare up at her now that she sat at the same level as their Yonshu.

Aasir shifted uncomfortably. "Well. Time to clear this mess up," he muttered, turning the horse around to face the people.

"Good Kalpans," he said, his voice surprisingly resonant throughout the Niche. "Please excuse this girl. She is a foreigner--a mildly stupid one at that--and therefore does not know what she does when she does it. Pardon her, if you can look past her disgrace to do so."

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Risa's face burned, and her hands tightened on the horse's mane to the point that it whinnied and stamped at the ground. But fortunately several of the people nodded, casting strangely understanding glances in her direction. It almost made her sick. How dare they treat her with such sympathy?

But one man stood, calling the attention of the others; he raised and accusative finger in the direction of the Justice, calling "Who is she, then, that she is of such importance--that we should pardon her?"

A collective murmuring and nodding of heads followed.

"She is the Sanchi," Aasir said unflinchingly, using a word Risa didn't recognize. But it must have meant something important, for there was such a sudden uproar among the people that even Aasir was surprised. It seemed a mix of many emotions; some still anger, mostly confusion; but strangest of all, there were smiles were appearing on the people's faces, followed by looks of extreme happiness, of joy. She would have to ask Thali what it meant when she returned...if she ever returned.

Inwardly, she figured it to be a bad word, similar to the ones that Channa once had called her; and her insides churned at the idea of being scorned so openly by the leader of such a great nation. But even that didn't make sense, though it seemed to be the most logical solution. If he had just called her something terrible, then why was everyone so happy about it?

He turned his horse to face the Ailis; and with a strange sense of pride, he began marching his way back toward his castle, addressing those he encountered and asking them of their families. All answered him back very politely, eyeing Risa with curious glances; and she could tell that many of them knew him rather personally, despite his position. And yet she had expected the Yonshu to be aloof and separate from his the people, distant and cold like the leaders of Reihem had been.

But Aasir seemed almost to enjoy the time he spent among his people, as though he was created for it; and they seemed too happy, almost blessed, to be addressed by him. They bowed low, respectfully; and he would nod once in their direction before continuing forward.

She turned to look at him several times along the way, unsure of what else to do; though this apparently irritated him, for he glared back at her, as though silently daring her to continue. But she couldn't help it. Somewhere, behind all the harshness of his face and the pride of his sharp jaw, there was a kind and almost sad look, mostly showing in his eyes. Even when he was angry, but there was something inside of him holding it back. She couldn't help but wonder what caused such a strange look in such a powerful man.

They wound their way throughout the city; and Risa, not wishing to spoil Aasir's idea that she still could not speak his language, sat placidly in front of him, erect but not proud, waiting as patiently as possible to be returned home. They viewed her with a sort of respect as well; but none of them addressed her directly, something Risa was inwardly relieved about.

It was only a little ways away; but there in front of her, before she had even realized it, stood the marvelous gates of the Ailis, tall and proud and magnificent in every way possible.

She stared up at them, her eyes wide in disbelief; never before had she believed that anything could be so beautiful. The marble was carved from the bottom all the way up to the top, so intricate that it looked as though it should have taken hundreds of years just to carve the bottom of it; and it appeared to be so impossibly great that Risa wondered how it could've been carved at all. She was in the middle of supposing how exactly they got them there in the first place when the doors gave a loud jolt and began to swing open, unassisted by people. Though slow, they were sturdy and steadfast, and thundered open to allow the visitors inside.



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Aasir leaped expertly off the horse, as though he had done such things his entire life, then began waiting impatiently for Risa (whom it appeared he had lost all sympathy for, and was now taking care of only from obligation); and the second Risa's sandals hit the ground, a person she guessed to be a servant came from inside and took the horse by the reins, leading it toward a side-door, which apparently led to a corral of some kind.

Aasir motioned forward impatiently. Risa, not having realized that she was supposed to move just yet as she had lost her thoughts in the direction of the Ailis, blushed furiously and rushed forward, careful not to fall behind.

"You did a very stupid thing," Aasir told her as they made their way through the grand entry hall, "in not bowing to me when I was announced. Do you not know that it is universally custom to show respect to those in a position of authority?"

Risa, not having anything to say (or perhaps not knowing what to say instead) could only keep her eyes downcast.

"And as for what I did for you today," he said, a tinge of something like regret in his voice, "You are indebted to me beyond what you could possibly imagine. My character--which, up until now, had been flawless--has just been mortally wounded in the presence of the people for whom I spent many Yaru building it up. And yet--it has all been torn down in a single moment! Did you see the way that they addressed me, how they bowed to me? I did not believe such humiliation possible!--but I have been wrong about such things before." His tone was full of remorse.

Risa could only think silently to herself, half listening to the Yonshu's woes. She herself was not much accustomed to the Kalpan ways, it was true (though this was no fault of her own); but if she opened her mouth to defend herself, she might unknowingly break another custom. And besides, the Yonshu still believed her to be an uneducated foreigner; if played the part carefully, she could possibly use it to her advantage. So she made the decision to keep her mouth shut, listening carefully to the Yonshu's every word and concentrating solely on remaining in step with him.

But while passing through the hall, she caught a glimpse of shockingly red hair, to the likeness of which she had not seen for many years; and she was torn from her thoughts, frantically refocusing on what she had just seen. Only one person in the entire world had hair like that, and he was thought to be dead.

But it passed the corner too quickly for her to examine it further; and so she had to pretend that she had seen nothing, and hurried forward to catch up with Aasir. Her mind was whirling, the thoughts rolling about it faster than they ever had before; and she fought to ignore them, to concentrate on the beat set down by Aasir's sandals. She wondered how he seemed to walk so fast; it was almost by magic, for he couldn't be more than a few inches taller than she was.

At last he slowed, and the two reached a large room at the end of the second (or was it the third?) hall. It was furnished mostly with carpets and rugs and sculptures of sorts; there were two chairs off to the side, near the farthest corner of the room, and they appeared to be reserved for guests. Aasir motioned for her to sit; but she only looked defiantly back at him, taking a step or two backwards. Not only did she not want to accept such an open display of hospitality from someone like him, who would curse a person when he thought they could not understand, but her legs were throbbing with soreness, and she was sure that if she sat she would not get back up again. So she shook her head instead, feigning a lapse of misunderstanding.

Aasir gave an irritated sigh, thoroughly frustrated, and began pacing the room back and forth impatiently, as though deliberating over what to do with her now that he had her here. She only watched him quietly; for

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there were times when he would pause, and she was quite sure that he would speak to her--but he would only shake his head and return to his pacing. So she simply waited quietly for him to stop, and attempt to tell her what he was going to do with her.

But after the third set of pacings, he only gave an exasperated grunt; and with that he pointed firmly at the ground near her feet.

"Wait here," was all he said before he stormed out of the room, slamming the doors behind him.

Soon after he left, Risa relaxed, as though having left the frigid cold for a room with a fire. She hadn't noticed it at the time, but she had been stiff in his presence; that ever-suffocating air still surrounded him like a fog, and it never ceased to choke her. Hesitatingly--because she desperately needed to move and stretch her cramped legs a bit, but was afraid to should Yonshu return--she began to peer cautiously around the room, her eyes shifting slowly from side to side. After some careful consideration, and a few moments' pause to make sure that she could hear no sounds coming from the hallway, she decided to go walking about it.

The rugs beneath her feet were beautiful, stitched evenly and yet not overdone; they looked as though they had never seen a speck of dust in their lives, though Risa couldn't fathom such a concept seeing as how they lay in the middle of a desert. Portraits of people Risa neither knew nor recognized stretched the lengths of the walls, which were colored like the sky; many of these paintings were regal-looking, clothed in bright and royal robes that draped artistically around them, their brows dark and brooding over unfathomable eyes. She stared at each one as though waiting for it to spring to life, for she was almost quite sure that they would; but thankfully they never did.

There was a vase full of flowers on a table in the farthest corner from the chairs, bearing the same dry buds that Thali had loved; and Risa wondered if they were Thali's favorite only because they were the closest things resembling to a flower that dared to grow on Kor. She fingered them carefully; they even felt dry. The petals seemed almost to wrinkle under her touch.

She sighed and walked slowly back to where the chairs were, for the dull ache had set into her legs and she could feel them about to give out; but just as she was about to rest, there came a harsh knock at the door. Unsure of what to do (because it couldn't be Aasir, he wouldn't have even bothered with the knocking), she simply froze, staring wide-eyed and expectant in the direction of the doorway.

The knocking repeated itself after a time, quiet but urgent; and Risa, her voice shaking, called out in a cautious Reihimian, "Who's there?"

The door creaked open slowly; and before she knew it, a man had entered, quickly but stealthy, and had closed the door behind him.

He turned; and there before her stood the person she thought she had seen before, with hair the color of fire and blue eyes that shone like the dark ocean waters. And he was as real as everything else in the room, as the portraits and sculptures and the little flowers that sat wilting on the table; and the only person, besides Celandine, who was born and raised in Reihem, and still lived to see the day.

## Chapter 15

Lan stood there, scanning his surroundings; and when he caught sight of Risa he came striding across the room toward her, a smile wide on his face, which was just as mischievous (and handsome) as she had remembered it to be (if a bit darker and older). He pulled her into a tight hug, which she had forgotten before but remembered now; and she nearly fell apart in his arms.

"Lan!" Risa cried, struggling with her emotions. She didn't want to push him away, but she felt uncomfortable at having to talk into his shoulder. "What are you doing here? I thought you were dead!"

"I could say the same of you, Risa," he said, his voice was unmistakable. That characteristic hint of confidence, mingled with an endless tint of amusement; this was undoubtedly the Lan she knew. And his Reihimian was pure and sweet to her ears; she hadn't realized just how much she missed it until she heard it again, and from someone other than herself. She hugged him even tighter.

"Aasir--he's the man who took you here, in case you didn't know--had told me that the Justice of Reihem was in his waiting room; but when I saw you walking down the hallway, your face white yet strangely determined, and fixed at the floor near the Yonshu's feet...it didn't look anything like the Hime I once knew. Her look was always something of a snob, with her nose in the air, and her eyes overly bright and piercing...which yours most definitely is not, and could never be. And I'm wondering," he said, pulling away to look inquisitively down at her, "why are you here instead of her? And why does the Yonshu believe so indefinitely that you are the Justice?"

Risa's face clouded over. "It's a very long story, one I'm sure I could not relate to you within a short amount of time."

Lan nodded. "Some other time then. But Hime? Where is she? She never would have let you go, not so long as she had her say in the matter." He paused, and his expression froze. "Unless..."

He looked toward Risa, who nodded slowly but definitely.

Lan shook his head, biting his lower lip; and his eyes grew troubled and dark.

"How did it happen?" he asked her slowly.

"Aasir...and Tanmar and the other men, I think they killed her. And the others..." her voice was barely above a whisper now. Her eyes were cold and far away; but Lan did not notice.

There was a long silence in which neither of them moved, or even seemed to breathe; but after awhile Lan sighed, running his hand through his hair, and the color returned to his face.

"That, I had not expected," he said, his air distracted and confused. She realized how much he seemed to be leaving her in that instance, falling deep into his thoughts; and she wanted suddenly to distract him, to keep him from the memories that she knew were heavy and weighing on his mind.

"And how have you been?" she asked, a small smile growing on her face. She looked up at him. "Last I remember, you were flirting with every girl in Reihem, even if they were older than you."

Lan chuckled. "That hasn't changed much."

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"That's a surprise. I thought it had, after you left," Risa responded.

"And why would you think that?"

"Well, you seemed for so long that you loved Rithe so much that you could never even pay attention to any other woman, no matter how beautiful she was. After the two of you left, I--"

But with the mention of her name, Lan seemed to freeze, every muscle in his body tensing visibly; and Risa noticed this reaction and watched him, concern momentarily crossing her face. "Lan?" she called to him. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Rithe--" he began, but the sound of footsteps in the hallway interrupted him. His eyes flashed, and he lowered his voice, turning to look urgently at Risa.

"I must leave now. Do not tell Aasir that we have spoken; he forbids any use of Reihimian, no matter what the reasons for it were."

Risa's face scrunched up, confused. "But--"

"I'll try to see you as soon as I can," he interjected, opening the door again; and he winked to her teasingly before disappearing through it, shutting it as quietly as before.

Risa couldn't seem to move for a second, as though she was somewhere else entirely; and then she sank into the chair, letting her head fall into her hands. Her mind was a mixture of so many different thoughts that she couldn't seem to understand them all, no matter how intensely she pried and poked and peered at them. Lan had loved Rithe so much...but why had he flinched at the sound of her name? And how could he have not known about the death of her people, when he appeared to be working in the castle of the Yonshu?

Her mind was still spinning out of control when someone entered the room, and she suddenly had the strangest sense, as though she couldn't breathe anymore; and she knew without even looking that it was Aasir. He had come at the most inconvenient time; and she hoped against hope that he would suddenly remember some other more important thing he obviously had to do (for he always acted as though he had some) and would leave her alone to her thoughts again.

"We're going now, get up," he commanded; and when she didn't move he reached for her hand, as though to help her up himself. But she flinched away from his touch; her thoughts disturbed, she glared up at him angrily, and stood entirely on her own. He only watched her, his eyes thoroughly irritated (though his expression feigned boredom).

"Not worthy of my pity at all," he muttered under his breath. Risa had to fight very hard not to say anything in return--though it was difficult to keep quiet, especially when you knew you were being insulted. Her head throbbed at the prospect of having to run to keep up with him again; and somehow his stride seemed even longer this time, as though fueled by the idea of finally getting rid of her. Risa locked her jaw in determination and scuttled alongside of him, taking two large steps for each one of his.

They had left the halls before Risa realized it, and she quickly caught sight of the same white horse as before, which was waiting for them at the gates behind the door. Aasir jumped skillfully onto it, then pulled Risa up to settle in front of him. He seemed to hold onto her rather tightly, as though afraid to let her go; and this was curious, because there was a softness to it, a seemingly gentle concern.

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And then she felt him tense at the feeling of her back against his chest, which was covered with sweat because of how hard she had to work to keep up with him; and his face curled up into such a sour look of disgust that Risa's insides boiled. She seethed, struggling to keep from turning around and throwing a fist in his direction. How could anyone be so infuriatingly rude?

Unconvinced at any attempts of concern he might have previously had for her, she glared furiously over the top of the horse, concentrating on the light that flickered from the opening at the far end of the Niche.

As they rode for the opening, he told her, in an impatient tone, "I am to take you back to your...home...personally. There are a few things I need to...discuss with Tanmar, mostly concerning you." He brought the horse to a stop and took hold of her hand (though openly against his will, and almost as though he had grabbed a slug), and pulled her onto the lift, tightening his grip even more if she tried to pull her hand away.

Risa felt a sickening nausea grow in her stomach, and her hands felt suddenly shaky in his grasp. She wanted to pull them away, but couldn't. He had to have found out about her. But how? Lan didn't have time enough to tell him, did he? After all, he was the only one who knew!

They boarded a second lift, which took them up to the Kuro Niche; and Aasir pulled her through the opening, his grip on her hand almost painful. He stormed through the streets of Kuro, and Risa was almost surprised to see that no one seemed to recognize him--no one, that is, except for Tanmar, who seemed to be waiting nervously by the door of his home (which Risa guessed was for missing his wife once again). When he finally caught sight of them, he watched the scene with wide and almost disbelieving eyes; for the leader of Kalpar was dragging behind him the unwilling young Justice of Reihem, with all the force and determination of a scorned man.

"Tanmar, I need to speak with you about this girl," he said harshly, almost throwing Risa in front of him. She didn't miss that he wiped his hands off on his pants after he let go; Tanmar, however, did not seem to notice this, for couldn't tear his eyes from the Justice. She was pale and sickly looking, her lips a terrifying shade of white.

"What, has she done something wrong?" he replied, looking anxiously back and forth between the Justice and Aasir.

"Has she ever. What was she doing in Zarkera?"

"Getting books for Thali. She hasn't been out of the house in a long time; and we figured it would be alright if--"

"If you let a Reihimian walk the streets of Kalpar alone? The people looked ready to tear her limb from limb when they realized she wasn't bowing to me as I passed through the streets. If I hadn't been there to help her, she might not have survived."

Risa swallowed, squeezing her eyes shut in fear. He was only brushing the surface. She awaited his next words with an apprehension that she had never felt before, knowing that he was finally to reveal everything she had fought so hard to hide from them since the very beginning.

"Besides that, no foreigner is allowed into the Library, not until they have seen Mordevi."

Risa's eyes snapped open. What?

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"And you will allow this?" Tanmar asked cautiously.

"I won't disapprove, if that's what you mean," Aasir replied dourly. Tanmar nodded.

"Then I will send Thali to see Nono right away."

Risa frowned. Nono? Mordevi? She wondered if these names meant anything special, for Tanmar had flinched slightly when he heard them. And did this mean that Aasir didn't know who she was?

She resisted a smile. So she was triumphant after all.

Lan's words flashed in her mind and she thought carefully over her next move. Turning back to face the Yonshu, she bowed low.

"While I cannot apologize for what I have done, seeing as how it was done unknowingly and therefore not in ill will," she said in her most perfect Reihimian, her constitution solid and more firm than it had ever been before, "I can assure you that it will not happen again."

The Yonshu looked taken aback; he watched her for a second as she straightened, squinting at her. Something vaguely resembling a smile seemed to touch the corners of his mouth, and he nodded, almost in approval. He then turned on his heel and began marching back toward the opening, his head held high and his blond hair flowing.

Risa was afraid to turn around after the Yonshu was out of sight; she didn't want to see the disappointed look on Tanmar's face. Knowing full well of his problems only made her feel worse when she added to them; and she dreaded the knowledge that she had, even if only out of a misunderstanding. But, to her surprise, his expression was far from disappointment. In fact, he looked as though he was trying very hard to keep himself from laughing.

"What is it?" Risa asked, confused.

"For the first time in all my years of knowing him, it appears that Yonshu Aasir has met his match in stubbornness. And in a young Reihimian girl, at that," he added, chuckling. "Never before has he met someone with such a determined and unbending will as yours, which is not unlike his own. I don't believe he knows what to do with you."

Risa snorted. The thought was absurd to her. The man was always so confident, so self-assured; Tanmar must be mistaken.

"I don't find him as kind as you have implied before; you seem to respect him so, and I think that he is nothing but an arrogant and hard-headed man, even if he is the Yonshu."

"Strong words," Tanmar said, "but true ones, so I will forgive them. But we should probably return to the house, and prepare for the night. Channa is not home, so you needn't worry about making too much noise. I will not mention to Thali just how much you have used Reihimian today." Another pause, and then he added, "It's going to be a very long day tomorrow."

"That Mordevi the Yonshu mentioned, and Nono...who are they?"

"Seers," Tanmar answered slowly, "or fortune-tellers, as I believed they are called in Reihem. Except that they are so much more than that. They see the future only for what it is, and what it always will be; and anything

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that is defined to us now was known to them in the past."

"If the Yonshu really doesn't know what to do with me, then why doesn't he just consult them about it?"

"That's the funny part; Seers don't know things that aren't defined now. If someone is to have a baby, and they wish to know the gender, they can ask the Seers; and they will be able to tell it to them, because the baby exists, though it is not born yet. And they will tell them if the baby is to live, or die in childbirth, based upon its current condition; what it will look like, and if it has any distinct traits, such as disabilities, or even magical inclinations."

"So why do I have to see them?"

"To prove that you are not a threat," Tanmar answered. He looked down at her kindly. "Do not worry though; they may sound frightening, but they're not nearly as terrifying as you might think them to be."

Risa wasn't so sure about that. It wasn't their powers that she found terrifying.

At that moment, Thali emerged from the house. She saw Tanmar, then Risa, and an inquisitive look appeared on her face.

"I saw Aasir," she said. "Is anything wrong?"

Tanmar shook his head, replying in Korish. "He only came to tell us that Hime must meet with the Seers before we can allow her into the Library."

"The Seers?" Thali echoed, her voice tinged with something Risa couldn't identify. "Then I suppose you'll want me to go see Nono?"

"I would appreciate it, Thali," he answered. And Thali sighed, nodding submissively before she began trotting off in the direction of the opening.

"She didn't seem too happy about that," Risa commented, watching her as she left. "Are the Seers ordinary?"

"There is only so much about them that we can tell you ourselves," Tanmar answered, "and even then it may not all make sense. But you will understand in time, and will be used to it before long."

Risa nodded; but inside her heart was shaking. She didn't know what to prepare herself for, and the uncertainty of it made her even more nervous than she would have been had she not known about it at all; and she had a feeling that she wasn't going to sleep very well that night.

## Chapter 16

Risa had never thought a desert could be so cold.

They had woken up so early that even the Lights hadn't had a chance to brighten the Niche; and for the first time since she had arrived, she had to dress warmly, covered almost entirely in a colorful assortment of scarves and coats (though for Thali, this wasn't too out of the ordinary). A wind, slow and mournful, circled the house; and a chill ran down Risa's spine each time it caught hold of bare skin. It wasn't much better outside; and it would waste warm air to talk, so the three were silent as they prepared for their journey to the Seer's Niche. When they were ready, they piled slowly out of the house, walking closer together than usual so they could keep each other warm.

The air as they boarded the lift was almost stifling with how cold it was; Risa could see her breath, and even that was through the scarf that covered most of her face. The wind created by the slow downward motion of the lift caused them all to shiver, and huddle closer together than they already were; and when the lift jerked to a stop at the bottom, Risa gave a sigh of relief, nodding thankfully at the men who worked them (known as "Leijas," or so Thali had told her once), and shuffled off after the others.

Tanmar had told her the night before that the Seers' Niche was to the farthest left corner of Kalpar, and the only one of the twenty-four not having a Lift. Instead, there were stairs, carved roughly out of the harsh mountain stone; and the Niche opening, though barely noticeable at first, proved wide enough to fit only a single person through.

Once Thali and Risa were inside, Tanmar (who had to duck his head to fit) came in behind them, and nudged them both forward.

The Niche, to Risa's surprise, did not have any lights. In fact, it did not have anything hinting towards magic at all--the walls were bare, adorned only by small fires, which were in bowls hanging from the ceiling; and a threadbare rug, just large enough to stretch the length of the opening, covered the hard floor with its stiff mat. There were no adornments, no decorations--just shadows dancing lengthwise on the walls. And the only house in sight lay just ahead of them, large but not immodest; perhaps two (or, from this distance,) three stories tall.

The door had a grisly brass knocker on it, in the shape of a golden eye, which had rust around the edges; and Tanmar had to reach out and grab ahold of its eyelashes, pulling them down to knock. Risa's face curled up in disgust; and she looked over at Thali questioningly, but the girl only shook her head. Though she didn't seem to be too happy about it either.

There didn't appear to be anyone there at first; and Risa, her heart pounding so loud that she was sure she could hear it echoing off the walls, suggested quietly that maybe they should just go home. But Tanmar assured her that they were somewhere deep within the house, and they needed only to wait patiently for them to allow themselves to be seen. Within that moment, Risa decided that she hated magic, and all of its mystery.

Risa was quite sure she hadn't been there the first time she scanned the room; but there, waiting patiently in the farthest corner of the house (which was just below a set of stairs), was a young girl, barely ten years old, standing with her arms crossed in front of her stomach. Her pitch black hair seemed almost darker than the shadows, pulled sharply into two tight braids which fell limply at her sides; and her eyes were closed, head tilted meditatively toward the ground.

But then her head snapped upward, and her eyes flew open; and they were yellow and glowing, brighter than the fire that hung from the ceiling. Her look alone seemed to empty Risa of all reason, for her eyes held no



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emotion, just a powerful light; and it seem to consume all which it saw nearby. Her lips formed a tight line.

"We have been waiting for you," she spoke, her voice as monotone as her expression. "Great-Grandfather told me that you were to come at first light."

She watched them expectantly, as though waiting for something; but when nothing happened, she gave an irritated sigh. "Well, stop standing there, and come to me. We haven't got all day; and if anyone but the Yonshu had asked us to see you, you wouldn't be here until sometime next Zhadi."

"We understand," said Tanmar, his voice full of a forced respect. The girl nodded, as though accepting his words.

"Then follow me," she said, turning and walking so smoothly that it was almost as though she was floating.

Thali must have noticed Risa's wide eyes and stiff movements, because she took hold of her hand and squeezed it.

"That's Nono, the sixth Seer," she whispered, careful not to draw the attention of the girl. "Her great-grandfather is Zannar Mordevi, the third Seer--and a blind man at that, which I have always found mildly ironic. Her grandfather was the fourth Seer, and her uncle the fifth; but they died many Yaru ago. Her parents, while having some magical qualities of their own, were not blessed with the gift; but were luckily they were able to pass it on to her, for her uncle never had children. Nono is the first girl to have ever shown signs of Seeing, and everyone praises her for it; but I don't think she appreciates it very much. In fact, I'm quite sure she hates it."

"Why?" Risa asked, her voice quivering in the cold.

"When she was only five years old, she ran crying to the Yonshu, claiming to have had a vision. People with magic, you know," she added, "are not supposed to show signs of it until they come of age--but here she was, barely able to talk, and suppressed with the most vividly accurate Sight than any that had ever been recorded before. She was sent here soon after, to train under the careful watch of her great-grandfather."

"What saw she?"

"She Saw that her parents and older brother, who had gone with the others to war, were going to die; for while they were still alive when she Saw them, they had already been mortally wounded. And Sights," she said, her voice growing softer, "are never a 'guess' at the future--they are always exactly what is to come, as is determined by the present."

Risa couldn't seem to find anything to say. No wonder the girl seemed so cold. And her eyes...they had a similar suffocating air as Aasir's.

Except that his, at least, seemed to have some sort of life in them.

They came to the top of the stairs and Nono halted, turning around to face them. She motioned toward an empty room nearby, and her eyes flashed in Risa's direction. "Wait here," she said, and walked alone down the dark hallway, disappearing before they could see where she had gone.

They stood in silence for awhile, having nothing to say (or perhaps being afraid to say anything at all), and shivered in the cold. Thali sneezed once or twice, sniffing each time before; but after a while she gave an irritated grunt and shuffled her feet. "I wonder how long this is going to take," she muttered into her scarf.

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"Not very long," came an amused voice from behind her, which chuckled soon after Thali jumped and gave a squeal.

There behind them stood a wrinkled old man with a wide and disarming smile, proudly displaying three teeth. "Hello there!"

"Greetings, Mordevi," Tanmar said solemnly, resisting a smile.

"Aw, how many times do I have to tell you, call me Zannar," the Seer said, wobbling his way to them. His back was so crooked that he was nearly doubled over. "You all treat me like I'm an old man or something." He wheezed at his own joke, the grin still fixed on his face; and Risa realized after a time that the rasping sound was actually his laugh.

"So, what can I do ya for?" he asked, looking up at them with closed and sunken eyes.

"We need to find out whether this girl, the Justice of Reihem, should be allowed as a citizen to enter Kalpar to it's fullest extent. Most specifically, the Library and Ailis," Tanmar said, pushing Risa slowly out in front of him.

Her eyes widened at the sight of the haggard old man, and she shivered even more, though this time it wasn't because of the cold.

"Aw, don't be afraid of little old me," the man wheezed. He held out a gnarled hand to her.

"Come now, child, and grab hold of it. Don't be afraid."

Risa reluctantly reached her hand out to meet his; and to her surprise, it was quite soft and warm.

And she expected his eyes to flash open, as Nono's had done; but they did not. They remained quite closed--and though he did nod to himself on occasion, and his expression becoming once or twice that of mild concern--there was nothing about his demeanor that caused Risa to worry. Before she knew it, he had let go of her hand; and he faced her, his eyes still closed, with another wide smile.

"All finished, dear," he said, the tooth closest to the front shining brighter than the others. "And you have my complete and utmost congratulations. You are now a citizen of Kalpar!" He chortled. "That wasn't so difficult now, was it?"

"You should have just let me See her, Great-Grandfather," Nono said. She was standing next to the door, her arms crossed over her chest. Risa hadn't even seen her come inside. "Your Sights have been weaker as of late, and we have many other people to See today."

"It was a favor for the Yonshu," the old man said sternly, "so I'll not hear another word about it."

The little girl sighed. "Great-Grandfather, this stubbornness of yours is going to be the death of you someday," she stated, seemingly indifferent; but Risa could hear a hint of genuine concern in her voice. She could tell that the girl truly cared for her great-grandfather, though it would appear to others quite differently.

"Oh, hush. I'll be fine," the Seer scolded, hobbling his way across the room. "If anything is going to kill me, it's my age. And for the final time, child, call me Zannar!"

"I will not," Nono replied defiantly.

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Zannar didn't seem too terribly upset by this, though; for it was almost as though he had expected such a reaction. Risa couldn't picture the girl being anything less than formal anyways.

"Oh, pooh," he said. "Well, I'm going to rest these old bones. In case I'm six feet under before I see you next, child," he said, turning to face Risa, "It was a pleasure meeting you."

"Great-Grandfather!"

"Now I know it doesn't show, Nono, but I'm almost 300 Yaru. Might as well accept the future for what it is."

He paused, looking up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "At least, that's how old I remember myself to be," he added, grinning.

"Now is not the time for jokes," Nono scolded. "If you're going to rest, then go."

"Oh, trying to get rid of me now, are you?"

"Great-Grandfather!"

"Alright, alright," he muttered. "It was lovely Seeing for you, Tanmar. And you, Thali. Stop by again sometime, hmm?"

"We will!" Thali piped cheerfully; but then Nono shot her such a glare of piercing wrath that she swallowed her smile. Risa wondered just how the old man put up with such a sour attitude.

Then again, it did seem as though he had humor to spare.

The three were led down the stairs and politely shown their way out of the door.

"Good-bye," was all Nono said before she slamming it behind them.

Thali sighed.

"Well, that went much better than I'd expected. It would've been nicer if Nono hadn't been there though."

"You say that every time," Tanmar said. "Yet where would she be? You fail to remember that she has nowhere else to go. I almost suspect that she's lonely."

Risa snorted, and Thali grinned at her. "Lonely? Oh, I'm sure she is, Papa," she answered sarcastically.

"If you were to at least try and make friends with her, as you did with Hime, I'm sure she'd be quite grateful."

"Me, make friends with her? At least with Hime I had some sense of hope. Making friends with Nono would be like trying to befriend an ice block."

Even Tanmar couldn't resist the urge to laugh at that one.

## Chapter 17

The sky had lightened considerably since they had been outside (had it really been so long inside that wretched house?) and the sun, which was hidden behind the mountain when they arose, was now in full view, rising steadily behind it. Shedding only a few of their numerous scarves, Thali and Risa boarded the Lift that led to Zarkera.

"I will meet you both back at home later," Tanmar had said when he left them at the gates. "I am going to see if Channa has returned yet. If not, then I may be out for a little while tonight."

The two had nodded, and waved good-bye; and with that they were up and on their way to Zarkera, still huddled together (though not nearly as close as before).

The Niche was just beginning to awaken, and a few people were mulling about; the great ball of fire that rested above the Ailis wasn't rolling as brightly as it usually did, so Risa guessed that it was just beginning to announce the start of the day. Thali, in an almost contagious excitement, couldn't seem to stop moving; and was either fidgeting constantly, or telling Risa of how excited she was that her new friend was finally going to meet Juris.

"He's the wisest man in all of Kalpar," she would say over and over, "and nobody is wiser than he, not even the Yonshu, no matter what Tanmar or the others might say."

The Library, to Risa's surprise, was open when they got there; and Thali explained to her that it never closed. "Information," she said, "no matter how unimportant, should never be left to wait."

She opened the door as though entering her own home and called loudly for Juris; and Risa, who was only slightly mortified by her actions, ducked down behind Thali and willed herself to become invisible.

From back behind one of the bookshelves, the strangest looking man Risa had ever seen in her entire life emerged. He had sand-colored hair, which was pulled back into a very messy ponytail; and his too-small eyepieces were askew and threatening to fall from his long and burly nose. The many books in his arms seemed overly bulky and heavy for how scrawny and thin he was, and Risa thought it was amazing that he somehow managed to hold them all.

"Thali," he said calmly, though not with the same brightness as she. His eyes shifted over to Risa, whose face immediately turned a light shade of red. "And who might you be?"

"This is Hime, the Justice of Maura," Thali piped.

"Ah," said Juris, a smile growing on his face. He set down the books and stepped over to the girl, holding out his hand to her. "Juris, Juris Turin. I've heard so much about you. All good, of course." He chuckled. "Thali couldn't say a mean thing if she tried."

Risa could only smile, taking his hand in her own.

At that moment a boy with white hair, whom Risa had felt she had seen once before, came stumbling out from behind a bookcase, eyelids half-mast; and his mouth (which was large) was pulled downward, and entirely to one side.

"Oh great, it's the sunshine," he drawled sarcastically, as though he had just woken up.

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"Hello, Aya!" Thali called, grinning at him.

"And this is my apprentice, Aya Moshe," Juris added, motioning to the boy.

"Hey," Aya said. He pulled something indistinguishable from his pocket and began gnawing on the corner of it lazily. Risa's eye twitched.

"So, is there anything I can do for you today?" Juris asked, turning to face Risa.

"She's come here to look for some new books. She can't ever seem to stop reading them, and she's already finished the ones I've given to her. I think it's fair to say that she's addicted. And I taught her everything she knows!" Thali chirped proudly.

Juris looked over at Risa, who nodded. "I...I learn much from Thali," she stammered. "My accent is no good yet though."

"I think it's just fine," Juris said reassuringly, smiling down at her. "I could scarcely tell the difference."

"She was wondering also if you had any books in Reihimian, her native language."

"We have a few. Come with me. And Aya," he said, startling the boy, "don't eat in the Library."

"Yeah, yeah," Aya mumbled, shoving whatever it was in his mouth and swallowing it in one gulp.

Risa eyed the bookshelves as they passed them by; she guessed that if she managed to climb to the top (which she could scarcely see from this distance), the books would be covered in cobwebs, because no one would be able to reach them.

But to her surprise, the Reihimian section, which was second shelf from the top, fifteenth bookshelf down on the third to the right row, was reachable; for Juris drew the shape of the book in front of himself, and whispered the title, and there it appeared. When he sent it back he had only to trace the outline of the cover, and whisper the title again, pointing to its location on the shelf; and it would return to its spot without a moment's notice. Risa watched it all with wide-eyed fascination.

"What exactly are you looking for? Because we have historical records, epic tales, battle accounts..."

Risa had come up with the idea of looking for a book solely with the intentions of discovering just what the magic of the Law was; and using this knowledge, she planned to somehow fake her Awakening, and stay with the people just a little while longer until she found a way to escape. But somewhere along the lines, she found that the original idea of revenge had become appalling to her; and so she let it rest quietly in the back of her mind, if she thought of it at all. She knew she must accomplish it eventually, but...she wouldn't think about that until the time came.

She eyed the books up on the shelf, listening to the titles as Juris read them to her. None of them seemed to be like the magic book she was hoping for.

After awhile, she said 'epic tales' slowly, and watched the book appear in Juris' hands; and she took it when he held it out to her.

The cover was green and soft and worn; and it looked as though a thousand hands had touched it, having fingered through the pages and marked the best parts with the folding of the lower corners. She flipped it open

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slowly after Juris and Thali had left her alone (for Thali was very good at being distracting); and her thoughts, which were somehow strangely peaceful, calmed her mind, though her heart was running rampant in her chest.

She found that it was mildly difficult to read the Reihimian in the Korish lettering, for she was not accustomed to it yet; but the thing that disturbed her most was that there were several words she did not recognize, even after sounding them out several times. The idea that she had begun to lose memory of some of her Reihimian after only a couple of months of disuse was somewhat disturbing to her; but she fought past it, determined to read at least one tale before she left.

She ran her fingers over the letters that were written into the first page; slowly she read the words, her voice just barely above a whisper.

"The Tale of the Northern Star," she read, and her hands trembled. This had been one of Kalauda's favorites.

He used to visit her so often to hear her stories; and not just the ones she had made up, but the ones she had memorized, back in Reihem. She used to painstakingly read them word for word, studying them carefully so as not to leave out any details; and it proved to be of some worth, for the look on her little brother's face when she recited them was priceless.

And the Tale of the Northern Star had always been his special favourite, because of Risa. It was the only legend told about the nighttime; so when he realized that she knew it, he would ask for it more than any of the others.

"And what story would you like to hear as your last for tonight, Kalauda?" she would ask him, though she knew the answer every time.

"Tell me the Tale of the Northern Star," he would say, grinning up at her; and she would revel in that smile.

"All right," she would say, smiling down at him and ruffling his overly curly-hair. She would take in a deep breath before she began her tale.

*Now, once upon a time, there was a little boy named Sotar. He was a very lonely child; for when he was only a baby, he was injured in an accident, and was never quite the same since. Sotar was always sickly and frail, and being told to stay in his room; and he would, sitting near the window as he watched the children who played outdoors.*

At this point Kalauda's eyes would cloud over, as though with memories; and Risa, who hated seeing her little brother this way, would rush over to the next part, careful not to let him know that she was doing so.

*Now this little boy didn't have many friends, because nobody wanted to stay inside just to sit around with someone who couldn't walk; and so one day he was told by a well-meaning nurse that if he wished on the northern star, he would get whatever he wanted in life. However, she told him, he had to choose wisely; because that star would die after granting him his wish.*

*She didn't think that he would believe her; but the boy, who was willing to believe just about anything with how lonely he was, took her quite seriously. He deliberated for a very long time on whether or not to call on the star, for he did not want it to die if he did; but then he realized that if he did not call upon it first, someone else might, and then he would never get the chance.*

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*So one night, when it was very late and everyone else had gone to bed, Sotar crawled his way up to the window and peered out of it, squinting into the night sky. And there before him in all its glory shone the brilliant Northern Star, brighter and more beautiful than any of the others. Quietly, he pulled the window wide open, leaning out into the night.*

*'Come here, little star,' he called, just at the nurse had told him to. 'I want to wish for something.'*

*And at first, nothing happened. Sotar waited patiently; but the star did not seem to change at all.*

*But Sotar did not lose hope. The idea that the nurse had tricked him never once crossed his mind; and so, when the light began suddenly to fill the room, he was not at all surprised by it.*

"How strange this little boy is," Kalauda would comment every time. "Maybe that is what happens to a person when they are left alone?"

"I wouldn't know," Risa would answer honestly. "I suppose it is only their personality; though I don't know what makes that. I mean, if you left me, I'm sure I wouldn't be half as sane as I am now." And she would smile; but the faraway look would settle into her eyes, and Kalauda would see it and frown.

"The story, the story," he would urge, shaking her arm and pulling her from her thoughts. "You're almost to the best part."

"Then don't rush me," Risa would say.

*But while Sotar was not surprised by the light, he was surprised by what emerged from it. For there before him stood a girl who was just his age, shining brightly in the night, with her hair and dress both the purest forms of a brilliant white; and when she smiled at him, his eyes widened, for he had never seen anything so beautiful in his entire life.*

*'My name is Astelyar, and I am the Northern Star,' she said to him cheerfully. 'What is your name?'*

*'Sotar,' the boy said. 'My name is Sotar.'*

*'Lovely to meet you, Sotar,' the girl chimed; and her voice was beautiful, melodic even, like that of a bird. 'You have called me, Sotar, for there is something that you desire; so what is it that you wish for?'*

*'Well...Sotar began; and then he blushed, for he had been so worried about the actual wishing that he had entirely forgotten what he wanted to wish for. 'Well, I don't know that just yet.'*

*And then Astelyar laughed; but it was so kind and beautiful that Sotar couldn't help but feel that he had done absolutely nothing wrong. 'I can help you, then,' she said sweetly. 'Though this will be the strangest thing I will ever do, for no one has ever called upon a star without knowing what they wanted. You must make your decision within three days time though; for after that, I must return to the sky. But if you manage to think of something, then I will grant it to you and disappear; and in that moment I will wish you all the happiness in the world.'*

*But the idea of the star-girl disappearing suddenly seemed so very horrible to the boy; and even though there were many things that he wanted and could wish for, he found that none of them justified her death. So he nodded.*

*'Three days,' Astelyar repeated; and then she disappeared out of the window.*

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*The next morning, Sotar was waiting for Astelyar; he had not slept at all that night, for his mind had been busy with thoughts of the girl, and of her modest proposal. When she appeared to him, she took him by the hand; and she whispered a few words, whisking him out the window and far above the castle he lived in.*

*'Where are we going?' he asked her nervously. He was not afraid; but he was only worried of what his nurses would think, to see him flying outside his window at such an hour.*

*'You shall see,' was all she told him.*

*Before Sotar knew it, he was standing at the very top of his castle. There before him lay all the kingdoms of the world; and not just his own, but the neighboring ones as well, and the islands. Even the uninhabited areas were there.*

*'All this could be yours, if you asked for it,' Astelyar said quietly.*

*And Sotar considered strongly for awhile; but then he shook his head. 'What could I possibly want with all this land? I am but a child.'*

*'Very well then,' Astelyar replied. 'I shall try again tomorrow.'*

*So she flew him back to his room, and left him there; and though he had been gone only a few moments, it felt like a day to Sotar, and he spoke of it nonstop to his nursemaid, who simply smiled at him and nodded, dismissing it as an overactive imagination.*

*But Sotar found himself anxious for the next day, when he would again see Astelyar; for though the time they spent together was very short, it was precious, for in it Sotar found adventures that were rare and unknown to him. At the end of the day, when he was about to go to sleep, he curled under his covers and clasped his hands, realizing that the one she held was still warm to the touch.*

*"But...how can that be? That makes no sense," Kalauda would ask, and Risa would give an exasperated sigh.*

*"I don't know, and I tell you so every time you ask me."*

*"Well, I keep hoping that will change," Kalauda said lightly, looking up at the ceiling impassively. Risa would've glared at him, but he only would've laughed at her; and so she sighed and continued on instead.*

*The next day, Astelyar came to visit Sotar even earlier than before. She took his hand and brought him to vaults filled with money, more gold and silver pieces than Sotar could've possibly wanted in his lifetime. But he only shook his head, telling her, 'What could I possibly want with all this? I am only a child.'*

*And so Astelyar, determinedly, grabbed his hand again, and whisked him off somewhere else.*

*And there before him was a room filled with food and drink of all kinds, people singing and laughing with one another, happier than Sotar had ever seen them before. Here was that which would give him joy...*

*But Sotar only shook his head again, saying, 'I could never eat this all on my own; and heaven knows I have no one to share it with.' So Astelyar nodded, grabbing his hand again; and she pulled him back into the sky.*

*And while Astelyar was becoming increasingly discouraged, Sotar was not. For in all honesty he was quite content with all he did not have; content just to be with Astelyar, holding her hand, even though he knew that after tomorrow she would be gone.*



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*Astelyar had begun pulling him toward a shop filled with toys and books and things when Sotar finally squeezed her hand. She looked down at him, confused; for he had a smile on his face, but his countenance was pale.*

*'Let us just return to the castle for now,' he said quietly. 'I am really very tired.'*

*But he wasn't. For Sotar realized that the one thing he had not allowed himself to think about was the very thing that could cost Astelyar her life. He held her hand guiltily; how could he possibly wish for anything, knowing that she would die fulfilling it? He did not even think of the fact that she was a star, and only a star, knowing nothing of human emotions. She was the first friend he'd ever had in his entire life.*

*Sotar did not sleep at all that night. He was awake the entire time, brooding silently under the covers as to what to say tomorrow, what to do. But nothing seemed to come to him, not even the sleep that he would have so gladly accepted; and so when Astelyar appeared to him at the wake of the next morning, he could not seem to look her in the eyes.*

And here Risa would look down at Kalauda, to see if he was going to interrupt her again; but a strange look always filled his eyes around this time, like he was somewhere else entirely, and so Risa would simply smile, and continue on where she had left off.

## Chapter 18

*Despite the fact that she had failed to help him decide his wish, Astelyar still smiled down at Sotar kindly. But before he could say anything to her, she interrupted him.*

*'Sotar,' she said softly, 'I was consulting the others, and I have discovered a wish that may perhaps be more to your liking.' She pulled a bottle out from her pocket.*

*'Drink this,' she told him, 'and your body will be whole again.'*

*Sotar stopped. He had not been expecting that. He stared at it for awhile, not thinking anything at all except of the children who still played outside his window.*

*But he could only shake his head, slowly but definitely.*

*'No,' he said, an ache in his heart. 'While it was kind of you to go out of your way to discover this for me, that is not what I want.' But then he rose, standing straight despite his bad legs.*

*'But I am ready to wish for something now.'*

*He noticed nothing but the joy in her face; did she not realize that this wish would be the end of her? But perhaps that was why she was able to give wishes so freely in the first place. Her selflessness was what fueled her.*

*'I realized quite a long time ago, when you first came to me, that I was happier with you than with all the other things I could've had.' His heart was trembling in his chest. 'And I realized that the only thing I ever wanted was a friend.'*

*'A friend!' Astelyar chimed. She lifted her hands expectantly. 'And a wonderful friend you shall have! You need only to say the words now.'*

*He nodded and took in a deep breath, closing his eyes.*

*'I wish,' Sotar said slowly, 'That Astelyar would live forever.'*

*And the look on Astelyar's face was one of confusion and misunderstanding; but then there was a great light, and she was consumed by it. And the light grew to such a point that even Sotar could no longer look into it, for it hurt his eyes.*

*When he could see Astelyar again, she was more beautiful than he had ever seen her before--for she was a pure and eternal star now, and not just a granter of wishes. She was a star that would live forever.*

*'Sotar,' she said slowly, looking down at herself. 'I...I don't understand.'*

*'You are the only friend I ever could've wished for,' he answered quietly, smiling at her; and she smiled back.*

*And what neither of them realized in that moment was that Sotar had done something incredible. For the first time in the history of the stars, a person had wished for something selflessly; and in doing so, he had granted the only wish of the star that had at one time existed only to serve him. And so he was given the gift of the stars; and to this day he can grant people's wishes without dying, if their hearts are as pure and selfless as his*

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*heart once was, and still continues to be.*

*Sometimes, on days when the nurse-maids leave early and Sotar is alone again, peering contentedly but no longer wistfully out of the window at the other children, Astelyar would come and visit him, and take hold of his hand, flying him all over the world; and he would spend his time granting wishes, which made him happier than anything else.*

*And so the two of them remain, even to this day. The occasional shooting stars, which you see every so often, will still grant your wishes freely should you remember to call upon them; and the beautiful Northern star, which lives forever, shines brighter now than in the days of old, and all due to the selfless wish of a lonely little boy.*

"Is that really true?" Kalauda would ask; and Risa would nod her head.

"I don't have any reason to believe otherwise," she would tell him.

And he would sigh, gazing longingly at nothing in particular. "If only I had known; for then I would've wished for a sister like you a long time ago," he would whisper.

Risa gave a sad smile and flipped her way back through the book, to close it. But something on the first page caught her eye, and she stopped.

There, written in a thin, slanted writing, were the words:

*For Arrin Toro, on his tenth birthday. I am, most respectfully, Arrin Tarashir, your loving brother. Best wishes.*

She fingered the page, her eyebrows knitting in confusion. What was this? And how could this book have gotten here, so very far from Reihem?

At that moment, Risa was torn from her memories and back into the library; for Thali was calling her. Her head jerked upward from the page; a myriad of small spots dotted it like raindrops, which she had not seen before. They were still wet.

"Hime! It is time for us to leave," Thali called again.

Risa quickly tucked the book into her arms and ran in the direction of the voice, wiping her face with the back of her scarf. It didn't take long to find Thali; the girl, though covered from head to toe and difficult to distinguish in the darkened Library, was loud and therefore easy to find. She caught up to her, panting; and when she noticed Juris standing slightly off to the side, she held the book out to him.

"May I borrow this?" she asked, pronouncing her Korish very carefully.

Juris smiled. "Of course you may. Just remember that it is the Library's only copy--so I am trusting you to take good care of it."

"I will," Risa promised, holding it close to her heart.

And with that, the two girls left the Library, closing the great doors behind them.

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Risa was surprised to find that nighttime was quickly approaching; an entire day had passed her by already, and she could scarcely believe it. She hugged the book closer, anxious to get back home and out of the night.

"That Aya," Thali prattled on to her as they walked, "he's such a lazy one. You know he was never supposed to be a librarian? He never wanted to be. He wanted to learn Shā'ran like his friends, but he was much too lazy for that. Of course, if they think that a job in the Library is much easier, then they're very much mistaken; for Juris works harder than anyone I know."

"You like him, hmm?" Risa said suddenly, without thinking.

Thali stopped in her tracks. "Is it really that obvious?"

Risa nodded.

There was a pause.

"Well then," Thali said slowly. "You might as well know; I mean, the rest of Kalpar knows. Even Juris knows."

"Juris knows?" Risa echoed. Confusion was etched into her face. "Why he not say anything about it?"

"I don't know," Thali sighed, as she began walking again. "He's been very distant to me, ever since I first got to know him. Except when he's teaching me Ponne. Then he seems to lighten up, to treat me like he treats everyone else. I've always supposed that he treats me the way he does because he likes me too, but..." She sighed again.

Risa smiled; there was a warm feeling in her chest, and she could feel it spread all the way out to her fingertips. "I'm happy for you," she said.

"I'm happy for me too," said Thali, "for there is nothing better than loving a person with all of your might."

"Even when it hurts?" Risa said; and the question was spoken with a smile, but there was a hint of something strange in her voice.

"Especially then," Thali replied. "Because that's when I know that I love them."

And somehow, in that moment, Risa's heart hurt. She thought of all the plans she'd made to take revenge on Kalpar, and to treat them as they had treated her. But when she thought of these things, her heart and mind grew heavy; and she felt as though they wouldn't return to normal again until she stopped thinking of them, and moved to something else. And so she ignored them now, and sometimes without a second thought; and she chose not to consider them until she had to.

A few days later, Risa found herself in the Library again--only this time, she was under the apprenticeship of Juris Turin, the Librarian of Kalpar.

She had made this decision through quite a bit of careful deliberation of her own; for she had a deep feeling that if she had asked for books on the magic she claimed that she held, it would be questionable. And besides that, she felt that someone once before (she couldn't remember who) had told her that the Law was a type of magic they hadn't yet studied; and so she didn't want to risk her reputation, especially on the chance of no

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reward.

Aya wasn't very happy with the idea of a foreigner coming to work alongside him; but he had a secret hope that, if Juris grew to like her better, he would be sent to do something else, like the battle-magic he'd wanted to study all along. But he knew that he had many other things to put up with now; for now that the Justice was here, her annoying sunshine-friend would be coming around more often too, and if there was anything he couldn't stand, it was her.

But the hope of leaving the Library gave him all the motivation in the world to put up with this; so he faced it bravely instead.

Instead of discovering what she had wanted to within the first couple of days, Risa found something else quite startling instead; the word Sanchi, which she had wanted to ask the meaning of, written in a book containing the history of Kalpar. She pointed to it, showing it to Thali and Juris (the two of them were almost never apart now that Risa was there--though never as close as they could be to suit Thali), and Juris, in his most studious manner, told her "Sanchi? That is old Korish for 'princess.'"

And in that moment, Risa's face turned the most violent shade of red; and Thali was sure for a second that she was going to faint, and went to her side. But Risa only shook her head, mumbling quiet thanks; and with that she shuffled away behind a bookshelf, to bury her thoughts for just a little while longer.

## Chapter 19

Risa had never written for an entire day before. Which was not difficult to believe, considering that she had only just learned how to write.

Although her hand was cramping miserably, she forced herself to keep going, biting her lip in concentration. She was terrified that she was going to forget the words before she wrote them; after all, Juris had told her just this morning. Tightening her grip, she tried to keep her hand from shaking as she redirected her focus to the paper still in front of her.

*I began learning of the Kalpan ways of time today, she wrote, her pen scratching against the paper. Juris has been teaching them to me in his spare time. They are quite useful to know, since they are everywhere in the older documentaries.*

*A year in Kalpar is called a Yaru. It is equivalent to six months of Reihimian time. Within a single Yaru are three Zhadi, which is old Korish for 'patterns'.*

*A Yaru begins with the longest of the Zhadi (approximately three months), known as 'Mol-Tchi,' or 'much wind' in Reihimian. During this time there is a strong wind that blows to the north. Planting season usually begins at the start of Mol-Tchi--for the sun is hottest then, and this is very good for the Korish seeds.*

*The second Zhadi is the shortest (approximately one month), known as 'Sah-Maar' or 'little heat' in Reihimian. During this time there is a very strong wind that blows to the southeast, with sometimes a little rain; and the sun is almost always hidden in the clouds. This is the time when the plants begin to grow; because there is still enough heat and light to nourish them, but not enough to kill them. We are currently in the Sah-Maar Zhadi.*

"Currently ending it," corrected Juris, who had been peering over her shoulder, reviewing what she was writing. "Sah-Maar Zhadi is almost over."

"And thank goodness for that," said Aya sarcastically. "Can't stand all this wind."

"It's good for the crops, Aya."

"I know. Doesn't mean I have to like it," he muttered. "And stop calling me Aya, I hate that name."

"Could you two be quiet? I'm trying to concentrate," Risa scolded. Both Juris and Aya quickly bowed their heads back to their books (for they had learned that Hime could be quite formidable in her wrath) and Risa resisted a smile, returning to her writing.

*The last of the Zhadi is the 'Kai-Dular,' or 'harvest sun' in Korish. This Zhadi is approximately a month and a half long. During this time, the people harvest their crops. Korish foods don't take long as Reihimians' to grow because of how much sunlight there is, and the wind is magicked by the Yonshu so the growing periods are different (to prevent them from getting scorched). Needless to say the taste is different too. There is a little wind during Kai-Dular, blowing mostly to the west.*

*And when the wind dies, it is the Dya-Tchi, or 'no wind'. This is a different length of time for every Yaru, ranging from six months to two days in some records. It is not considered a Zhadi like the others because of its unpredictability.*

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*Dya-Tchi is mostly a time for celebration and storing away the crops harvested during Kai-Dular. When the wind starts up again, it is the end of Dya-Tchi and the beginning of a new Yaru; and thus begins Mol-Tchi.*

"Ugh, my head hurts," Risa complained, letting her head fall onto her paper. "Too many 'Tchi's'."

"You signed up for it," Aya grumbled, and Risa glared at him.

"Almost done," she sighed, pointing her pen back at the paper.

"Almost?" Juris asked. "What more do you have to write?"

Risa paused, thinking of what Lan had told her yesterday.

"Your Awakening, kid," he told her, 'is supposed to happen at the beginning of the Dya-Tchi. The second the wind stops blowing, you're done for."

"Unless," Risa had answered, "I can come up with a plan."

"Which I'm sure you'll do just fine," he grinned. "I never doubted you for a second."

Risa chewed on the end of her pen. But how was she supposed to come up with a plan? She didn't even know what she was supposed to be looking for. All she knew was that if it was the end of Sah-Maar, she had only one Zhadi left; and if she had only one Zhadi left, then her time was running short.

"I suppose I'm finished, then," she murmured, folding the paper in a book and pushing it away.

She looked up from her thoughts to see Juris standing besides her, his head stuck in a book as he made careful markings in the margins. He looked as though he hadn't slept at all the night before; his eyes were overly bright, and there was a ring of red surrounding them. When he took off his glasses to run his hands over his tired face, Risa's eyes grew sympathetic, and she stood to walk over to him.

"Are you alright, Juris? You don't look so well," she said.

"Maybe he's lovesick," Aya teased. Juris groaned, leaving his head in his hands.

"Maybe," Risa said, allowing herself a small smile. "Though Thali is a very lovely girl."

Juris grunted, peering at her irritably through his fingers.

"What?" she grinned. "You don't think so?"

"I...I do," he said hesitatingly. "I just...I...can't."

"You can't?" Risa echoed. "Why?"

The Librarian looked away from her immediately, finding something suddenly captivating about the book that lay in front of him. He fidgeted with the pages.

"It'd be non-stop love for you then, wouldn't it, Juris?" Aya called. "And you wouldn't be able to handle it, would you?" He chuckled, showing all his teeth. "The sunshine's too much for the stone, huh?"

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"The stone?" Risa repeated, confused.

"I call him that because he's always so cold and harsh with her."

Risa laughed. "That's terrible!"

"But true."

"I wish...I wish you two would stop," Juris stammered.

"Why? Don't you realize how much she idolizes you?" Risa said. "It's always 'Juris this, Juris that' back at home."

"I know. But...could you please try to discourage her, for me? It...would be better for her that way." His eyes fell.

Risa stopped, and the smile left her face. "Discourage her? That's like asking her to stop breathing." She eyed him curiously. "Did she do something to you? Do you...dislike her now?"

At this, Juris' shoulders grew rigid; his hands formed into fists, and his face turned bright red. "No!" he blurted.

But then he looked extremely embarrassed, his eyes darting around, first at Risa, then at Aya. He took a deep breath to compose himself.

"No," he said again, calmer this time. "I don't hate her."

"Then why?" Risa prodded.

But Juris didn't answer her. He had his head stuck deep into his book again; and had it not been for the deep shade of red that his face seemed permanently changed to, Risa would've thought he had been ignoring her altogether. So she turned back to her own book as well with a sigh of defeat.

There was a sound at the door, which caught Risa's attention almost immediately; excusing herself to Juris and Aya (both of which were too preoccupied to even notice that she had spoken), she crept her way quietly out of the Library and back into the Niche.

She was at once enveloped in the sweet smell of Pardonberries as a pair of warm arms wrapped around her; and she knew without a second thought that it was Lan. He pulled away after a time, smiling down at her; and his blue eyes bright.

"Hey, kid," he said, grinning ear to ear. "I've gotten a little bit closer to finding what you wanted." He bent down closer to her, his voice dropping to a whisper. "There's rumour a second Library, hidden somewhere in the Ailis; they say it's used to hide the books of forbidden magic."

"Forbidden? Like the Law?" Risa said.

"That's what I figured," he said. "Now I have a hunch as to where it is, and I'm quite certain it's real. It's going to take me awhile to find it, but I'll let you know once I do."

"And you're sure this place exists?"



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"Absolutely; the Ailis is just way too big for the number of rooms I've seen. It just doesn't add up. But it's something to hope for, isn't it?"

Risa smiled and nodded. Hope seemed to be all she had anymore.

"Well then, that's all I wanted to tell you. I've got to get going, since Aasir isn't supposed to know that I left. I'll see you around," he said, ducking back down an alleyway and out of sight.

Risa sighed, leaning up against the Library. Lan was working so very hard for her; she didn't know how she would ever be able to make it up to him. Because of him, she was so close to finally discovering Hime's secret...and she just might have time enough to cover it up now, too. Letting one final sigh escape her lips, she slid down to sit on the ground next to the door.

There were just so many questions running through her head. Everybody here seemed to have secrets...Thali, Juris, even Lan...for there wasn't a single night that she didn't wonder what happened to Rithe.

Now that she thought about it, she hadn't seen the quiet, sweet girl anywhere since she had arrived. Maybe she was sick? Or...could she possibly have been captured?

There were just too many possibilities. Risa hated having to wait patiently for Lan to reveal it on his own.

But perhaps that was why she had made it this far. Everyone else hid behind their own disguises...and it prevented them from seeing hers. She was silently grateful for this; but yet she was sure that if she ever discovered even a portion of theirs, hers would come crashing down. She hated to see them in pain, but it was for their own good.

And hers as well.

Risa returned to find Juris still deep in his book, with Aya munching on some sort of vegetable in the corner (so as not to be seen). She watched them both for a moment, trying to concentrate but somehow still unable; and with a sigh she asked if she could return home early, for her mind was still too bogged to even consider her work. While her curiosity was insatiable at times, there was still no reason for her to burn herself out over it; and it would be better to consider it again in the morning, when her mind was fresh. Gathering her things, she headed again for the Niche, quietly closing the door behind her as she went.

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