

CHAPTER ONE

Under ash they walked. On ash too.

Sabira had dreamed of Ignata. First as a small child, when it had seemed like a land of possibility, of adventure and fantasy. Then she had met its people, and they had made it a place where nightmares were born. A year ago, after the worst experience of her life, she had sworn to banish those nightmares, as the mountain god Aderast's Nightmare had been banished long ago. It had left her with a permanent injury, scars on her conscience and nothing in the way of a plan. This was the first that she felt that she was making any progress, as she strode through Ignata with a score of other Aderasti.

'Not far now,' Sabira told herself, taking another step along the rocky road, 'We're almost there.'

The blue glow of icy magic that supported her damaged knee dinged in happy agreement. Her frostsriver, the being behind the sound was another reminder of what she had been through, when Ignatian soldiers came to call on her home. The result had left her with a piece of a sentient glacier sharing both her head and its many gifts – a piece of the mountain god. A Tear of Aderast filled with the light of frostfire.

'We won't let them down,' she told it, thinking of those she had lost on Aderast fighting off the renegade Colonel Yupin's attack. Her uncle Mihnir had nearly died from exposure after an avalanche, lost toes to frostbite and could no longer work as a packman. Her brother Kyran, thought dead years ago had truly given his life, along with dozens of other lost souls of the mountain, protecting the glacier that had made them the misshapen things of magic that they had become. Frost-Cleric Tserah had guided Sabira up the bonding path only to die and leave her frostsriver to Sabira.

She and it together had been enough to beat back what threatened her home – though at the cost of it returning to once more become part of the glacier. Her current frostsriver had been born in those final moments, and Sabira could not be more grateful for it, though she did miss the slightly grumpy tone of Tserah's frostsriver all the same.

No fun.

Sabira smiled. Fortunately, with her new frostsriver's assistance the long walk from the Aderasti mountains had not been too hard. Not until this last day, when she and the rest of the diplomatic delegation began marching below grey and leaden clouds. They weren't real clouds at all - that was what Sabira's father had told her. Instead, the blots on the

already silvered sky had been blown over from the ashlands, a day distant. They had begun spewing their contents some hours back, and the travel had gotten much less pleasant since. Sabira shook the stuff out of her dark braids, brushed a cloud of grey from her bright Aderasti travelling clothes for the hundredth time and coughed, ash motes tickling at her throat.

‘Home sweet home!’ said the sarcastic voice of the only Ignatian in their party. Danlin, scrawny former chemic’s apprentice, even more former conscript of the grand Ignatian army. Sabira’s surprise ally in her fight under the mountain and, more importantly, her friend.

‘Doesn’t taste that sweet,’ she said when she had cleared her lungs, ‘How did you ever live here?’

‘Oh, it isn’t so bad,’ said Danlin, ‘Not unless you enjoy having clean air to breathe, and who wants that?’

He’d been better fed this last year and wasn’t quite as thin now. Even his black hair now had some length, where before it had been army regulation short. He had also regained much of his sharp tongue, much to the distaste of Sabira’s mother. It was probably a good thing that she had not come on this trip, leaving it to her father to take care of Sabira. At fifteen that didn’t feel as comforting as it once had.

Sabira had so much that she needed to do here in Ignata, and her father was such a cautious man. Experienced with both healing and delegations Rabten might be, but Sabira knew now that decades of taking the safer paths had not brought Adranna and its people any actual safety.

‘I can do without clean air for a while. I just want to get to work,’ she told Danlin, and strode on, taking a swig of water from a canteen, trying and failing and rid herself of this warm country’s nasty taste.

This was where she wanted to be though. Where she had to be.

A year of spinning thoughts, of plotting and planning and wishing towards ways of fixing the frayed ties between the nations had left her itching to act. Now the time was finally coming, and she was not going to stand behind her father and let him shield her – not when being bold seemed so surely the right thing to do. Anything else would dishonour her brother’s memory, and every other sacrifice that

had been made to make sure that Sabira could be here at all. She wouldn't let them down.

'Well, not long now,' said Danlin, darkly. Sabira didn't blame him – she wouldn't want to be returning home in his shoes. She did hope he was right though. Difficult discussions ahead or not, this was the first real diplomacy since the almost-invasion. If things went well, the two countries might come away with permanent ambassadors to one another, and just maybe a renewed will to keep on avoiding the battle that always seemed around the corner. It would also be nice to have some respite from the travel.

The landscape they hiked through was grey and drab. Some greenery managed to half heartedly poke its way out of the ash and granite of the hillsides, but for the most part every hill of Ignata so far had been less living than the last.

That ash was what did it. The stuff smothered everything, belched from great geysers in the unliveable and uncomfortably close expanse of the ashlands. Sabira couldn't imagine why anyone would settle so near to somewhere so dangerous.

With a pang, she recalled how once she had fantasised about going into that place with her toy ash-cat in the hopes of seeing living versions of those stealthy predators. Even if she didn't now understand how dangerous that would be, there was too much history there to want it any more. Her brother Kyran, lost to the glacier and his own obsessions. He'd wanted a frostslover so much that it made him unable to bond one without becoming something less than human. An icy yeti, clumsy and barely remembering who he had been. That toy had been his gift. Both now gone. Too much lost. Don't let them down.

Sabira was interrupted from her remembrance by another fit of coughing. That gasp of ash had really gotten in there. Finishing, she found herself having to swallow the phlegm she had hacked up, and grimaced.

Not very nice.

Her frostslover spoke aloud, each word a musical ring. It talked more with each passing day, but it still didn't quite understand how humans talked to one another. The living ice was always more feeling than thought. In that, and a thousand other small ways, it was not quite like the other frostslover she had been bonded with. Sabira loved it all the same.

'You got it, ice monster,' Danlin told it. That was one of his array of mildly mean names for the frostslover. It didn't seem to mind. In fact, it tinkled pleasantly to itself.

‘You know,’ Danlin went on, as he often did, ‘I think you’re right. I don’t know why anyone does live here. Not half as nice as my old island colony. I guess they think the whole having lived here for hundreds of years thing is important somehow. Can’t imagine why.’

Silly.

Her frostslover could have been meaning the Ignatians, or Danlin, or both. It seemed happy, anyway.

‘You want to go back there?’ she asked.

‘Be nice to be the chemic boy there again, making solutions for people,’ he said, but lost his smile towards the end, ‘Those times were gone even before the army though. Not sure I’ll ever go back to the colonies, even if they would have me.’

For her part, Sabira found it difficult to keep the scale in her head. This was as far as she’d ever been from home, and yet the colonies Danlin mentioned were ten times further still. Maybe more. He’d pointed them out on a map to her before, and it looked like the little dots of land poked out from a body of water almost as big as the entire Aderasti mountain range.

It wasn’t that Sabira didn’t believe him, or the lessons the Frost-Clerics had given her over the years, but she still just couldn’t get her head round the concept of a whole continent full of wonders even beyond those she had already seen. Then again, that was no small part of why she was here with this group in the first place – she still wanted to see it all one day. First though, get this right. Make a lasting peace, then maybe the rest could still come.

They weren’t a large group, just twenty or so in all, but Sabira had still managed to get included all the same. Even though she was only fifteen, people seemed to feel that she had earned a place. After all, as Frost-Cleric Hadatan had argued, Sabira had saved their city from invasion and ruin. Treating her as the adult she almost was didn’t seem like too big a price to pay.

‘I know you’re always the talker, but this is ridiculous!’ said Danlin, making her realise that she’d been lost in her thoughts for at least a minute, letting him ramble for even longer than usual. Sabira wasn’t even sure what he’d been saying.

‘Alright, alright. You got me,’ she said, ‘I got my frostslover to hum really loud in my head to block you out.’

Should I?

Sabira sighed, and tried to get back into the world. Danlin was smiling, everyone was trudging, the ash was still falling, and that was a ridgeline up ahead. Good, they had been tramping up this incline for far too long, and Sabira's feet were aching. Even the magical assistance of a frostsliver didn't solve all problems – which was proved a step later when yet another fleck of ash got into her throat. This time, the coughing caused her to double over. She motioned Danlin to go on ahead, who smiled and shrugged, as if to show off how used to all this he was. Curse him.

When she straightened up, she saw that she had dropped to the back of the group. Her father, who was leading the way, had reached the ridge top first alongside Frost-Cleric Hadatan, an officious looking man who was sweating heavily in his layered scarlet robes.

'Sabira, you'll want to come and see this!' Rabten called back to her excitedly.

'Hold on just a second!' she said, unable to take the half-choking feeling any longer. She held her breath, thinking, forming an idea of what she needed.

The instant she had it fixed in her mind, her frostsliver slithered up her body, the little slice of magic abandoning her knee for more important work. It flowed under the light cotton of her multicoloured lowland clothes, moving past her necklace where it often resided as an icicle, and up to her face.

The frostsliver expanded, a snowflake lattice writhing pleasantly over Sabira's skin. The glowing not-quite ice kept growing until it covered her mouth and nose, and for a moment she could not breathe - but Sabira wasn't worried. She was utterly in tune with her partner, and it would never hurt her. To do so would only hurt itself anyway. Their lives were forever entwined.

A moment later, the glowing ice solidified, forming a fine mesh over her features and filtering out the nastiness in the air. Sabira found herself able to fill her lungs much easier, though the taste of ash was still there nonetheless.

'Thanks,' she muttered to her frostsliver, though she could just as easily have whispered the word in her mind. That was the depth of the link with a frostsliver. A Tear of Aderast, the sleeping mountain god. Now, a mask to make travelling these strange lands more bearable.

'Sabira!' her father called again, to her embarrassment.

‘Coming!’ she shouted, and limped up to stand beside the sometime surgeon, sometime diplomat. Then she froze, eyes wide.

‘Yeah, it really is something,’ said Danlin, for once not interested in making a joke. He couldn’t have said anything to dampen Sabira’s awe anyway, for the expanse of human construction below the ridge was like something out of a legend. Even the storied Deep Explorers wouldn’t have believed their eyes.

The still distant place was huge. Sabira had never seen anything like it. She’d imagined other cities as being like her own, but Adranna was a speck in comparison to this sprawling black labyrinth. Smoke rose from many buildings, so much so that a kind of haze held over the whole city, adding a second layer of awfulness to the air on top of the ash.

It didn’t have walls, but it couldn’t have. You’d have had to pull down a mountain to build them. Sabira tried to imagine how many people lived there but found that her mind melted at the thought. She knew what this place was though. The only place it could be.

Cinderstone. The Ignatian capital city.

Their destination.

Sabira found herself wanting to turn away from it, to head home to Adranna and the safety of the clear mountain air, but that wasn’t why she had walked all this way.

‘Will you look at that. The old gang’s out in force.’

Danlin was looking at a flat area on the edge of the city, where several great black squares were moving across the ash.

‘I can’t help but be impressed,’ said her father, ‘Getting that many people to walk around in formation when they don’t want to...’

‘That... They’re people, marching?’ Sabira questioned.

‘Quite so,’ said Frost-Cleric Hadatan, ‘The Fifth Army, training new recruits, I believe.’

‘Fifth? They have four more of them?’ Sabira almost stammered.

‘At least. The High Tribunal does not publicise its troop organisation,’ Hadatan commented, matter of fact. He brushed a little ash off his robes. It was like he thought this mass of military might was normal, something to be expected.

Sabira had thought the thousand strong regiment that Colonel Yupin's hate had brought to Aderast had been a big part of Ignata's forces. She couldn't have been more wrong. There had to be as many troops on parade here as there were people in Adranna.

This was all beyond her. What were they doing here? What could they hope to accomplish in the face of all this? Her frostslover sensed her distress, but didn't truly understand. It offered an answer anyway.

Peace?

Looking at that distant marching army, Sabira thought that peace had never seemed further away.

CHAPTER TWO

The weight of a thousand eyes settled onto Sabira's soul as the group passed into Cinderstone's streets, and it only grew heavier as they walked towards the great ash-stained structures walled off at its centre.

'That,' Frost-Cleric Hadatan happily informed them, 'is the High Tribunal's seat of power, where they rule Ignata from. That round tower at the centre is the Kindling of Law, and the whole thing is known as Grayscales.'

'Like a fish?' Sabira questioned.

'Like a judicial court,' the frost-cleric replied.

It didn't look like any kind of court house to Sabira. To her, there was only one word to describe the place – palace. One belonging to a demon king, to judge by the shadowy shapes it formed against the ever-grey sky. It was fantastic though, the layered roofs, pointed spires and orange stained glass windows of its many buildings far beyond even Adranna's temple observatory in scale and intricacy.

The streets they were travelling now were a far different story. Instead of the awesome designs of some long dead architect, the buildings here were much more mundane. Tiled roofs and brick walls, all stained dark with ash and soot. Many had dangling windchimes built from metal and chunks of fire coloured stones – evidence of the religion the nation's ember-priests preached. Danlin regarded the things with suspicious glares as they passed.

People were everywhere, in crowds like Sabira had never seen. Only on the most popular festival days had Adranna seemed so busy, and she did not like the feel of it.

Trapped.

Her frostslover had put the right word to the feeling. Sabira didn't think that it was on purpose, but the hundreds of grey-robed people, many of them wearing patterned kerchiefs to guard against the ash-thick air did make the walk feel oppressive.

Sabira didn't think that they had been waiting for the delegation, but when the Ignatians noticed who was walking their streets, they certainly took notice. Many stopped to stare or point. Most said nothing or whispered to their fellows behind a variety of expressions. Others however, were bolder.

'Murderers!' yelled a young boy, suddenly. It was like he had set a match to blasting powder.

'Heretics!' an old woman with a net of necklaces holding hundreds of amber shards called.

'Traitors!' added a couple of muscle-bound young men who could be brothers. More angry messages rang out after them, and the crowd began to press in closer.

This was getting out of hand, Sabira realised with a jolt of fear. It would be a cruel irony to survive Ignata's soldiers only to be torn to pieces by a mob of its citizens. Maybe that would only be fair, a tiny part of her thought. Her actions under the mountain had saved her people, and meant the death of so many conscripts.

'Ah, perhaps we should speed up?' said Hadatan, but the crowd in front of them had become solid, the people there unmoving, wanting to see what the fuss was about. No escape that way.

'Back up!' Sabira heard her father call, but that too was impossible. The Aderasti were bunching up tighter and tighter, and people had filled in the path they had just walked. The street was fully concentrated on the intruders that had so haplessly walked into it.

Someone threw something – a pebble, but it could just as easily have been a rock. In another minute or two, it might be.

'We have to get out of here,' said Danlin, urgently. He was scrunched in at her side, and sounded about as worried as Sabira had ever heard him - she felt the same, her heart hammering.

Fight?

No, she couldn't. She had come here to take action, but not like that. She felt her frostsriver trickling across her skin, getting ready to form protective armour – or a weapon. This couldn't be happening. Bloodshed was only moments away, and Sabira felt every dream she had built begin to break. Feeling unable to do anything, she felt tears of anger and fear start to well. She was already failing them, those that she had left behind on the mountain.

'What's this, what's this?' a booming shout broke over the din of the crowd's rage, startling Sabira.

Over the heads of the crowd, she caught sight of two riders approaching down the street on large plains ponies, their faces and tan, fur-lined dress marking them out here as much as Sabira and her fellow Aderasti.

'Make way! Make way!' the larger one in front cried. She had golden metal spikes in her hair like horns, and a long braid down her back that ended in a golden ball with another spike on either side. She was perhaps in her middle twenties, in well-tailored leathers and burlier than any other woman Sabira had seen.

The second rider was also a woman, but younger and thinner, though still with her own kind of strength about her. Together they cantered straight for the dense pack of people, forcing them to move aside or risk being trampled.

'Stay back, stay back!' called the older rider, 'You treat guests of the High Tribunal this way? Should we of the plains expect the same treatment? Dishonour, dishonour!'

The crowd backed off a little, though whether that was due to the woman's words, her sure-footed horsemanship or the wide, though gentle swing of her spiked braid end, Sabira could not say.

'Are you not good citizens?' the younger one questioned, 'Do you not respect the law?'

She pointed sternly at the tower right at the centre of Grayscales. The crowd's cries died a little, shouts giving way to mutters.

'Forward, forward,' the older rider urged, taking advantage of the draining hostility. Sabira and the Aderasti did as they were told, moving carefully on until they were away from the main mass that had almost become a mob.

The two plainswomen stayed with the expedition right the way through the busy streets, riding around them in skilled loops and circles, easily discouraging any bystanders from coming close.

When the group had moved beyond the main thoroughfare, into the more sparsely populated district near Grayscales itself, Sabira felt the tension ease. In this richer place the people still looked at them with veiled anger but hurried by rather than stopping to glare.

There they halted their rush, and the two plains ponies were reigned in. Sabira found herself breathing hard, harder than even than the rush through the streets should have produced. She looked down at her hand, and found a pool of glowing blue had gathered there, her frostsriver almost itching to form something and strike out.

‘No,’ she whispered to it, ‘That’s not what we’re for.’

Her frostsriver hesitated, as if wondering if she was sure, and then retreated back inside Sabira’s clothes.

‘Close one,’ muttered Danlin, and Sabira wondered whether he meant the crowd, or her frostsriver. Hoping her heartbeat would calm itself soon, she looked over their saviours – especially the younger one, who actually looked to be in charge despite being probably under twenty.

The way she held herself made Sabira think that even dismounted, the woman would make an impressive figure.

‘We are in your debt,’ said Sabira’s father, sounding both relieved and weary. This near disaster was worth about ten days hike of fatigue.

‘Yes, you are,’ agreed the younger rider.

She was only a few years older than Sabira but held herself as if she had ten years more than that. Tall, and possessed of both strong features and an imperious stare, Sabira suspected that this was someone raised from birth to expect people to respect and obey.

Yet, for all that she gave off the impression of being some kind of princess, her possessions looked practical above all else. Fine, yes, but functional too. Her robes were embroidered with gold, but cut for riding, and the only jewellery she wore was a polished sapphire set into a gold band around her fur accented hat.

Despite the fact that there was stubby musket holstered on her mount, there was also a bow slung beside it, of a smaller design than the hunting weapon Sabira's mother used. Sabira could easily imagine this woman donning armour for war like in tales of battles from ancient history. Her people had fought with the Ignatians for about as long as either had existed, though admittedly with long breaks like the current one, coming up on a century strong.

'Show proper respect,' demanded the older woman with the metal horns, 'You stand before Khanum Turaqai, First Daughter of Khan Sartorq, Khan above Khans. Above Khans!'

'Self-titled,' noted Hadatan, unwisely to Sabira's thinking. Neither rider seemed to hear him – or if they did, they didn't acknowledge it.

The khanum trotted her pony through the group, examining faces, before stopping close to Danlin and Sabira. She wasn't sure if she should be doing something. Bowing, maybe? This was some kind of princess, after all.

While she hesitated, Khanum Turaqai leaned down from her saddle, met eyes with Sabira, and said in a calm, collected tone,

'Lightning alive, this is quite the predicament you found yourselves in! Good thing we were there - we foreigners must stick together, no?'

Did she know who Sabira was, or was it random chance that Turaqai had chosen her to speak to?

'They don't seem to hate you,' Sabira said.

'Well, they've had time to get to know me and learn of my magnificence - plus, I didn't drop to town's worth of mountain on ten hundred of their kin, not to mention a celebrated military commander.'

Her words dropped a weight on Sabira's shoulders. She hated being reminded of what she had done. The surgeon's choice, but terrible all the same. Maybe not directly, but hundreds were still dead by her hand.

'I didn't want to,' said Sabira, her voice so small that it made her feel childish. So much for being bold and ready for action. Turaqai wasn't happy with that answer though, and gave a derisive snort.

'Own your victories!' said the khanum, 'People enough will try to take them away from you without you doing it to yourself as well.'

Sabira nodded, though she didn't feel particularly victorious. This woman wasn't so much older than her, yet she seemed so much more directed. More self-assured. Like she knew what needed doing.

'Take me, for example,' Turaqai continued, 'I'm always telling people how I defeated the bandits at Diamond Pass with only my trusty bodyguard to assist me – and how we survived getting closer to a canyon dustdevil than anyone else alive. Isn't that right, Jaliqorbei, my heart?'

'Truth, 'tis truth!' said her companion, though Sabira noticed that she did not say whether it was true Turaqai had done those things, or whether she only said it a lot.

'You are an impressive young woman,' said Hadatan, his tone placating. Sabira got the sense that the bookish frost-cleric was not overly impressed by bluster, confidence and clever riding skills.

'Good for you that I am so, as I say,' Turaqai retorted, to the whole group now.

'We are indeed well met,' said Sabira's father, 'but perhaps we should press on to Grayscales. After that crowd, I'd rather be too cautious than too little.'

'Ha!' said Turaqai, 'I'm no thrall to caution, but in this case I'll see eye to eye with you, Aderasti. Come, Jali!'

'Follow, follow!' commanded the bodyguard, and the delegation did, somewhat subdued. Sabira felt it as much as any of them - glad as she was of the plains people's help, this was about the worst possible arrival they could have imagined.

'Bet she's a laugh at court,' Danlin said quietly in her ear, 'Can't imagine the stuffy military officers and judges know what to do with her.'

Sabira wondered if maybe that was the point. What better envoy than one not easily read, or intimidated? She'd like to be like that. She might need to be for this mission, but she did not feel close to having that fire.

Strong.

Maybe one day she could have her kind of confidence. Maybe not quite so much brashness though. She just smiled at Danlin, and moved on with everyone else, absorbed in her thoughts as they strode the rest of the distance to Grayscales.

It wasn't far, and the walls surrounding it grew quickly to towering heights. Sabira gazed up at them and swallowed. It was a forbidding place, full of majesty and command. By the time they had reached the gates, themselves three storeys high, her mind had been filled with the stained grey stone – and this was only the way into the innermost city. There was still the Kindling of Law to climb, and that tower was like a man-made mountain by itself – if a short and thin one compared to her home.

Aderast, she'd walked all this way, and still there was still so much further to go. As she shuffled through the gates with the rest of the party, the jeering crowd kept coming to mind. She quieted their voices and steeled herself for the climb ahead.

Up.

Her frostsriver's chime was wary, and Sabira felt the same.

Maybe it was all uphill from here.

CHAPTER THREE

Being escorted to the Kindling of Law by Ignatian soldiers reminded Sabira all too much of being captured. There was no intentional air of menace, but with musket wielding dark uniforms on each side, Sabira felt her stomach begin to churn. Her frostsriver too was anxious, writhing around in the back of her mind, hot and cold as it touched her thoughts. Much as Sabira did, it wanted to act, to face something down rather than sit quietly as they were led to who knew what end.

It was foolish. Sabira knew that. This was to be only the beginning of diplomacy, and she was going to have to have patience. The myriad issues between the nations wouldn't be solved in an instant. It was so hard though when every step brought with it a tiny flash of being back under the mountain – or worse, being before the burning forest that had near wrecked her family long ago. The violent event that had set her brother Kyran on his path to doom. These uniforms had been in both places – though here they were pristine rather than weathered by use.

'Bet they've never been far from a parade ground,' Danlin muttered beside her, obviously conscious of the same things Sabira was.

'This does look like a good place for toy soldiers,' Sabira replied, relieving her tension with a touch of meanness. The inside of Grayscales was cleaner than the rest of the city by a

long way, and she dreaded to think how many people had to work at keeping it that way, given the constant ash fall.

‘Judges!’ called Turaqai from the front as the party reached the steps to the tower that was the Kindling of Law, ‘I’ve found some lost lizardlings from your herd!’

Did they farm lizards here? The thought flickered away from Sabira as one of the group standing on the steps replied in a long-suffering tone,

‘Khanum Turaqai, as always you are a delight to know.’

She was a severe, grandmotherly woman with grey hair bound back in a bun, wearing the same clothes Sabira had seen on Judge Meihu before her mission to Aderast had been hijacked by Colonel Yupin and his fanaticism. Two others had similar garb.

An old woman. A middle-aged angry looking man. A young, rotund man.

Sabira knew the descriptions, and her heart skipped a beat as she realised that this must be the High Tribunal, the leaders of the Ignatian legal system and by extension, the entire vast nation.

‘Judge Huawen,’ said Turaqai in reply to the older woman, ‘I am indeed a delight to know, for without me you would not have these people for all your boring business. Isn’t that right, Jali?’

The bodyguard nodded slowly, suppressing a sigh, though not well.

‘Judge Huawen, Judge Xaoten and... Judge Shangao, is it?’ Sabira’s father said, trying to get some control of the situation, ‘It is good to see the High Tribunal back to full strength, and it is an honour to be back in Cinderstone. You remember Frost-Cleric Hadatan, I expect.’

‘And the rest of you,’ said the one named Xaoten said. He was a bald man whose eyes peered out from behind a seemingly permanent scowl. Shangao, a younger, shorter and much rounder man in glasses stayed quiet, but offered a smile.

Sabira did everything she could to remember the names, knowing how important they would be to her mission here.

Judge Huawen.

Stern.

Judge Xaoten.

Angry.

Judge Shangao.

Cheerful.

‘Thanks,’ she told her frostslover silently. It had both helped her file the details away, and cheered her up a bit by reducing the judges to such petty, silly things. She couldn’t lose focus though, even if she wasn’t doing the talking. These were the people that held this nation’s power. It was in the way they stood, the way soldiers deferred to them, and the in the functionaries that flanked them. One of them, one of the few women among their number stepped forward.

‘Ember-priest,’ Danlin muttered, and Sabira tensed up once again. Those people were exactly who Colonel Yupin had been associated with. People that believed who knew what.

Her dark clothes were covered in tassels like the Judges’ but in the opposite colours – bright and dark stones in ribbons the colours of a dying fire. Several others near her wore the same, but hers seemed the finest. Her hair was short, close to shaved, and she had an air of floating grace about her – almost a mechanical fluidity. Folded eyeglasses were tucked into a pocket on her robes, but she didn’t seem to need them.

‘It is good to see one of our own returning home,’ she said, looking directly at Danlin and perhaps at his lack of Ignatian uniform. Had she heard him? Either way, Sabira found herself slightly unnerved.

Danlin just set his jaw, and said nothing more. The ember-priest did not skip a beat, instead shifting her gaze to the rest of the Aderasti delegation in turn as she announced,

‘I am Suwei, senior ember-priest in Cinderstone. There will be an event tonight to welcome you all to our nation in this trying time. I and the other ember-priests organised it – time is not in abundance, and if we are to solve the issues that currently lay between us it seems that getting all the new faces acquainted with each other as soon as possible is a good idea. Newcomers are especially requested.’

Sabira could appreciate that. She wanted to get started as soon as possible as well. Who knew what fresh disaster might come upon them with delay.

‘Indeed, Ember-Priest Suwei has been exceedingly diligent about the preparations for your arrival,’ said Judge Huawen, ‘Every catechism to the land said in triplicate, every visit to the ashland shrine made with purpose. She intends, as we all do, that no further difficulties will occur.’

Then she looked straight at Sabira, who had to fight not to look away from those hard eyes. They all knew who she was then.

Prepared.

Was she though? Sabira didn't feel it in front of these people, their tower, and their power.

'Talk, talk, talk!' Turaqai said, 'This event had best come with food and drink at least!'

Attention swivelled back to her, as the khanum had obviously intended. Sabira wondered if the plainswoman had even been invited – well, she was now. To do otherwise would be a diplomatic insult. Sabira wondered if she'd ever find a way to be so sharp.

'Expectations will be met,' said Xaoten, his eyes narrowed in dislike.

'I bet,' said Danlin, still with teeth gritted.

'If I may be practical for a moment,' said Sabira's father, trying to get a return a little order to the proceedings, 'I had thought we would have more time to settle in. Not to mention become presentable.'

Rabten gestured at his dirty Aderasti travel clothes, which had been impossible to keep free of ash on the journey. They were in stark contrast to the perfect dress of the judges and ember-priests.

'I expect there will not be...' began the younger judge, Shangao, but Suwei spoke over him,

'You have some hours still.'

She said it with a smile, but Sabira got a flash of steel there – the ember-priest did not intend this as a request. She expected it to be done. Sabira began to wonder where the power truly lay here – she had only heard stories of the Ignatian leadership, and felt that she was going to be cursing her ignorance before this visit was over.

'Most of us have our formal clothes from the last visit,' her father offered, 'but my daughter and young Danlin have not yet had chance to acquire anything locally.'

'For the best,' said Xaoten, 'They should skip this first event and rest. I expect little of value will be lost. There will be more when they are more... acclimatised.'

Sabira felt like there was more behind those words, but she wasn't sure if it was an insult or simply some diplomatic calculation. She guessed that her presence was going to cause a stir, so that made some sense.

Change.

That was the whole point, Sabira reminded herself, and found herself saying,

'If there's a way to make it work, we'd like to be there.'

'Speak for yourself,' she heard Danlin mutter, quiet enough for only her to hear.

'Oh, you are fortunate,' the voice of Khanum Turaqai cut in before anyone else's could, 'We've been here long enough to know exactly where to find what you need.'

'Perfect,' said Ember-Priest Suwei sweetly, causing Danlin's face to screw up in a scowl for some reason.

'Indeed it is!' Turaqai stated, moving to Danlin and Sabira and laying hands on their shoulders, 'Come, Jaliqorbei, we have duties to perform!'

And with that, she began to lead them away.

'We did have some issues in the city before,' said Frost-Cleric Hadatan, 'Perhaps we should escort them?'

Others in the Aderasti party, including Sabira's father, looked similarly concerned, but Turaqai did nothing to slow down.

'Oh, they will be as safe with her as with anyone,' said Judge Huawen, taking a calming breath, 'Khanum Turaqai's ambassadorship here has taught us that much at least.'

'We will be staying within the walls of Greyscales!' Turaqai said, 'Are you expecting an ash-cat attack?'

No one found a way to argue with her before Sabira and Danlin were whisked away from the group by the two plainswomen. Sabira did note though that Judge Xaoten motioned to several Ignatian soldiers. They instantly snapped to his order and began to follow behind at a discrete distance. She chose not to care. It was only to be expected that they would be security conscious, here at the heart of the Ignatian nation.

Yet, being followed by black uniforms and muskets still put her on edge, even if they were in part for her own protection.

Strange.

Everything here was, from the windchimes to the stained orange glass, to the very idea that a daughter of a hunter and a healer could come here to the greatest centre of

power in the world and be treated as a person to be spoken to rather than a thing to be stepped on.

‘I suppose you’re part of the reason for that,’ she told her frostslover silently. It dinged happily.

‘Move it on!’ Turaqai urged, her grin almost predatory, ‘It’s not like you’ve been walking for days on aching feet – and we have a need to spend!’

And as if this day hadn’t been surreal enough, apparently now they were being taken shopping by a princess.

CHAPTER FOUR

‘Ten! Ten, for this!’ Turaqai cried, holding the embroidered fabric aloft like it was evidence of some great crime, ‘I wouldn’t give my mother ten for this, even if she still drew breath!’

‘I... I...’ said the Ignatian merchant from behind his counter, completely wrongfooted, ‘Perhaps for one as honoured as yourself... perhaps eight?’

‘Well, that’s better, but really I don’t think it’s my colour,’ the khanum replied, switching speeds with absolute confidence, ‘Though maybe more to your taste, Sabira?’

‘Um,’ Sabira said, not altogether sure that she wanted to be brought into this conversation. She couldn’t talk like Turaqai, with that force. That surety.

‘No, I agree. And while Jali would look as good in it as she does in most things, that woman won’t wear anything that would make fighting even a hair more difficult. A bodyguard’s work is never done!’

‘Never. Never,’ Jaliqorbei agreed, though Sabira thought she might be simply glad not to be roped into the discussion. She on the other hand was not so lucky – Turaqai’s hand shot to a scarlet dress hanging nearby, one of dozens in the shop. The thing was beautiful, layers of flowing silk and gold patterns sewn in. It looked like something that, well, a princess would wear.

‘Nothing in red,’ Sabira said quickly. She was no frost-cleric, after all.

‘Oh, of course, that old tradition,’ said Turaqai, ‘Then blue it will have to be – and black for your companion. That is never out of style. Blue trim to compliment, of course.’

She strode to other clothing and gave it a cursory examination. The blue dress was a lot less ornate, thankfully. All these things were so alien to Sabira – the vast array of styles, the often dark colours, the cuts and ribbons and accessories that would have looked so out of place back in Adranna.

Match.

‘Yes, you will – you all will!’ said Turaqai in reply. Sabira felt herself growing embarrassed. Sometimes her frostslover’s impulse to say things out loud was not a helpful habit.

This whole experience was a little embarrassing, actually. Everything in the place was finer than anything Sabira had ever owned – or even seen, in most cases. At least the blue robe dress wasn’t quite so ostentatious. It was still pretty though, simple with blue flower patterns rather than sewn in precious metal.

‘An excellent choice?’ the tailor said, sensing a deal coming. He was a little man whose appearance was as carefully cultivated as his wares – though tape measures and items of his trade were spilling out of his pockets as if they had been put there absent-mindedly. He seemed nice enough – as had most in the Greyscales shopping district they had met so far. It was a place for those with coin and a will to spend it, and nothing seemed further from the mob they had met not so far outside the walls.

Sabira was frankly just glad to meet Ignatian citizens that didn’t seem to actively want her dead. It was hard to be able to tell whether the smiles were just a mask though. After all, with Turaqai leading, everyone knew that coin was coming their way, if only they could manage to smile at the Aderasti killer that was following on the plains woman’s heels.

‘It is nice,’ Sabira admitted, ‘Yours too, Danlin.’

‘I can begin work on something similar immediately,’ the man said, quite reasonably, but that wasn’t good enough for the khanum.

‘They’ll be here months – something made from scratch can wait! They need serviceable, and soon. That’s all! Can you do that?’

Withering under the force of Turaqai’s personality, the tailor nodded, paused, and added,

‘You’ll want ash shawls to go with it, of course?’

The suggested addition made Sabira suddenly realise a problem.

‘We just got here - we don’t have Ignatian coin yet,’ she said, embarrassed.

Turaqai just held up a hand.

‘Charge it to my diplomatic account,’ she said, and the tailor got the clothes down as if that was enough.

‘Are you sure? I expect...’

‘This,’ said the khanum, pointing at the sapphire on her hat, ‘buys me the right to buy what I want. Father’s plunder might as well serve some decent purpose.’

Soon after, both Danlin and Sabira were in their respective clothes, the tailor doing his best to fit them with all his skill and haste. As he poked and prodded at her, the needles of his craft uncomfortably close, Sabira tried to ignore the tucking and shaping of the dress. She needed a distraction, and looked around, across the rows of fine fabrics.

Turaqai and Jaliqorbei were still browsing, the khanum holding pieces up to the bodyguard and smiling while the larger woman remained stoic. Sabira was glad of the break. The plainswomen seemed like decent people, but Turaqai’s intensity in particular was exhausting. Still, she was glad Danlin was beside her in his slightly too big garments, waiting for his turn with the measuring tape.

‘You’re quiet,’ she said, thinking that his often all too quick tongue had been held for a while. Now that she looked closer, there was something of a frown on his forehead, and when he looked up at her, it was as if she had broken into some deep thought.

‘What’s wrong?’ she asked. He had been like this since their arrival at the Kindling of Law, and Sabira had no idea why.

‘It’s not important,’ he said, but it obviously was.

‘You look like you saw a yeti at one of the tower’s windows.’

She tried to keep her voice light, like he would, but Danlin didn’t laugh. He didn’t give up anything, in fact, so she kept pushing.

‘This place is dangerous enough without you keeping secrets from me,’ she said, despite feeling a bit rude. Danlin’s defences slowly fell before her gaze.

‘I think I’ve met that ember-priest before,’ he said, the words sounding like he was prying them out individually, ‘Years ago, back on my island in the colonies. It isn’t a good memory.’

Sad.

Her frostsliver mercifully kept its voice as a thought in her head. Sabira thought he was closer to angry personally, but either way, Danlin was hiding it as best he could.

‘Are you sure it’s her? Suwei didn’t seem to recognise you,’ Sabira said quietly, feeling that perhaps she should have waited to have this conversation in private.

‘I hope she doesn’t,’ said Danlin, ‘What she did, it would make people here think even less of me than they already...’

He checked himself, controlled his voice.

‘I’ll tell you about it later,’ he said. There was definitely something he wanted secret, and by his look at the tailor it was Ignatians he wanted to keep it from.

‘What conspiracy goes on over here?’ Turaqai demanded, having given up attempting to push clothing on Jaliqorbei.

‘Boredom, mostly,’ Danlin said, flapping his too long sleeves like a bat. His mask was back up – a mask Sabira hadn’t even known he had.

‘The excitement comes later,’ Turaqai said, ‘Or we shall have to make some - judges are not known for their wild parties.’

Sabira wasn’t sure that she wanted anything of the sort, not while there were so many worries settled on her shoulders. A nice dress did not lighten the load.

‘I’m going to get things done. It’s what I’m here for.’

‘Good for you,’ said the khanum, ‘Hold on to that attitude, if you can. Even I haven’t budged much here despite years of shoving, right Jali my heart?’

‘Years,’ the bodyguard repeated.

‘You seem to keep upending things,’ said Sabira, ‘I think a bit more of that might make things better. Perhaps you can show me what’s worked for you.’

Action!

Her frostsliver’s internal call was one Sabira had been telling herself for months now. Patience was something you could only keep for so long. At least now they were here, and she could finally get to work on the change that she had chosen to dedicate her life to.

Turaqai, uncharacteristically, did not seem to share the same enthusiasm.

‘How much do you actually know about this place?’ she asked, knowingly. Sabira’s expression must have betrayed her ignorance, for the princess smiled, and waved off any reply. ‘Never mind, that will come – you just ought to be careful who you trust,’ said Turaqai, ‘But I think you know that, if the stories about that are true.’

She indicated the blue glow at Sabira's neckline.

True.

Turaqai took a half pace back at the cold word. Then she got her composure back, and said,

'So, they are as it is said. Fantastic things. No wonder the Ignatians are so jealous.'

The tailor coughed, but if he was taking offense, he didn't say so out loud. Turaqai didn't seem to care that he was listening though.

'Mark me – they'll have that from you if they can,' she said, 'If nothing else I've learned here, for all their talk of law, Ignata looks out for Ignata.'

'For a diplomat, you're not so diplomatic,' said Danlin.

'Ha! Where would be the fun in that? Besides, I'll be packed off home for marriage soon enough - my father's never-ending quest to unify the plains nations under his thumb, you know.'

Jaliqorbei sniffed, more derisively than Sabira would have expected from a royal bodyguard.

'Well, Jali,' Turaqai said, a wry smile on her face, 'You wouldn't bet against him, would you?'

Another sniff. Sabira couldn't imagine what that would be like, waiting for a day that a summoning message would come, deciding the rest of your life for you.

'I... You're alright with that?' she said, before deciding that it was probably rude to have said anything. Turaqai smiled, though there wasn't much humour in it.

'I think maybe you understand a little of duty,' she said, and left it at that.

'What's it like in your home? Do you live in a city?' Sabira said, changing the subject a hair. Turaqai must have been glad of the out, because she smiled and began,

'A city, yes. A city built in a canyon that cuts wide and deep into the plains. Khanaqayanqua – the name means "ruler of lightning," from the ten-storey tall dustdevils that run through the canyons, casting out lightning and bringing life. My father rather fancies it as a name for himself as well.'

'If he can say it,' Danlin grumbled, 'Khanackyakee?'

‘We do not share the same spoken language as you Ignatians and Aderasti do,’ Turaqai admonished, ‘Try a little harder. Karn. Ack. Eye. An. Kwa,’ she said, pronouncing every syllable with patience, ‘Karn-ack-eye-an-kwa. Khanaqayanqua.’

She didn’t stop until Danlin got it right.

Soon after, they were properly fitted, the clothes as fine as any Sabira had seen, let alone worn. If she looked anything like as dashing as Danlin did in his dark robes, that was more than good enough for her.

‘Excellent - pay the man, Jali,’ Turaqai said, appraising them and nodding. ‘Now, it is time to have some fun.’

CHAPTER FIVE

‘War is, quite frankly, inevitable.’

The bald judge, Xaoten, made the pronouncement with grim certainty. He was one of many in the courtyard, all wearing their very finest tasselled robes. Others in similarly high-class garb dotted the area behind the Kindling of Law, which was encased in glass, much like the temple was in Adranna. Only here, the centrepiece was not exotic plant life, but a tiny ash geyser imprisoned within a glass cylinder and surrounded with amber stones, ribbons and other markers of religious respect.

Sabira, standing with the rest of the Aderasti delegation, watched the ash billow and snake its way up the glass funnel, the poisonous stuff contained and rendered into something almost beautiful until it was released through the roof and out into the world. She was uncomfortably reminded of a certain mountain cavern, lit by frostfire from the glacier as it boiled up from below in a pillar of power and Colonel Yupin advanced on her with death in his eyes.

‘It doesn't have to be like that, Judge Xaoten,’ Sabira’s father argued, ‘Nothing has happened that cannot be moved past. We aim to establish a full ambassadorial exchange with this visit, and that could be the first step in coming back from the brink.’

‘He makes a reasonable point,’ another Ignatian suggested, younger and wider – Shangao, Sabira remembered. ‘There has been damage done on all sides. The cases involved are intricate and may take many years to resolve – we should not prejudge their outcome.’

The bald judge snorted, as if he didn’t think there was much doubt. It was surreal, being around people that were not more than a few steps from being Sabira’s enemies, yet

that was the task she had given herself. Bring two peoples together despite their differences – or at least leave things better than when she arrived. Now she had to look for some way to act, to put pressure on the right spot. To shake things up while still keeping them from spiralling out of control. This was on her. The responsibility given to her by the mountain, and her choices beneath it.

Peace.

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I want, but I...’

‘Smouldershell?’ said a waiter beside her, startling Sabira by seemingly appearing out of nowhere balancing a tray of broiled, orange-mottled snails half a hand in size on his fingers.

‘You haven’t got any firefruit, have you?’ asked Sabira, not overly keen to try the things, ‘I loved it when father brought some back from Ignata.’

She thought that she was being friendly, complimentary even, but the waiter quite obviously had to disguise wrinkling his nose in distaste.

‘Apologies, honoured guest, but that is a food for commoners – it is not served in Grayscales, let alone the Kindling of Law itself.’

She took a snail without another word. As the man wandered away to offer his tray to others, she bit into the unpleasantly textured creature and added another level of discomfort to her already high pile.

Sabira didn’t even feel comfortable in her clothes. The tailor had done a good, if quick job with her flowing robes, but she was not used to them. You couldn’t work or climb in such things, and the cold of Aderast made wearing anything like it regularly a foolish prospect. Here of course, it was mainly the closeness in the great glass chamber that gave her discomfort, along with the central pillar of ash, but that was plenty to put her on edge all by itself without feeling self-conscious as well.

‘So, how’s Ignatian high society treating you?’ Danlin said, walking up and finishing chewing on something. ‘Snails are good – rich people food,’ he explained, looking a bit more comfortable in his dark robes than she felt.

One of those nasty smouldershells. Maybe being an Ignatian meant that his tastes were different – Sabira couldn’t see how people could eat them otherwise.

‘I can’t stand the way they stare at me,’ Sabira whispered to him. Danlin didn’t look much happier than she felt.

‘They look at me as bad or worse,’ he replied, perhaps trying to reassure her, but failing. He was right though – they made quite a pair, traitor and the supposed enemy champion.

‘I just wish I could be comfortable here,’ said Sabira, ‘but apparently I don’t know anything about Ignata, or its culture.’

Danlin sighed.

‘This is as new to me as it is to you. I grew up on a small island a month’s travel from Cinderstone. My main memory of coming here was getting conscripted into the army. Didn’t see much of the sights after that.’

‘Sorry,’ said Sabira, not meaning to have dragged up bad memories, ‘I just... don’t really know what I’m doing here. I’m starting to wonder if I might be hurting things by coming – by being a symbol of how bad things have gotten.’

He didn’t say she was wrong, and that said it all.

‘Enjoying the reception?’ said Frost-Cleric Hadatan, suddenly beside them. Sabira smiled weakly rather than admit the truth.

‘They just couldn’t wait to see us,’ said Danlin, and Sabira heard layers of sarcasm in his words. She didn’t feel much different about this meet-and-greet. Even without everything else Sabira was dead tired. The walk, not to mention the encounter in the city had been exhausting, never mind having to talk to all these people she didn’t know for hours on top of that.

‘Some diplomat you are,’ she muttered to herself.

‘I’m sorry?’ questioned the frost-cleric.

‘Oh, nothing,’ said Sabira, ‘Just... wondering what I can even do to help. Neither of us know anyone, and I’m not sure they want to know us.’

‘Oh, but young Danlin here must know a few of his countrymen!’

They looked at Hadatan until the man’s frostsilver said aloud,

Perhaps... not.

‘Chemic’s apprentices don’t exactly move in these social circles,’ said Danlin acidly, ‘nor do conscripts.’

‘Ah... Of course, of course, foolish of me to think you would be at home navigating such occasions. Perhaps I can offer you a tip or two?’

Tip?

Her frostsriver's audible chime was quizzical, trying out the sound of the word and liking it.

'Yes,' said Hadatan, 'I have some experience in these matters after all – we've travelled here a number of times, my frostsriver and I. The secret is to remember that people come to these events to talk. If you simply introduce yourself, that can often lead in fortuitous directions, and if not, another conversation is simply a pace away. Sometimes the trouble can be in getting people to shut up so you can move on.'

'I know the feeling,' said Danlin quietly, and without too much malice.

'In fact, speaking of moving on, I do see someone I need to speak with,' the frost-cleric continued with barely a pause, 'if you'll excuse me. Minister... minister!'

He moved away to begin discussion with one of the Ignatian officials.

'I guess we should do the same,' Sabira offered, and Danlin nodded, grimly setting his jaw. Where to start though? She took a step to the right, peering around the side of the ash filled tube and hoping to find someone at least a little friendly looking. Khanum Turaqai fit the description, but she was surrounded by a group of younger officials that she was laughing and joking with, Jaliqorbei at her side, arms folded and clearly not enjoying herself. Sabira wished she could swap places with the woman in that moment – Turaqai made this all look easy.

She moved on, but what she picked out instead was no High Tribunal judge or regular government functionary. Ember-Priest Suwei looked quite different, in fact, being one of the few women in the room, her robes the negative of the various judges.

'Sabira, we should...' Danlin began, but if he had been about to suggest avoidance, it was already too late. The woman had turned, spied Sabira, and to her dismay, instantly made her way over.

'Admiring the First Giver?' she said, leading Sabira to stare at her blankly. 'It was the reason Cinderstone was sited here,' Suwei explained, indicating the glass imprisoned geyser, 'A single eruption of ash on an otherwise pristine plain, distant from the actual ashlands – but not too distant. It fed our crops once. Before the rest of the ash fall grew too heavy.'

Sabira and Danlin looked at one another. Hadatan hadn't been wrong. People did seem to want to talk.

'Sabira - and Conscript Danlin, I believe it is?' Suwei continued, perhaps sensing that she was going to have to keep the conversation going.

'I think you know who we are,' said Danlin, bristling at the use of the word conscript.

'True. You've been through a lot to get here, so the tale goes. Colonel Yupin and a regiment of his best, attempting to take Adranna in defiance of instructions! His reputation was near shining before all of this, enough for my order to give him a stole in recognition. A shame.'

She sighed, and Sabira said, frowning,

'He was a murderer.'

A shame didn't really seem a strong enough word. The ember-priest's smile changed a little, and she nodded.

'Well, indeed. We are lucky to have you here in Cinderstone at all. Still, the stories we have heard – you in particular Sabira are a fascinating case and I would love to hear the details if you are willing.'

'If you know about Yupin, you probably know most of it,' Sabir replied. Was this what she would have to do? Recount all her terrible memories to be picked over by the Ignatian court? That wasn't what she had been thinking of when she planned to take action. Could she even do it? Those memories were seared into her even now, standing ready to come to her in her still frequent nightmares. The burning forest from when her brother was injured. The avalanche that nearly killed her up on the glacier. The brutal battle between yeti and soldier that had left so many dead. Her brother, finally sacrificing his mutated form to save her. Suwei was talking again. Pay attention, Sabira thought, you could be missing something important.

'Colonel Yupin never had an original idea in his life,' the ember-priest was saying, 'If he did as you say, someone ordered it – or perhaps strongly suggested it.'

That thought put a new chill into Sabira, and she felt her frostslover tense. It wanted to fight off anything that would make her feel this way. If only it was that simple.

'But where are my manners?' Suwei said, changing direction, 'You must be struggling here, with all these politicians and lawmakers, and you with no training in how to navigate them.'

‘I suppose you could say that,’ said Sabira carefully. This woman seemed nice, but there was something off about her. Maybe it was just the clothes bringing up bad memories. Something in the smile though. This was a woman with cunning, not some functionary obsessed with pleasantries. Danlin was glaring at her with a gaze strong enough to set something on fire.

‘Do tell,’ his said, his eye actually twitching slightly.

‘Well, for starters, I’d take care around Judge Xaoten,’ said Suwei, ‘He is very hands-on – a man of action and some would say rash decisions. Aggressive, one might say. Beware of him.’

‘I... thank you for the warning,’ Sabira stammered, not sure what to make of her.

‘It’s nothing, dear. Merely trying to see that nothing untoward happens to our honoured guests,’ said the ember-priest, laying a gloved hand on Sabira’s bare arm in a gesture of comfort. It was cold and... wet?

Sabira pulled her arm back and saw a slight sheen of drying liquid glistening on it.

‘Oh, forgive me, I must have spilled my drink earlier,’ said Suwei, and pulled out a square of silk to clean off her glove.

‘No, it’s nothing,’ said Sabira automatically.

‘Thank you,’ said Suwei, handing her the silk, ‘Allow me to get you a drink in compensation – if you’re old enough to be here, you’re old enough to not have to stand around with nothing to imbibe.’

‘I don’t...’ Sabira begin, but Suwei held up a hand.

‘Please, I insist. Just stay right there, I’ll be back in a minute.’

She shuffled off without another word.

‘I suppose that could have gone worse,’ said Danlin, watching the ember-priest’s rapid retreat with slowly fading animosity, ‘It is her from the island, I’m sure of it – but I’m not sure if she actually remembered me... Sabira?’

She had barely been paying attention. What was he saying? And what was that noise? She swung her head round, but spotted nothing but chatting party guests and wandering waiters.

'I... do you hear that?' she said, but Danlin just looked at her confused. Then the sound sharpened into a ringing of some sort.

Sabira's eyes flicked back and forth, searching for something, though she knew not what. Why was she so on edge all of a sudden? She found that she was breathing hard, and that now she could identify the ringing as the wordless distress of her frostslover.

Something was wrong with her.

Her muscles tensed and untensed involuntarily. She tried to force the unease away, but her emotions wouldn't obey and after only a few more moments her frostslover was sounding in her head, a constant bell of alarm. Where was this coming from? It was like being back inside Aderast, in battle, or defying death by monstrous snow-spine.

Then she felt her frostslover grow solid, pumping its desire to defend her through the bond. Ice, casting blue frostfire light spiked through her fine clothes, half way between the intricate armour that had saved her life before, and the aberrant, frozen body of a yeti.

'What is going on?' she heard an Ignatian voice demand, and saw Judge Xaoten watching her uncontrolled transformation. The din in her head grew, along with the spikes. Her heart pulsed harder, a heavy drumbeat to accompany her frostslover's bell.

The fear grew to terror as the man began to approach, dislike clear in his face. She was sweating, shaking. What was happening to her? She felt impulses growing within her, building and building until she couldn't think properly. She just wanted to flee, to fight.

Danger. Danger. Danger!

'No, there's no... what?'

Killer!

'Sabira? What's wrong?'

Danlin's voice was oddly muted, a calm island in Sabira's heightened senses. Her heart pulsed faster and faster. Her eyes darted from face to face. Settled on the tall, bald judge that was coming towards her, bejewelled tassels swinging. Xaoten, she recalled through her haze, that was who that woman had warned about. Action. Take action.

Danger killer hurt fight threat threat threat!

Her head throbbed, and her vision was a tunnel, focusing in on the man's harsh features, his accusing eyes, the Ignatian army officers flanking him with equally hard expressions. The pillar of ash behind him.

‘What’re you doing, witch?’ he demanded, staring at the icy protrusions that had cut her clothing. He was only a step away, his hands balled into fists, face full of bigotry and building fury. Like Yupin had been.

Protect!

Suddenly her hand was full of frostfire, and she knew what was going to happen – but couldn’t stop it. Her mind was too fogged with aggression and fear. She could only silently mouth a single ‘no’, as a thin, solid spike shot from her palm and straight through the judge’s chest. Her heartbeat was slamming like a drumbeat in her ears. Her vision blurred, but she could still see red flowing from flesh.

Then Sabira felt her legs give way, and she slammed into the stone floor, unable to do anything to break her fall. The frostslover was still sounding in her mind, wordless now but still urgent, panicking.

Was that... Was that blood pooling beside her? She couldn’t move. Had she cracked her head open? Was this it?

No, it wasn’t hers. Not her blood – the judge’s. The man her frostslover had killed. Who they had killed.

Danlin was shouting next to her. People were screaming. Sabira wanted to do the same, as the spreading blood began to ooze into her dark braided hair.

But, unable to make a sound, and half way towards passing out, all she could do was silently howl into the spreading darkness of her own mind.

CHAPTER SIX

Sabira woke to a pounding head, and darkness.

‘Wha...?’ she exclaimed in shock, fearing in her woozy state that she was blind – but no, there was some light in the room, just tinted orange, and not a lot of it. Still in Greyscales then. The nightmare was real.

‘Sabira!’

Danlin. He was alright. That sent a flutter of thankfulness through her chest.

‘Where are we?’ she managed, barely finding the strength to move, ‘What happened?’

‘You... You don’t know?’

Oh, she knew. It was all coming rushing back. The feeling coursing through her. The frostsriver's alarm. The blood... By the mountain, she could still feel it dried into her braids. She felt herself start to shake and couldn't stop it. It was like she was right back at Aderast, having emerged from its depths battered and scarred. Maybe worse.

'I remember,' she said quietly.

A hand on her shoulder. She jumped, but it was just Danlin, kneeling down beside where she lay. He was wearing the same clothes as the reception, though considerably more ruffled, as was his hair. So was she, Sabira realised, poking a finger through a hole that one of the ice spikes had made.

She sat up, a little embarrassed, and looked around. They were in a round room – a cell – only a few strides across, one where the only windows were orange stained glass, recessed a long way into the wall and only the size of a fist at most.

'This place is built to stop bonded from escaping – though I expect they've never used it before,' said Danlin, 'They told me to tell you that trying to cut our way out with your frostsriver would be a really bad idea. I told them you wouldn't try and escape. They didn't seem too interested.'

'I... No, I just want to understand what happened,' said Sabira, then after a moment, 'A bad idea, how, exactly?'

'Apparently there are ropes in the walls holding that up,' said Danlin, pointing to the roof, which was formed by the bottom of what looked like a heavy weight the exact size of the little room. 'If you used your frostsriver to cut through the stone, you'd get the rope too, and that would fall and flatten us. Lovely idea from some lovely people.'

Sabira swallowed, not liking the feeling the knowledge put into her. The trap was as ingenious as it was awful, another crushing weight held over her, almost as bad as the mental one that had always been just a few bad days at bay. What chance was there of peace after this? Exchanging ambassadors? They'd be lucky if any of the delegation made it home.

'Why? Why did this happen?' she said plaintively, hoping that someone could explain. Her frostsriver said nothing. It had mentally contracted in on itself, forming a ball of swirling emotion in the back of Sabira's mind.

'I think,' said Danlin, 'that you must have been poisoned.'

That ember-priest. She had touched something to Sabira's skin, that had to be it.

‘What kind of poison could do that?’ Sabira wondered, fearing the answer.

‘There are chemic substances that can do weird things to people,’ he replied, ‘What did it feel like? Were you hallucinating? Did Judge Xaoten look like a monster or something?’

‘No... I... Everything looked normal, but my feelings were out of control,’ Sabira explained. Each word was painful, like she was writing out the memory in detail. ‘My frostslover was desperate to protect us but didn’t seem to know what from. Then the judge came towards us looking aggressive and...’

She couldn’t say it out loud.

‘Please, talk to me,’ she told the cringing ball of emotion in the back of her mind. It just vibrated in distress. Feelings flowed out though, rivers of fear, confusion and guilt.

‘It wasn’t you, not really,’ Sabira told it, though she felt some of those same things herself, ‘Someone made you. Please understand.’

The tremors slowed slightly, and the ball relaxed a small fraction. It would take time to heal. Sabira felt a stab of anger for the ember-priest, Suwei. Her frostslover had been growing so well, learning to be part of the human world, and now this trauma had... Well, it had hurt them both more than she would admit.

A burning forest. A cave of dying soldiers. A spear of ice through an innocent man’s heart. Another nightmare to add to Sabira’s collection. She tried to shake away her horrors, and focus.

‘I should have listened to you. You warned me about her.’

‘No I didn’t, not really. That’s my fault – not yours, and not your little snow monster’s,’ he replied. Sabira considered arguing that it was truly her at fault, but decided that she’d much rather argue Suwei’s guilt than her own.

‘That woman did this. But what’s the point?’ she asked Danlin, standing and stretching out her aches, ‘Why would they want one of their own dead?’

‘To make the talks break down – to start a war?’

It was the obvious answer. Surely though, there were easier ways?

‘Perhaps they wanted to get me imprisoned in particular,’ she said, the possibility seeming all too possible. ‘Now that I think about it, why are you in here?’

‘Maybe I made a bit too much fuss when they tried to take you.’

‘Fuss, eh?’ said Sabira, raising an eyebrow.

‘Yeah, gave one of the guards a fussing black eye. Stupid really. Didn’t help anything. Your father tried to stop me, said we’d get it sorted out, but I didn’t listen. Sorry – I could’ve been out there trying to help do something about this, instead of getting stuck in here with you.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said Sabira, ‘I prefer having you here with me... I mean...’

Her embarrassed correction was cut short by sounds outside the cell. Scuffling shoes on stone.

‘Someone’s coming,’ said Danlin, stating the obvious. She felt herself tense up involuntarily. Would it be Ignatians, here to administer punishment? Had she fully shaken off that strange poison, or would her frostslover attack the first vaguely threatening person it saw?

Deep in her head her frostslover moaned like a great animal with a throat made of glass. It was in no state to attack anyone even if it wanted to, Sabira decided.

‘I can’t fight like this - I’m not sure what we should do,’ she said, though she wouldn’t have wanted to anyway – there was too much death weighing her down already.

‘We’ll face it together,’ Danlin promised.

They waited as the steps got closer, and closer. Then a section of wall was pulled back with a grinding noise, letting in white light where before there had only been orange. Sabira sighed with relief. It wasn’t some Ignatian official come to punish her, but Frost-Cleric Hadatan, and her father. Of course, they weren’t alone – Ignatian soldiers in their tar black uniforms were escorting them.

‘This will have to be quick,’ said her father, ‘they’re just letting us see that you’re alive and healthy. The whole delegation has been confined to the tower.’

‘It’s good to see you,’ said Sabira, and made to rush to him for a hug, but one of the soldiers behind him held up a hand.

‘Stay in the cell,’ he said, and Sabira froze.

‘Do you have no compassion?’ Hadatan demanded, ‘What damage would that do?’

‘We have our orders. They are to stay in the cell at all times.’

‘It’s alright, Hadatan,’ Sabira’s father said quietly, ‘We’re not here to cause trouble.’

He smiled weakly at her, and she realised in that one look just how much stress he was under. She did her best smile back in return, hoping to lift at least some of it. Rabten nodded and said,

‘You’re both holding up then, Sabira, Danlin?’

‘I’ve been better – and worse,’ Danlin offered.

‘I’m recovering,’ said Sabira. Her father nodded again, and held up a bundle of cloth.

‘We’ve brought you some new clothes. Thought you would want... Well, here they are.’

He passed the bundle inside, and Sabira was at least pleased to see some more plain garments – even if it was a reminder of the torn formal robes she was currently wearing. They really were ruined, she realised – it would be great to get into something both comfortable and not almost falling off her.

Of course, in here there wasn’t exactly anywhere private to change, but Sabira decided to save thinking about that unfortunate prospect for later. She looked up as her father began to speak again.

‘There’s going to be a full High Tribunal hearing in a few hours. I don’t know what they’re planning to do, but there’s a lot of anger.’

‘We can only do so much to smooth things over,’ said Hadatan, blunt as ever, ‘One of their most important figures was murdered at the hands of the Aderasti champion – in their eyes, anyway.’

Sabira had guessed as much, but hearing it said by someone else was still a punch to the gut.

‘Do you know what happened? That ember-priest...’ she began to explain, but her father interrupted,

‘Best to save it for the hearing. I don’t think we can do much with the information – they’ve been resisting letting any of us represent you. Something about us being potential co-conspirators.’

Hadatan added,

‘They’ll have to let you have someone as defence counsel though – Ignatian law is quite clear about such...’

‘Time’s up,’ said an Ignatian voice around the corner, and Sabira’s father had to step back as the wall-door began grinding back into place.

‘It’ll be alright,’ he said urgently, his eyes locked on hers until the last moment. Sabira wasn’t so sure – and neither was Danlin.

‘They are not going to go easy on us,’ he said when the wall had sealed them in, ‘We’d be lucky to escape with a hundred branding lashes.’

‘That sounds bad,’ Sabira agreed, ‘but I guess... I guess it’s better than death.’

‘Oh, that would definitely kill us,’ Danlin said, setting his scarred back to stone and rubbing at his eyes, ‘It would just be plenty of pain first.’

He would know. The Ignatian army had taken the heated metal whip to him several times, leaving him permanently marked with words that proclaimed him a criminal.

‘I thought you were the one of us that saw the bright side, cracked jokes and stuff.’

‘Being locked in a frostsilver-proof cell awaiting a terrible trial can change a person’s outlook on life,’ he retorted, though there was the tiniest of smiles on his face. Sabira’s didn’t feel like laughing much either, but she was so close to the edge of her mind’s black pit that she clung to what humour she could find.

‘That’s better. Now turn around. I’ve got to figure out how to change without humiliating both of us too much.’

Then, a moment later she added,

‘I don’t know what you’re laughing at – they brought you fresh clothes too. You’ve got to do the same after me.’

CHAPTER SEVEN

The courtroom of the High Tribunal was as imposing as the tower that had been built to house it.

Sabira and Danlin were led in under armed guard to a vast space with high ceilings, as much a temple as anything more mundane. That was how Ignatians saw the law, Sabira thought – almost as much a religion as what the ember-priests preached.

Stepped seating stretched back and up for dozens of rows, and balcony viewing galleries added to the space, making it look a little like a theatre. Every opportunity to observe had been taken, and the place was filled with Ignatians, mostly richly dressed, but

some common folk in greys as well. There was already a heavy murmur going, and when the audience spotted Sabira, it increased to an avalanche of whispers.

Angry. Scary.

Her frostslover's voice wasn't as confident as it had been. It was quieter, subdued after what had happened. It was recovering though, and that brought warmth to Sabira's heart.

The main focus of the room was a platform dais with three golden chairs upon it, each with a side table holding a tall, heavy lantern, unlit and also wrought in gold. Moments after Sabira and Danlin were directed into a wooden pen before the dais, an announcer in over-elaborate clothes and a very silly hat cried,

'Rise – the High Tribunal enters!'

The cold branding lash coiled at his hip was much less silly, but Sabira pulled her attention from that to the opening heavy doors. Of course, only two judges entered, not three. Shangao, the large young man that had been talking with Judge Xaoten before his death, and the older woman, Huawen. They took two of the ornate seats with some small ceremony.

On the right, one seat stood empty. That of Judge Xaoten, Sabira assumed with a pang of guilt. She hadn't been responsible, she knew that, but still she felt it. It was like her brother Kyran all over again. She hadn't been able to save him either.

She wanted to talk to Danlin but had been told that they had to respect the court's procedure, and thus only speak if directed to.

'I bring this emergency session of the Ignatian High Tribunal to order,' said the woman, when she, and the audience, had settled.

Order. Good.

Sabira nodded. She too would be happy with a pinch of order in her life – as long as it wasn't the order of a prison cell every day for life. Her desire to fix things, to take action and push had faded in the face of reality.

'Firstly, the issue of advocates,' the judge continued, 'Prosecution for the state is ready of course, but the defence is lacking. Petition by Frost-Cleric Hadatan for the role is denied, on the grounds of lack of standing. As is therefore necessary, a public official will take...'

The heavy doors burst open once more before she could finish her sentence. A collective gasp met the plains woman that strode through them, sapphire circlet glinting on her head.

‘I, Khanum Turaqai, envoy to this great nation from the Khan above Khans, have the standing you seek!’

She apparently cared much less for respecting the norms of the court.

‘Technically speaking, she is correct,’ said the wider judge, ‘She holds that right by virtue of her position.’

‘She isn’t meant to utilise it,’ said the female judge.

‘Yet I do!’ Turaqai interjected, waving a finger, ‘To the letter of the law!’

Sabira watched the scene unfolding with growing disbelief. Danlin had been right earlier – the Ignatians had no idea how to deal with the plains princess.

‘Approach,’ the female judge demanded, and Turaqai allowed the demand to stand, sauntering closer to speak with both of the robed officials. A hushed conversation ensued. Sabira looked at Danlin, who shrugged.

Confusing.

It was, but eventually it seemed like the issues had been worked out, for Turaqai moved towards where Sabira stood, the larger judge announcing,

‘Khanum Turaqai will serve as advocate for the defence.’

‘What?’ Sabira whispered to the plains princess as soon as she was within range.

‘Why?’ added Danlin.

‘I like you,’ Turaqai explained, ‘or at least I like your story. Not the one they spin about you though. That one rings a little too much like their favourite game – pin everything on anyone they don’t like. Lightning alive, but I have more fun in mind than that!’

‘What’s your plan?’ Sabira asked, hoping it was a good one.

‘I rather intend to come up with one soon,’ replied the khanum.

‘You... You...’ the normally all too talkative Danlin stammered.

Doomed.

Sabira’s frostsiver was mournful. She was pleased to hear its voice in her head nevertheless. It gave her the courage to blurt out,

‘I think I was poisoned. Ember-Priest Suwei, probably, if that’s any help to you.’

‘Sure, sure. In any case, you have your advocate,’ Turaqai stated, not sounding like she expected any disagreement.

What could they say? Misgivings or no, this was the first bit of good news they’d had in a while. Maybe with the diplomatic weight of both the Aderasti mountains and one of the plains nations, they might have a hope.

‘They accept you as their advocate?’ the female judge demanded impatiently.

‘It is so,’ said Turaqai.

‘Then we shall begin the hearing,’ said the judge, and sounded a small gong next to her.

Immediately, a hush descended on the watching audience, though Sabira could still feel their watching eyes boring into her. At least Father and the other Aderasti were there too. Knowing that made her feel a little better.

‘I summon Judge Shangao to the podium!’ Turaqai announced, as soon as the court’s procedures allowed it. The audience again gasped – she was pointing at one of the High Tribunal, after all.

‘Are we in for an entire hearing of these dramatics?’ asked the female judge, acidly.

‘Only if justice requires them!’ said Turaqai, seemingly enjoying herself.

‘It’s alright, Judge Huawen,’ said Shangao, getting up and walking from the dais to the small witness podium in front of it, ‘I was there when Judge Xaoten died, after all.’

‘Indeed,’ said Turaqai, ‘And how did that happen. Please, tell the court – we’re all dying to hear.’

Sabira thought that was a poor choice of words, but Shangao did so anyway, without comment. It wasn’t a complicated tale, but the judge told it with care. The diplomatic event, the sudden ice spikes growing from Sabira – and her obvious distress. Then, of course, the blood and death. Sabira noted that the judge did not seem interested in painting her in a monstrous light – there actually seemed a tiny note of sympathy when he described her collapsing. Could that be a good sign?

Turaqai and the other advocate, a severe man with a long beard, traded questioning sessions, but neither got much more from the judge. What more was

there? The facts were clear, and soon it was time for others to be summoned to the pedestal.

Witness after witness told the same story. How could they not? They had all seen the same thing. Sabira knew they weren't lying – it was just that they didn't know what had been going on in Sabira's head. Turaqai could not make them say otherwise and did not seem to be trying that hard. Perhaps she now recognised that this was a hopeless case?

'What we've heard,' said Turaqai eventually, as Ember-Priest Suwei stepped up to be questioned, 'is that everyone saw young Sabira here in obvious distress, but not that she was in any kind of war-rage. The bloodshed was a surprise to her as much as to anyone! The girl fell unconscious afterward, and could not be woken for hours, for the khan's sake! It is clear she was afflicted with something, and not, obviously, a murderer.'

'It is possible,' the ember-priest suggested, 'that the girl is not in fact wholly responsible for her actions.'

Sabira narrowed her eyes. Was Suwei about to confess? Her tone didn't sound sorry or frightened though.

'You have a theory?' asked the khanum, and Sabira saw her mistake before Turaqai had finished the sentence. Suwei smiled sweetly and began to speak.

'I do. I – as all of you – have heard the story of the girl that destroyed Colonel Yupin's protector force. I have learned recently that in order to do it, she bonded a frostslover in an unusual way – and that when bondings go wrong, they can create monstrous icy beings. Yeti, if you will.'

Whispers in the audience. Strong ones.

'Where is she going with this?' muttered Danlin beside Sabira. She didn't want to know but got to find out anyway.

'I postulate,' Suwei continued, 'that the girl's bond is the source of these terrible problems that have come between our nations. It seems quite possible that the frostslover may be close to madness and has acted irrationally on its own. The girl may even be its tool without her knowledge.'

Sabira stared, mouth open. It was an awful accusation, one that cut her to the core. Murmurs behind her rose in volume, and the female judge had to sound her gong to restore order.

At least a portion of the crowd believed Suwei's slithering words. Sabira was not surprised. A little piece of her was quietly asking if it might not be true. Wasn't that an easier explanation for her frostsriver's violence?

She wanted to shout at Suwei, to protest her innocence. To demand that she take back her words about Sabira's frostsriver. Turaqai obviously saw that in her, for the khanum leaned in close to whisper,

'It won't do any good to get charged with contempt on top of the rest. You must trust in me – you have every reason to, after all!'

Turaqai had been thrown by Suwei's testimony, but now she was back to her normal grinning self.

'This idea of yours, when exactly was it that you had it?' she demanded, turning on Suwei. The ember-priest did not answer directly though.

'I believe I may be able to help the poor girl. Those of my order study deviations like her, unbound from the blind reverence the Aderasti show them. Our ashland shrine has taken great steps in recent years.'

Suwei had arranged her face into a look of compassionate concern, but Sabira could see through it. The ember-priest's every word was calculated, even what emotion she did show. The woman was manipulating her audience masterfully, and Sabira didn't see what could be done to turn it around.

'So, as you avoided the question, I can only assume it was directly before you poisoned the young Aderasti!' Turaqai stated, pointing an accusing finger. Sabira heard the sound of Danlin's palm smacking his forehead in frustration. It was hard to tell whether they would have been better with the advocate the High Tribunal had been intending to assign.

'The only contact I have had with young Sabira is in paying my respects. I had never met her before she came to the Kindling of Law – what reason would I have for wishing harm on her, at the event or otherwise?

Suwei sounded so convincing – if Sabira hadn't know the truth, it would have been a believable act.

'So, you admit contact with her,' Turaqai pressed, 'just before the death of Judge Xaoten?'

‘Yes, and I can only count myself blessed that I was not the one struck down. Perhaps, if only I had lingered a little longer, I might have been, and not our esteemed member of the High Tribunal.’

‘Highly suspicious!’ Turaqai announced, ‘No problems before you or since, but moments after you touch her and this terror happens?’

‘I am offended at the implication,’ said Suwei, ‘I showed compassion to the girl – and I am still. I truly think my examining her may prove the best thing for everyone. There is much that may be solved with the proper application of reason.’

‘I fear you’ve already been improper! If you could...’

The sound of a gong interrupted her.

‘This is going nowhere,’ the Judge Huawen stated, ‘this argument – with a respected member of the ember-priest order, no less - will establish nothing beyond what has already been told. Frankly, I think we’ve heard enough from everyone – unless you advocates have anything more to add? No? Good,’ said Huawen. With barely a hesitation, she moved to light the ornate lantern beside her with a smouldering taper. ‘In my view, guilt has clearly been established, and we can move on to a swift sentencing procedure. Arguments of culpability can be expressed in that context. Judge Shangao?’

She looked at her rotund colleague, who was sitting still, fingers steeped in thought. Eventually he looked up and spoke.

‘The facts of the case are obvious. Judge Xaoten died upon the blade of this Aderasti girl. That is not in dispute. That is cause for moving to summary sentencing. In most cases. But this is a more delicate case than most. As my predecessor, Judge Meihu was fond of saying, when it comes to matters of nations, we must be sure. So it is here. My vote is not a determination of guilt or innocence, but for exploring more, and putting the process firmly in public eye.’

He picked up the taper, and instead of lighting the lantern, doused the wood in water.

‘Without a unanimous vote, we will go to a full trial,’ said Huawen, sighing in clear frustration. ‘We will reconvene when the third High Tribunal seat has been refilled in three months’ time. That should give plenty of time for all interested parties to ready themselves to appear or observe. The accused will be returned to custody in the meantime. The rest of

the Aderasti delegation will be held under house arrest until their level of involvement can be determined.'

She sounded her little gong again, and with that, soldiers moved in to once more escort Sabira and Danlin. They hadn't lost, but Sabira's heavy heart certainly felt like they had. Three months. Three. Months.

It hit Sabira now, how her dreams for actually making things better had fallen apart. Was this all her brother's end had bought? She was not going to be bold from a prison cell. She was not going to be like Turaqai and shake things up – except in all the worst ways.

Turaqai herself regarded them with a grim expression, all trace of her smile gone as they were marched off, the court official yelling, 'Rise!' once more. She had done her best – and it hadn't mattered. The truth hadn't mattered, and now they were destined for who knew how long locked away.

She looked over her shoulder at the faces of the Aderasti in the gossiping crowd. The face of her father, who was pale and clearly shocked by the whole process. Sabira looked to Danlin, and his own frightened eyes. He knew, as she did, how bad their situation was, even if neither of them could put it into words right now.

Her frostslover knew how to say it though, in the silent spaces of her mind.

Doomed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

'They've already made their decision. They just want to do it formally, so it doesn't look like they've rushed to judgement.'

'No,' Sabira told Danlin, 'They just...'

'You don't believe that, and I know that's not true,' he shot back from his corner of the cell. Could it be called a corner when it was round? They'd been in here for hours since the hearing, and stress was leading Sabira's mind to some strange places.

Dark places.

Her frostslover was right about that, and she had to stop, had to find some glimmer of hope to hold on to.

‘It wasn’t a complete disaster,’ she tried, ‘they weren’t making it into as much of a diplomatic incident as they might have.’

‘That’s only because...’

‘You can’t come in here!’ a shouting voice outside cut in.

‘You dare? You dare to speak to the First Daughter of the Khan above Khans in this fashion?’

That second voice was unmistakably that of Turaqai’s bodyguard, Jaliqorbei - even through the stone. Muffled argument replied.

‘You are going to let me in, and that’s final.’

Was that Turaqai herself? The grinding sound of the cell’s wall-door cut off her thoughts – which were proved right only moments later. In the doorway stood the khanum, resplendent in finery, but still somehow looking like she could be at home on horseback.

‘And where is my applause?’ she demanded. Seeing Sabira and Danlin speechless, she continued, ‘Oh, fine, be paralysed by my excellence then. It is a wonder that you’re not under the lash now, or whatever that Suwei woman wants done to you.’

‘The ember-priest,’ Sabir managed, ‘She’s dangerous, I’m sure. She was so good at sounding reasonable, I thought even you might believe her.’

‘Ha! I’ve known far better liars and beaten them all – but you’re right to want to stay out of her clutches,’ agreed Turaqai, ‘I’ve heard some nasty rumours – especially about that shrine of hers. She’s got plenty who support her, but I know a thing or two about finding those that don’t. Some call her witch, and I don’t find that so unkind – but I think what’s at the bottom is a cunning woman with a mind for science. Suwei and her cult dress it up with ritual, siting their base out in the ashlands to be mysterious and all that, but I’m certain that they know things, and want more. I expect you’re a convenient path to that, if they can get their claws on you.’

‘Can you see a way to avoid that?’ Sabira asked.

‘Yeah, that last attempt didn’t go so well,’ Danlin added.

‘I’ve got nothing better to do while I’m here than help you,’ said Turaqai, ‘No, really – this mission from my father has been boring as dirt and you’ve been a burning bright spark in it. The answer will come to me soon enough.’

‘We do have time,’ Danlin said, ‘the trial is going to be months and months long.’

Sabira felt herself tense up again at the idea of being cooped up in this small space for that long. Too much like the caves under Aderast. Turaqai just nodded.

‘You Ignatians do love a good bit of long-winded court procedure, even if we all know where it’s going. So, nothing to worry about - you just sit here and prepare yourselves for when the time is right,’ said Turaqai, offering her arm in friendship, ‘and I expect soon enough all this will blow out in an unexpected direction.’

As Sabira made to clasp the khanum’s outstretched hand, she caught a flash of something held in it, but something about Turaqai’s fixed smile made her decide to continue. As they shook, Sabira found herself being passed a tube, no more than a couple of fingers wide, with some kind of string attached to one end.

‘That’s...’ said Danlin, eyes wide as he spotted what was going on.

‘Nothing for anyone to worry about, exactly,’ said Turaqai, almost theatrically. ‘So, until we meet again – assuming we do. I hope we can visit that tailor’s shop again together *someday* soon.’

Sabira hurriedly hid the tube as the plains princess stepped back out of the cell, under the decidedly grumpy gazes of the guards she had bullied her way past. The wall ground back into place, and they were again alone in the cell. Only then did she relax and bring out the tube to inspect. It was a deep red and had some kind of waxy caps on the ends. The string fed into one of them, looked to be coated in some almost metallic substance and it held a familiar smell.

‘I’ve heard about this, but never seen it,’ said Danlin quietly, leaning in to examine, ‘I think it’s detonation stick. Several times more powerful than blasting powder. It’s made with acids I believe, and they...’

‘Maybe save the chemic lesson?’ Sabira whispered back, ‘Why has she given it to us?’

‘Not as a weapon, that’s for sure,’ said Danlin, ‘The fuse would make it useless. Besides, it would probably blow a hole right through the floor.’

‘Or wall,’ Sabira mused.

‘Or... Wall...’ Danlin repeated, eyes narrowing. He knew what she was suggesting and did not like the sound of it. Sabira on the other hand held the detonation stick like it was a climbing piton and she at the bottom of a crevasse. She could act after all. She could do something.

Be bold.

‘Exactly,’ she said, and then to Danlin,

‘Does staying here for months with the weight of punishment hanging over us sound better to you? You said it yourself – they’ve already made their decision.’

He shook his head, but slowly. He was not convinced. For her part, Sabira’s stomach knotted at even the thought of facing that court again, reliving the moment her frostslover had murdered a man again and again as the final day arrived where she was sentenced to prison, or death, or the branding lash.

‘We can do something out there. Find proof that we’re innocent,’ she said, ‘Or at least not be the focus of their anger. Maybe without us in the way father can do something to get peace talks back to being possible. I don’t know what else we can do.’

‘I don’t know either,’ said Danlin.

Useless here.

At the frostslover’s voice, she pushed dark feelings back. It had reminded her of something she needed to hear. If they did nothing, all her ideas, her hopes for making things better would end here. Out there was at least the potential for a better tomorrow. Sabira found her resolve growing with every second she spent fantasising about seizing control of her own future.

‘Danlin, I think we should take this chance,’ she said, ‘but I’ll understand if you don’t want to. I think you’ve got a good chance of getting out of this safely – I was the killer in their eyes, and unless things go very badly, I’m sure we can make them see that you weren’t involved.’

It rushed out of her, as all the while she looked into his dark eyes, searching for his answer before it came. She was throwing herself in front of the cave bear for him, but desperately wanted him to pull her back from its claws. Finally, he held up the detonation stick and said,

‘So, we need to work out how to light this.’

Sabira’s smile could not have been wider.

CHAPTER NINE

Having made the decision to escape, it didn't take long for Danlin to inspect their cell. He looked into cracks and touched the stone, feeling the texture. Once he was satisfied with what he had found, he said,

'I think the stone is rough enough to generate enough heat through friction. Should be able to light the fuse.'

'I knew there was a reason I'm friends with a chemic! Then what?' said Sabira, more than happy to defer to Danlin on this, his greatest area of expertise. He made an expanding hand gesture and a noise to show an explosion.

'I got that. I meant what happens to us?'

He scrunched up his face and moved his fingers as if calculating something in his head.

'The wall won't survive it,' he said a few moments later, 'but it's not going to be good for us either. Even with most of the blast passing into the stone, there will still be a shockwave, and plenty of rock debris. We'd be cut to ribbons standing in front of it.'

'I can try to protect us,' Sabira suggested, 'We huddle as far from the blast as we can behind a frostsriver shield.'

'That's going to fall as soon as the wall goes,' said Danlin, pointing up as the menacing weight that formed the ceiling, 'And we're pretty high up. Can you handle all that?'

Sabira didn't know if she could and, looking for some reassurance, asked inside her mind,

'We can do this, right?'

Survive!

Her frostsriver sounded excited, like it was eager to be doing the kind of thing it had been born for. Just like Sabira was.

'Yes,' she said, far more firmly than she felt. Danlin nodded, and began wandering the edge of the cell, detonation stick in hand and looking for a place to put it.

'A horrible thought just came to me,' he suddenly said after a few seconds.

'I don't want to know.'

‘What if Turaqai doesn’t like us that much, and just wants us to get rid of ourselves?’

‘Then she’s going to be disappointed,’ said Sabira, more determined by the word. She couldn’t look back, couldn’t look for reasons not to do this, or she would find them all too easily. ‘Besides, I think she was telling us to meet her when we got out – near the tailor’s place.’

‘If you say so. And you’re going to be fine when this goes off? To be clear – much bigger boom than blasting powder. I only patronise you like that because if you’re wrong, well, I don’t want either of us splattered over a wide area.’

Protect both.

‘You heard the glowing ice,’ said Sabira, ‘get ready, and so will we.’

‘Alright tiny cold demon, if you say so.’

Danlin nodded and moved to one of the thin tubes in the stone wall that orange light was coming in through. It wasn’t even large enough to fit his arm into, but that detonation stick would slide in easily.

Sabira crouched down across from him, and for the first time a long while, willed icy armour to spill out across her. It wasn’t the warrior’s intricate skeleton that she needed this time though, but merely an anchor for the angled shield she had her frostsriver form next. The blue glow of frostfire filled the prison cell as it spread, thinning out in an incomplete dome over Sabira and putting out icicle struts to brace it against the floor. Sabira had so much more control now than she once did, and that power, if nothing else, brought a smile to her face – and a quick beat to her heart.

‘Can’t be as bad as holding back an avalanche,’ she muttered, more of a prayer than a statement of fact.

Maybe.

Comforting, that.

‘Frostsriver, you’ll want to seal off Sabira’s ears too – this will be loud, especially in such an enclosed space,’ Danlin advised, readying himself and pinching the end of the fuse. The mildly unpleasant sensation of liquid ice oozed into Sabira’s ears, and sound faded from the world.

‘Ready!’ she called to him, probably louder than she intended. He mouthed something – probably some bad joke – back at her, and swept the end of the fuse across the rough prison wall.

The volatile powder covered fuse caught immediately, fizzing away in Danlin's hand and burning his fingers too, if the way he jerked them away was anything to judge by. Sabira's eyes widened as the short length sizzled away, fire creeping quickly towards the explosive tube. He fed it into the hole in the wall and pushed, before darting towards Sabira – they had only seconds.

She watched sparks flutter free of the hole as Danlin rushed through the gap she had left in the shield. Her frostsriver closed up behind him and began extending tendrils to give him earplugs too. As the shield completed, Sabira asked,

'How long left...'

She had been near an explosion before but the strength of that little stick was stunning, the blast blinding, the wave of force from it hammering against the frostsriver. Another hammer blow seemed to strike in her head as well as she felt terrible pain through the bond. There was no time to do anything about it though – the heavy cylinder that had been the ceiling was coming down right on top of her.

Whatever ropes had been holding it up had disintegrated, and before Sabira could blink again the weight slammed down onto her shield. The frostsriver clutched at her heart, pulling strength from her as it tried not to crack under the pressure.

Sabira got one good glance at the damage that they'd done and knew that no one was going to be occupying this cell again. The sky was clearly visible, even through the frostsriver shield, and heavy masonry stone was still falling – hopefully not onto anyone.

Not long. Cracking.

No time to think about the consequences.

She flung herself free of the crushing force, shield flowing back to her, tackling Danlin right through the empty space. He had to come too, or the smash that hit behind them would have claimed him. Sabira twisted in the air, trying not to think about the fact that they were falling, and stabbed her hand towards the stone that was flashing past beside her.

Her frostsriver generated a climbing piton in her hand, and blue ice stabbed into cold stone, jolting them to a stop. Sabira just managed to keep hold of Danlin as her arms flashed with pain – but instantly she felt his weight slipping from her grasp.

‘Help him!’ she desperately told her frostslover, mind only half forming ideas as to how. Ice spilled out from under her clothes, seizing on to Danlin’s wrist like a malformed manacle. Sabira breathed out, trying to calm herself – but it was hard with her arms still almost being pulled out their sockets.

‘Climb up onto my back,’ she told her friend, ‘My frostslover can bind you safely on.’

After a painful and very awkward few moments, he did so, her frostslover turning him into a kind of living backpack and supporting at least some of his weight.

‘I’m not going to look down anymore I think,’ said Danlin when they were done, ‘that would have been a nasty splat in the courtyard.’

He was right – it was a dizzying way down.

‘I didn’t think we were this high up!’ said Sabira.

‘This isn’t seeming like such a good idea!’ Danlin called back over the wind and the ringing in her ears. Too late now.

‘It’s alright – we can still do this,’ she said, summoning some confidence. She had chosen to be bold, and she was going to act like it. Surely Turaqai would shrug off little things like the potential effects of gravity? Sabira would do the same.

‘Can you make wings?’ Danlin asked, though he didn’t sound like he expected the answer to be yes.

‘Not working ones. We’re too heavy. I’ll have to carry you down,’ Sabira told Danlin, who had nothing to do but agree. She began generating spikes and edging down the tower’s vertical surface. The wind did its best to sweep them from the sheer stone, but Sabira kept on with determined care, minute by minute, floor by floor. Time passed to her heavy heartbeat.

‘This is taking too long,’ Danlin whispered in her ear, ‘Every soldier in the city will be on alert by the time we get to the bottom.’

‘Oh, you want speed do you,’ Sabira said, stabbing again and grunting at the effort, ‘Maybe I should just drop you, then we’ll both get there much faster. You mostly.’

‘I have taught you well,’ said Danlin, approving of her joking under pressure despite the undercurrent of fear in his voice. He was right though, this was taking too long, but what else could they do?

Tower near.

Sabira flicked her head around to the structure that had been in her peripheral vision. 'Near' was pushing it, but it might just be close enough.

'If you can hold on any tighter, you should,' said Sabira, and launched herself back and away from the wall.

'Aaaaaaaaaah!' Danlin replied as they fell, pinned to Sabira's back and helpless.

It wasn't nearly as far down to the tower top as the ground, but it was plenty far enough for terror to set in. Sabira twisted, trying to get her feet pointing in the right direction. It was awkward, but she got there just in time before impact. Her frostsriver had been busy to in the moment of freefall, forming into giant bird claws on the bottom of Sabira's feet. The shining ice slammed into tiled roof, sending broken bits of orange glazing flying and absorbing the worst of the damage that would have been done to Sabira and Danlin.

'That was...' said Danlin, but Sabira didn't stop to reply. If she stopped, she wouldn't be able to make herself begin again. Instead, she ran forwards, slipping and sliding on broken tile, until she reached an edge and flung herself off it, frostsriver strength adding to the force of her jump.

There was another tower ahead, one only a short drop away. A short drop, but a long, long distance. Thinking that it might be a terrible idea, but doing it anyway, she willed wings to spread from her Danlin-backpack.

Terribly thin and delicate, the feathers flowed out like a sculpture, right out to the absolute limits of her bond. The frostsriver could only stretch itself so thin, even with the powerful bond they shared.

'Not working ones, you said!' Danlin yelled in alarm, but she was concentrating too much to reply. Unfortunately, it was true, the spindly wings weren't any use for flapping or gaining height. But a bit of distance, gliding? That they could manage.

With significantly less grace than the average bird, they shot across the gap, Sabira having no choice but to see the long drop below – and the shocked people there, pointing up at them.

Then she was across the gap, and slamming stomach first into the edge of the tower roof. The wind left her, and she almost fell, but she had enough will left to

turn the wings to grasping hands, holding them both to the roof and pulling them up to stand, panting on the tiles.

‘That icy fiend is amazing. You are amazing,’ said Danlin, still on her back, supported by ice. Sabira didn’t feel especially amazing. She felt like she had been battling a bear and not coming off all that well. Still, they had covered a lot of ground with that foolishness.

‘No more jumps like that,’ she said, as much for herself as for Danlin.

But... fun!

Sabira didn’t argue, instead searching out the next part of their route. It turned out that from there it was an easy path down to the outer walls, and Sabira landed there less than a minute later, Danlin still safely on her back, the sound of alarm gongs ringing from somewhere behind her.

They had made it to the edge of Greyscales, and from here she didn’t think it was far to the tailor’s shop. Then what though? Head out into the wider city?

A city full of enemies and danger. An obstacle that had to be crossed if they were to hold on to their freedom.

‘Let’s go,’ said Sabira, the sinking feeling in her stomach growing stronger by the step.

CHAPTER TEN

Together, Sabira and Danlin padded across long rows of tiled roofs like sneak thieves, away from the attention that people in Aderasti clothes would gain if they walked in the open. Sabira just hoped that the few people around didn’t glance up at the wrong moment. It was slower going than the streets but, even as she jumped between two rooftops, she thought it was probably safer.

Sabira still felt and urge to speed down the street like an entire army was after her. They would be soon, she knew, and she would like to run with that in mind.

‘Go!’ said Danlin, waving to the right. He scurried over the low angle of the roof peak, and she followed him, avoiding the potential eyes of several Ignatian city folk coming the other way in the street below. No soldiers, mercifully – they were probably all racing to the alarm gongs that were chasing Sabira and Danlin away.

Maybe, just maybe the Ignatians would be confused by the blast, thinking that Sabira and Danlin had not survived it, but she wasn’t going to count on that.

It was late, and Grayscales didn't seem all that busy, which was fortunate. Fewer prying eyes to spot them fleeing. They reached the end of the rooftop and halted, waiting to get their breath back. The tailor's shop was just across the street, Sabira saw, its paper lantern casting shadows of the needle and thread painted on it. There was no sign of any plainswomen nearby.

'This is bad,' said Danlin, stating the obvious, 'Turaqai had better be coming - we don't know this city, we don't have any supplies and we don't have anywhere to run to.'

'You know the city, don't you?' said Sabira, starting to feel like this might all be a dreadful mistake.

Reckless.

'You're not helping,' she told it.

'Um, sorry?' said Danlin, taken aback.

'Not you, I meant... never mind, we don't have time. If they don't come, we'll have to get of the city on our own – what's the best way to go?'

'I don't know,' he replied, 'I've been in this city less than a week in my entire life.'

She didn't know what to say to that – she hadn't realised how little he knew the Ignatian capital.

'I thought...'

Even as she said it, Sabira began to think about what other assumptions she had made, and how little she had thought about the consequences. Anxiety and fear had driven her choice and she had pulled Danlin along with her. It was too late to take it back now.

Suddenly, a commotion back towards the Kindling of Law drew Sabira's attention, and she pulled on Danlin's shoulder, getting him to duck down with her. If a brigade of soldiers was coming out after them, she wanted to see the route they were taking, and avoid it.

What they saw was indeed people armed and dangerous, but far from a unit of tar coated Ignatians. City folk were diving out of the way of the unmistakable galloping figures.

‘I think that’s them,’ Sabira hissed. It had to be – those golden horns in Jaliqorbei’s hair were distinctive just by themselves. The plains women seemed to be riding with some haste, and with a third animal in tow – one slightly larger than their own manoeuvrable plains ponies.

‘I hope they have more of a plan than we do,’ said Danlin, ‘because going down there to meet them is going to be risky.’

‘I’m going to take that chance, unless you’ve got a better idea.’

‘Oh no, lead the way,’ said Danlin, and threw her a mock salute.

A minute later, Sabira ducked out of the wide alley she had jumped down into and waved her arms wildly, just before the plainswomen arrived, galloping horses kicking up ash dust.

Fortunately, both princess and bodyguard were skilled enough to rein in their three animals before any trampling could happen. Each was trotted into the alley after Sabira, probably in the hopes of attracting slightly less attention.

‘Good to see some friendly faces,’ said Sabira, though when she looked at the bodyguard’s half scowl, she began to reconsider. Jaliqorbei’s head swung back and forth between them, the spiked braid swishing behind her as if she were debating whether to flick it into one of them with stabbing force.

‘Greetings, fools,’ she said, with obvious annoyance.

‘If we’re fools, what does that someone that set us on this path?’ Danlin demanded, looking pointedly at Turaqai. Jaliqorbei drew herself up in the saddle in anger.

‘Khanum Turaqai was not expecting you to use the stick instantly! Khanum Turaqai...’

‘Khanum Turaqai should have know better than to think that emphasis on the word *someday* would make you wait one of them,’ the plains princess said evenly, cutting off her bodyguard.

‘I certainly expected one or both of you to have more sense! Some sense!’ Jaliqorbei argued.

‘Shows how well you know us,’ said Danlin, a sheepish smile on his face.

‘Done now. Done you will be too if you do not make haste,’ Jaliqorbei replied, apparently not fond of the joke.

‘How badly have we messed things up?’ Sabira asked, worriedly.

Bad.

Her frostsriver's silent suggestion was exactly what she had been thinking, and no one did anything to dispel those thoughts.

'I intended to have a plan ready to smuggle you out of the city, but now you're just going to have to make a break for it,' said Turaqai, 'Lightning alive, it's a terrible plan, but I think it will be terribly exciting. I almost wish I was doing it – the monotony of this city does get to you after a while.'

'You'll need this,' the bodyguard stated, indicating the rider-less animal, 'You won't make it far on foot, and there are supplies in the saddle bags.'

It wasn't that Sabira wasn't grateful, but she found herself pulling a face of uncertainty as she asked Danlin,

'Do you know how to ride? I certainly don't'

There wasn't much call for it on Aderast – horses weren't big on sheer mountainsides.

'I've ridden,' Danlin replied, sounding like he meant maybe once.

'Make do, make do,' said Jaliqorbei, and handed over the reins. The woman had the right of it, Sabira supposed as Danlin awkwardly got onto the animal's back. They were in no position to be picky.

'Thank you, for everything,' said Sabira as she mounted up behind Danlin, using the frostsriver to give herself a boost. She immediately decided that she was not fond of riding – even as calm as the animal was, she felt on the verge of sliding off her slightly swaying perch.

The two plainswomen began turning their mounts, back towards the Kindling of Law. The place that had been Sabira's prison. The place where her father and the other Aderasti were still. What would happen to them after their escape? What had she put in motion by fleeing?

'What will happen to the Aderasti delegation?' she asked, suspecting the answer, and dreading it.

'Hard to be sure,' said Turaqai, 'but I'd bet on an accelerated trial. They may be looking for someone to punish now that you've slipped their clutches. I won't lie - you escaped summary sentencing, but I'm not sure they will now. A few days and then... Well, I'm sure you can guess.'

The horror of it set into Sabira's skin. The idea of those judges lighting lanterns and sending innocent people – her father among them - to punishment in her stead... The memory of that official announcer, the one with the ceremonial branding lash came to mind. It was wrong to simply run, she knew that now. It had taken freedom from the cell for her to see it, but now it was as clear as an Aderasti sky.

She had to make this decision be worthwhile. Something that her father and Hadatan would think was a fair trade for their freedom, at minimum. Images of the trial flicked through her head, only increasing her fears – but then one of them seemed to call to her to think again. The woman in the fiery tassels with the almost shaved head and the dead-inside smile. Sabira's tormentor. Ember-Priest Suwei.

'I've got a better idea than running,' said Sabira. She hoped it was better. It was certainly bolder – and importantly, it was quick. Quick enough that they might make it back before the delegation's time ran out. She tried to hold on to her confidence as heads turned to look at her.

Push on.

Her frostslover always had that anxiety in it, wanting to run and fight, as it had when it was only newly born from the glacier. Well, maybe this plan would end up indulging it.

'I'm ears,' said Turaqai, a slight smile pulling at the corner of her mouth as if she knew something outrageous was coming. Sabira wasn't happy to oblige, but she did anyway.

'Suwei. She's the source of all this. We find her, or maybe her chambers, and we might be able to prove it.'

'Ambitious,' said Turaqai, 'but that's going to be hard, as she's leaving the city tonight.'

Tonight?

'Already gone,' said Jaliqorbei, 'An hour or more hence, judging by the din they made leaving the stables.'

'Then there's still time to catch up,' Sabira found herself saying, reckless though the suggestion was.

'To her and the unit of the finest Ignatian cavalry that accompany her? Even I would rate that as a bit too much adventure,' said Turaqai, 'but I admire the optimism.'

'Where are they going with that kind of guard?' Danlin asked.

‘The ember-priest shrine in the ashlands, I’d suspect,’ Turaqai replied, ‘Now she knows that she’ll have to wait months to get her grubby paws on you, she probably wants to relax at home for a while.’

‘Then we can follow her,’ said Sabira, determination growing in her.

‘And we would want to, why?’ Danlin said.

‘Because if we don’t, no one will ever know what her order are up to - and everyone else will suffer because of our escape.’

Learn truth.

‘The ember-priests don’t all have to be in on this,’ he said, ‘Could just be Suwei doing this to us, no help needed – would you put that past her?’

Sabira knew it was possible but didn’t feel that it was right.

‘Please Danlin, I’m asking you to trust me.’

‘I’m with you to the end, but I doubt these two will want to take this path,’ he said, indicating the two plainswomen. Sabira didn’t care. As long as he was with her, that would be enough. They had already proved that together, they could beat any odds. And anyway, she thought that she had Turaqai’s measure.

‘Why, Danlin, do you think they would be too scared to come?’ she said, a smile spreading evilly across her face.

‘Ha!’ said Turaqai, ‘You already know me – I won’t back down from that challenge!’

And that was all it took, apparently. Jaliqorbei’s face became one solid frown, but she didn’t object. Perhaps she also knew her princess all too well.

‘I don’t know - can this actually work?’ said Danlin, not sounding enthusiastic about chasing after Suwei. Sabira didn’t know if it could work, but didn’t say so. There were no better ideas.

‘We shall have to ride fast if we’ve any hope of catching up,’ said Jaliqorbei, obviously preferring not to, ‘Don’t fall. Do not fall.’

‘My heart, you worry too much – let’s go!’ said Turaqai, and wheeled her horse around to point toward the city limits. Danlin uncertainly did the same. Sabira held on tight as the group of ponies clattered out onto the main street. The others leading the way, Danlin accelerated to a canter – or at least the animal had decided

to go that fast. There was no chance of escaping notice now, not with three horses clattering through a city that seemed to have very few of them.

It was bumpier than Sabira had expected, and with each of the animal's strides she worried that she would be thrown off. But, holding on to Danlin seemed to be keeping her in the saddle for now at least.

As they headed into the outskirts of the city, and after one particularly strong bounce, she began to cough again, the ever-present atmosphere of ash and soot getting to her once more. Inside the Kindling of Law the worst of it had been kept out, but out here Sabira's breathing was already starting to suffer.

'You alright?' Danlin asked, concerned,

'Yes, I just...' Sabira said, as she looked up and saw uniforms ahead, black as tar.

'Look out!' she cried, pointing at the Ignatian soldiers. They must be city guards, ones that had heard the distant alarm gongs.

'Keep going. Keep. Going!' Jaliqorbei ordered, and whether it was due to his flimsy control of their mount or the force of her words, Danlin did not stop. Sabira would have done the same – they were committed and could not shy away now. The soldiers jumped and dived out of the way of the stampede with a chorus of shouts and swearing. Sabira caught a flash of hastily aiming muskets, heard a bang and whizz of shot flying past.

Then all three horses were out, away from Cinderstone and on to an uncertain future. There was a certain elation in the moment of stolen freedom, but Sabira soon felt that fade as she looked out over the landscape. Grey and desolate mostly, as she had seen before, but not all of it was lifeless. Unfortunately.

That army that they had seen before on manoeuvres had manoeuvred right onto the road home to the Aderasti mountains. Thousands of soldiers with thousands of muskets, all ready to be used on an escaping prisoner of the High Tribunal.

'Good job you're not going that way!' Turaqai called, sending a pang through Sabira, for when she looked toward the ashlands, she certainly wished they were. The columns of grey filth it was pumping out felt choking here, so how much worse would it be when they were up close? They would be far, far larger than the First Giver from the courtyard, and not behind glass. Not to mention the dangerous woman that they were on the trail of. Adranna felt far more appealing than any of that, even with an army in front of it.

‘We could still just head home,’ Danlin suggested, not entirely sarcastically, ‘who knows, they might just let us through.’

But Sabira knew that it wouldn't be that easy. An Aderasti girl, a frostslover and a boy in Aderasti clothes? They'd surely be stopped and questioned, even with a plainswoman princess for an escort.

Fight. Break through?

The very idea of it sickened Sabira. She didn't know how much violence she could do with the frostslover – even the power she had been gifted was not infinite – but it would be dozens, maybe hundreds of lives before she found her limit. Maybe she could actually get them through that entire army safely. That possibility filled her with terror. She couldn't do it. She wouldn't. Besides, her father needed her to come through. Saving the delegation was her duty now. She had put them in this terrible position, and if she failed, they would pay. Maybe every Aderasti would, if Ignata took their flight as an excuse for war.

‘Decision time!’ Turaqai called, not slowing. She was still focused on the road ahead. The road to the ashlands. As Sabira knew she ought to be. The drumming of the horse's hooves formed a rhythm with her heartbeat. She was set on this. She had to be.

‘We've gone this far,’ said Sabira, trying not to think of those she was leaving behind, ‘We have to see this through.’

She thought that it was the right thing to do, so why did it feel like abandoning her kin? Abandoning her father.

Whatever the correct answer, her words were enough for Danlin. After only a few more seconds' hesitation, Danlin worked the reins and the horse accelerated, heading away from the road home to Aderast beside the plainswomen.

Away from the path of safety and escape.

Towards the forbidding grey geysers of the ashlands.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

‘What are we doing?’ Sabira found herself asking, after their ride had been under way for many hours. This had been her idea, and still she found herself doubting. Her decision to take action was endangering so many people – herself, her

frostsliver, the plainswomen, her father and the other Aderasti, and of course Danlin. As she held on to him in the saddle, legs and other parts aching constantly from the ride, she just felt so grateful that he made no complaint. It was as though he did not care for his personal safety, so long as he had her word to trust in.

‘Getting sorer by the minute,’ he responded, flippantly. There was probably something behind those jokes, Sabira decided, but she didn’t have the strength to poke through to it right now.

‘I had no idea these things were so uncomfortable,’ she said instead.

‘Because you have no proper riding tradition!’ Jaliqorbei declared, not looking at all fatigued, ‘None at all!’

While accurate, Sabira didn’t really appreciate the bodyguard’s assessment. The woman had become less grumpy as Sabira and Danlin’s discomfort became clearer. Perhaps she thought it fair recompense for convincing her princess to run into the unknown. Perhaps she was simply getting into the idea of a new adventure, as Turaqai seemed to see it.

‘We shall have to time our pursuit carefully,’ the khanum said, ‘catch Suwei’s group on the edge of the ashlands, but not before.’

The road wound between gentle grey hills, making it impossible to know how far behind they were, but also preventing the group from being spotted. Behind them, the ashland geysers now swallowed their view.

‘Are the ponies going to be alright in there?’ Danlin called, and it was easy to see why. Water had been rare on this road, the few pools half-filled with ash, the grass barely there beyond a tuft or two. Even that was putting aside the air, which was making Sabira cough even now – how much worse would it be within the ashlands proper?

‘For a day or two, I’m sure,’ said Turaqai, patting her pony’s neck as if it had already done well, ‘They’ve got us through worse.’

Sabira wasn’t sure she believed that, but didn’t question aloud – after all, if this took more than a few days, her father and the rest would be consigned to prison, the branding lash, both, or worse. Practical matters had not been on her mind when she suggested pursuit. This was reckless, she knew, yet that was not enough to make her want to give up and go back. Still, from here on out she was going to endeavour to act with at least some sense and reason – and that had to start with some honesty.

‘Danlin,’ she said carefully, speaking quietly and not really wanting to say what she had to say, ‘We should talk. I have something I need to say, before... before everything else.’

‘Oh?’ he said, and Sabira thought she detected a hint of colour in his cheeks. Did he know what she was thinking? Would he be upset?

‘I know I got us into this,’ Sabira pressed on, ‘but I think that we have to be prepared for the worst.’ Danlin’s face fell a little. ‘I know, I know, but if we can’t find Suwei’s base, or things start to go bad, we should go back. Or I should, anyway. You could get away still, they probably aren’t as bothered about catching you. I’ll have to go and face the music though. It’s the right thing to do.’

She swallowed, and sat up a little taller, feeling a spark of righteousness stiffening her spine. Danlin just snorted a laugh.

‘I really thought you were going to say... Doesn’t matter. If we stay we stay. If we go back, we go back. Whatever it is, we’ll do it together.’

Together.

Sabira smiled, appreciating both his words, and the frostslover’s echo.

‘Alright then,’ she said, ‘I guess you being an Ignatian should make this a little easier, right?’

Danlin’s expression fell a little.

‘I’ve not been to the ashlands before – it’s not the kind of thing that sensible people do.’

‘Oh. Makes sense that Suwei would make a home out here then,’ suggested Sabira.

‘My experience of ember-priests has been that they’re big on symbolism and short on sense, yes.’

His words made her wonder.

‘What are they even for, anyway?’ she asked, ‘What do they believe? Our frost-clerics are all about Aderast, their frostsivers, and the mountain, but they teach too – you know Hadatan, he always likes a good lecture if you get him going. What really is an ember-priest? I know Suwei hurt you somehow. Are they all like that?’

Danlin grew ever more serious by the sentence. When she was done, he didn't immediately respond. He simply watched the horse plod along the grey road.

'When I was little, there were none around,' he eventually began, 'Our island was – is – small, and the Ignatian mainland didn't much care about us. Can't say I preferred it when they did finally come. Lots of rules. Lots of changes. I couldn't have stayed. I... they... well, whatever problems we've got now, I'm glad not to have those anymore.'

It was best to look on the bright side, Sabira supposed, looking towards their grim destination.

'This will be quite the unusual adventure!' Turaqai was telling Jaliqorbei up ahead, who was shaking her head in something close to despair. Sabira wondered if the bodyguard was closer to correct than the khanum.

They were close enough to see the geysers in great detail now. The mounds ranged in size from little boils only a handful of paces across to massive swellings that anyone not Aderasti would call mountains. She had known that the First Giver was far smaller than these, but the difference in scale was still incredible. Still, Sabira wasn't impressed by their height so much as their power, which was another thing entirely. Gouts of grey death surged from those countless wounds in the lands, seeding destruction over everywhere in sight, and far beyond besides.

'I don't think I ever got it into my head what this was like,' she said, 'I always imagined... something else. Smaller maybe – or at least not as many.'

'I confess, even I was impressed when I first saw it!' admitted Turaqai.

'Now you understand why people make such a big thing about the ash,' Danlin replied, 'I didn't understand either when I was still out in the colonies. The air's pretty clean on the islands still. Maybe not forever though, the way things are going.'

The change in climate of the ashlands, he meant. The destruction the geysers had been causing these past generations. Sabira couldn't imagine what this nation had been like before that. The ash seemed to be a part of it now, like it had seeped deep into Ignata's soul.

'I wonder why they've changed,' she mused, 'Why the geysers now put out enough to kill instead of just fertilize.'

Angry. Infected.

'They do look a bit like that, don't they,' Sabira replied.

‘That thing is weird!’ Turaqai interjected, as she had several times before when the frostslover spoke.

‘I pity anyone that gets that that many boils,’ said Danlin, ignoring the princess, ‘Except maybe Suwei. She can get as sick as she wants.’

Sabira could get behind that, but the bitterness that was there was something new from him. Danlin had never had much respect for Ignata’s institutions, but she realised now that he had a special level of disdain for the ember-priests, and Suwei in particular.

‘I wish I could understand,’ she said, steering away from the subject, ‘If they had just stayed how they were, we wouldn’t be here. Yupin would never have come to Aderast. You might never have had to be a conscript if only the geysers had stayed peaceful.’

She realised it was probably a mistake to mention what he’d been through, but she couldn’t take it back now. Stony faced, Danlin said,

‘The ember-priests say that it’s to do with justice. When things are disorderly, or immoral, the land shows its displeasure. I guess we’ve really been bad lately.’

He barely disguised his disgust for the idea.

‘It’s an excuse to do what they want. I should know, back when they first arrived on my island, they made a few choice changes.’

There seemed to be hidden pain under those words. What had Danlin been through before the Ignatian army got the lash on him?

‘You hardly talk about your past – if you would tell me the rest soon, I’d like to hear it,’ said Sabira. She’d wanted to know for most of the time she’d known him, but wanted to wait until Danlin was ready. Recently though, she’d been reminded how quickly things could be lost forever.

‘I guess that’s fair,’ he said, ‘I’ll...’

Whether he was going to speak about his history or not, Sabira did not learn.

‘Look! Look!’ Jaliqorbei called, her golden spiked braid flicking in her excitement. She was pointing to the road ahead, where very faint hoof prints were visible in the coating of ash.

A trail, where one had not had been before. The constant ash fall had obscured it – that must mean that they were getting close.

‘An hour behind, do you think?’ said Turaqai to her bodyguard. Jaliqorbei gave a noncommittal gesture so the princess added,

‘Either of you know? That weird thing around your neck, maybe?’

Sabira shook her head. She had no idea about such things. All her hunter’s training had been on Aderast and its lowlands, and that was nothing like this place.

‘No idea,’ said Danlin, ‘but we need to be careful. I was infantry, not cavalry, but I know there aren’t many mounted units. What few there are... They’re well trained, to say the least – I expect her escort are elite soldiers.’

‘Ha! A challenge then!’ said Turaqai, which was basically what Sabira expected her to say at this point. Her lack of enthusiasm – perhaps Danlin’s too – was probably obvious, because the khanum kicked her pony to greater speed and called,

‘Come now, this should be easy!’

Easy. Of course. What else would it be, tracking down a murderer and her allies in the middle of a desolated, deadly wasteland.

Just follow the trail.

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘This place,’ said Sabira, fighting off the urge to cough, ‘is awful.’

Her frostslover was covering most of her face, masking off the worst of it, but that left her with the discomfort of a harsh heartbeat. She had been left a choice between unpleasant options.

She scooted to one side in the saddle to look at Danlin. He seemed to be able to handle the ash better than she could, but he was obviously still feeling the effects. His eyes were narrowed and watery, blinking against the dust that billowed around them ever stronger. Once, when he had been a conscript he had owned crystal goggles to deal with this kind of thing – it would be nice to have a few pairs of them now.

They had ridden fully into the ashlands now, with no hint of where they had come from to be seen. Grey smothered everything, land and sky, like all colour had been wrung out of the world. Sabira saw nothing man-made – but nothing natural either. It was like nothingness given choking form.

‘I don’t even see a road anymore,’ she said, ‘I don’t know how we’re going to find Suwei now, let alone her shrine thing.’

‘Never fear, we are still on the trail,’ said Turaqai.

‘If you say so,’ said Danlin, ‘But you’d best not lose it, or we’ll never find them again. The ashlands are huge, like a small country by themselves.’

‘Suwei’s been following the road so far,’ Turaqai replied.

‘So far,’ Jaliqorbei echoed, darkly.

‘Even if they turn off this... road,’ Sabira said, thinking it wasn’t much of one, ‘they must find their way somehow,’

In the haze she struggled to see how though. It was almost like a blizzard from back home – but here it was always. Every day full of more choking ash. A heavier fall every year, if what she had heard was true.

As if in response to that thought, Danlin began a long coughing fit that she worried might spook the horse. Fortunately, it seemed that army horses were not so easily frightened.

‘So who is this Suwei anyway?’ Sabira asked when he had recovered himself, thinking Danlin might fill in some detail and take his mind off things, but it was Jaliqorbei that got in first.

‘Not the highest of the ember-priests, but the most influential. Comes from a wealthy family. Expected to take the path of the judge but chose another path, reportedly out of a sense of duty.’

‘Jali remembers my diplomatic briefings, so I don’t have to,’ Turaqai explained. The bodyguard rolled her eyes, and might have explained further, but Danlin’s cough returned, worse this time.

Sabira wished that she could give him the same protections she had.

Can try.

‘We need a quick break,’ Sabira said, thinking that it would be much easier on the ground. Plus, she was not used to riding, and certain parts of her were really starting to hurt after an exhausting amount of time in the saddle.

‘No more than a minute or two,’ said Turaqai, ‘We must be close – I don’t want to lose too much ground on them.’

‘Sounds good,’ Sabira replied. There was no time to lose, not if they were going to make it back in time to save the Aderasti delegation from whatever fate the court dealt them.

‘We’ll scout on over the hill,’ suggested Turaqai, ‘I think the road may double back that way, and I’m always in favour of short cuts! Back in a flash!’

She turned to do so without waiting for a reply. The khanum was not someone used to needing permission, or even discussion to do anything. As Jaliqorbei followed, Sabira swung herself awkwardly down off the pony.

It was all she could do not to fall over, her legs were aching that much. Horseback riding was not a sensible activity, she decided. Danlin came down too, and they both walked a few paces, stretching out abused muscles.

‘Sit down,’ said Sabira, ‘we’ll sort you out.’

She looked around for somewhere to lay down her sore limbs, before finding that there was nowhere better or worse to sit. Everything was the same dull layered blanket of ash, so she chose a patch of ground at random.

‘Lovely place for a picnic,’ Danlin said between coughs.

‘We’ll sort that out,’ said Sabira, ‘my frostsriver can handle giving us both masks.’

‘Are you sure?’ he replied, ‘You’ve said that thing stresses your heart.’

She nodded, expression firm. He wasn’t wrong, but Sabira wasn’t about to let that bother her. Even if it was doing damage to her, she might not feel it for years – well worth it if it saved Danlin from coughing his lungs up right now. They both sat, and her frostsriver began crawling icy tendrils towards him to form a second, connected mask. Taking a deep breath, Danlin said,

‘That’s so much better. I guess all everyone here needs is their own personal ice monster.’

As he did so, Sabira’s flicked around as she spotted motion atop the hill. The plainswomen returning. They were not alone.

The blast of two muskets sounded, as the two riders fired blindly behind them. Then, with an intake of breath, Sabira saw a patch of dark grey move all as one, following the two ponies over the slope of the ash-covered hillock.

‘Danlin!’ she said, setting her frostsriver to pull back to form the fantastic, intricate armour that had saved her life under Aderast. He couldn’t help her, she realised – he had no weapon. This was all up to her.

‘Run!’ Turaqai yelled at them, galloping at full speed.

‘Back on the horse!’ Sabira urged, peering closer, straining to see what was coming for them. It was too late to mount up and go though – the shadowed patch of grey had become several and resolved into things with teeth and claws.

Three almost perfectly camouflaged feline forms, each longer than a person was tall padded towards them on furred paws, slit eyes focused and hungry.

Ash-cats.

Sabira had almost forgotten that the predators lived here among the geysers. Each powerful feline was a match for their horse in weight, but stockier and more well-muscled. Yet they also looked sleek, with no spots or stripes to break up their colour.

Their fur was strange though, like it was changing colour with the creature’s motion, strands flowing from a charcoal to a cool cloud grey as they padded forward. It gave them the look of fading in and out of the landscape, almost like they were ghosts. Sabira could see how they had inspired terrible tales of the beauty and power – she was in one of those tales right now.

The plainswomen shot past, heading back onto the road in the direction they had come. The ash-cats charged after, too fast for Sabira or Danlin to make it to their pony before they arrived. She stood in front of him, trying to think herself the warrior, trying to be what Kyran would want her to be. It couldn’t be done.

Even if she could fight one – or all of the ash-cats at once – there would be nothing to stop the pack from killing Danlin while she was occupied. She wasn’t even convinced that she could beat them – her armour would protect her, but she’d never faced anything like this before.

Then the ash-cats sprang forward as one, and any thoughts of strategy vanished. It was like the creatures were all being propelled by the same force, launching the felines forward in a lightning fast pounce.

Sabira had no time to have her frostsilver form anything – the ash-cats were too quick, too well coordinated. Instead, she could only dive backwards out of their path, pulling Danlin out of their path. They rolled in the ash, the taste of it filling her mouth, along with the sharp sensation of fear. Springing to her feet, a blade of glowing ice in her hand, Sabira steeled herself to do battle. However, she saw that

the predators had already found different prey in the form of their unsuspecting mount.

It stood no chance against even one of the beasts, and the pack's teeth and claws brought it down in seconds. One held on at the jugular. Another seized at the hind quarters. Sabira felt a scream rip from her but couldn't help the stricken animal – there was already far too much blood.

Must flee. Cannot make better.

'Sabira!' Turaqai called, but it only attracted the ash-cats' attention. They left the corpse they had just made and went after the plainswomen, attempting to make more. Turaqai and Jaliqorbei were forced to pick up speed to avoid being mauled.

Sabira thought about running after them, despite the danger, but that was when other figures appeared on the hill. People, this time. Ignatians. One of them wore tassels and looked on with cold satisfaction. Suwei.

Part of Sabira wanted to attack. She could do it. Her frostsriver would protect her. She could save anyone else from the threat of the ember-priest even if she couldn't save herself and Danlin. Or her father and the other Aderasti.

Then more blurred feline forms came up beside the woman, and Sabira realised that her frostsriver had the right of it – they had to flee.

'Come on!' she said to Danlin, and together they did the only thing they could do and ran. Off towards the nearest hills, away from the path they had been following. Seconds passed, with only the dying agony of the horse following them. No following soldiers. No sharp teeth or claws in the back.

'What was that?' said Danlin a few minutes later, sounding out of breath.

'I don't know,' Sabira wheezed back.

Wrong. Not normal.

'Your frostsriver's right. Everyone knows that ash-cats are solitary. Every Ignatian, I mean. Those things... it was like they were, I don't know, trained or something.'

Danlin sounded rattled, almost as much as Sabira felt. Could you train an ash-cat? The creatures seemed so wild, so capable. It didn't seem like it would be easy to bend them to a human's will.

'Answers will have to wait,' said Sabira, 'We have to put as much ground between them and us as we can.'

Ground that would take them further from Turaqai and Jaliqorbei. Further from the road. Further from the possibility of survival.

As she began to hike faster, Danlin said,

‘I just hope that there aren’t more of them nearby.’

That was enough to keep her fully concentrated on every step they took as they strode on into the gloom, leaving ash footprints to be slowly filled in by the geysers behind them. The mercifully distant roars of the ash-cats followed them, deep into greyness. Into the night.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

No horse. No road. No hope.

That was Sabira’s first thought as she awoke from fitful sleep after a day’s wandering through the ashlands without transport.

‘Nothing dangerous – nothing to report at all,’ Danlin said to her as she sat up from the bed of ash and hard ground, stiff and barely rested. He had taken the second watch after sleeping himself – both being unconscious at the same time seemed a good way to get eaten by ash-cats. Apparently though there had been none, and neither of them had seen a trace of either Suwei’s soldiers, or Turaqai and Jaliqorbei either. She feared that they might never again.

We will.

Her frostslover’s assurances aside, the road was lost forever, slipped away from them in the panicked dash away from the ash-cats. Sabira wasn’t even sure what direction anything was anymore. Too long had they climbed, stumbled and fled across the almost featureless hills. She had to fight not to think about what that might mean for her father and the others. A day gone, and who knew what rulings the High Tribunal might already have made.

She had no idea what time it was now – the ever-present greyness made it impossible to be precise – and despite the sleep she was still tired beyond belief. That made everything worse, every bad thought burrowing deep into her brain. More and more she thought all this had been a terrible idea. It had been her that pushed for action, to get out of that cell and do something. She had been so

desperate to fix things that she had dressed up thoughtless desire for escape in the pretence of doing what was right.

‘Wish we had some food,’ Danlin said, ‘I don’t fancy an ash breakfast.’

Sabira just took a swig of water from her canteen in reply. They were lucky to have even that – everything else Turaqai had prepared for the trip had been on their unfortunate mount. He took a drink as well, and wordlessly they got up to continue their wander. There was nothing else to do besides walk and think, and despite aching muscles, the latter was worse.

Sabira knew that they had run because she asked to, and she no longer trusted her justifications for doing so. She feared it had been because she couldn’t stand the thought of being confined by the Ignatians – couldn’t she have at least endured a week of it, to see how things played out?

Then there were the even more disturbing thoughts. Memories of a burning forest long ago. The mauled, dying horse. Her ice dagger slamming into the judge’s chest. There was so much fuel for that fire, no matter how many times Sabira tried to douse it.

Does not help.

‘I know,’ she told her frostslover quietly, ‘but I can’t stop.’

If they didn’t come when she was awake, they’d come again in her dreams. They always did.

‘Blast it!’ cursed Danlin, stumbling on a rock. Sabira stumbled with him, but together they stayed upright.

She had worked out how to share the frostslover’s protection, each of them walking with an arm over the other’s shoulder, a blue strand of glowing ice connecting her mask to one upon Danlin’s face. It was a little awkward, but at least this way it was possible to support one another and move onward, if slower than they would have preferred.

‘What do ash-cats even eat out in this wasteland?’ Sabira found herself asking, the latest in a series of unimportant conversations that kept their minds off their tired feet. And the rest.

‘There are caves I think, with lizards and bats and maybe fish too. Oh, and ash-rats.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘No, really, they’re big too, nearly as long as your arm. No tail, fat face,’ said Danlin. Sabira couldn’t tell if he was joking, so she just left it there. She yearned for the times – only

days ago – when she would have spent an entire evening laughing together, leaning on each other to forget their worst memories.

Funny how much a part of her life he had grown, she thought.

Should say it more.

Sabira was glad her frostslover said that in her head and not out loud, but it was true. Danlin had become more than a friend in this last year. He was basically family. She just didn't quite know how to say that without it coming out sounding stupid. She didn't want him to laugh it off.

'Ash-rats?' she said instead, 'Don't worry about them – my frostslover and I will see them off!'

Coward.

She almost argued with her frostslover, but then realised that the word had been his own. Before she could make herself do better, Danlin was replying,

'It's weird, being the soldier and having to rely on you to defend me,' he said.

'You're not a soldier anymore,' said Sabira.

'Not anything, really,' said Danlin, 'Except maybe annoying? I can do that.'

He was smiling, so Sabira smiled back and said,

'It's been a while now – I've learned to block it out.'

'Honestly, I never expected you to put up with me for this long,' said Danlin. It sounded like it should be a joke, but Sabira wondered if he might actually mean it. She opened her mouth to question but stopped in her tracks as she looked down into the little dell below the hill they had just crested. The idea of heading downwards triggered something in Sabira's mind, a fragment of their earlier conversation resurfacing.

'You said there were caves here,' she said.

'Sure, filled with ash-rats and whatnot,' Danlin replied. Then he got it, and smiled.

'Yeah,' said Sabira, 'What if that's where the ember-priest shrine is?'

'Underground?'

The idea made Sabira shiver, but it made sense.

'They worship the land, you said. Where better?' she said.

'It would keep them safe from the ashfall...' Danlin agreed slowly.

‘So, we’re looking for cave entrance.’

‘Not to be the pessimist, but we’re good and lost. Even if we were right by it, I’m not sure that looking for a cave would narrow it down. There must be thousands around here.’

Sabira thought about it, and decided that he was right – but this idea felt right too. There had to be something they could do, didn’t there?

Follow. Sense path.

Sabira didn’t understand how her frostsriver could, but she trusted it. Perhaps she could get some better understanding as they went.

‘Well... It’s *a* plan,’ said Danlin, for her frostsriver had made the suggestion aloud, ‘Maybe not a good one, but I’ll take it.’

So would Sabira, and for the next few hours, they did.

Most of the ashland landscape they trudged across remained grey and uniform. It dipped and rose, and blew out polluting, deadly gout, but it was all aspects of the same dimness.

That was not where Sabira’s frostsriver led them to though. Dinging and chiming when they were pointed in what it deemed the correct direction, they meandered across the landscape following the lines of valleys lower and lower.

Then, where two large geysers met, at their very base, Sabira saw a wide, dark crack in the stone like a black smile. She and Danlin exchanged looks before quietly and cautiously approaching.

As the cavemouth swelled before her, Sabira worried that there might be some kind of trap – or that this would be the lair of some other kind of monster. She wasn’t so far off with that last one.

‘Look,’ said Danlin, poking at something with his foot.

Half buried in the ash of the geysers, was ash of a different kind. Butts from tobacco sticks – maybe hundreds of them.

People had been here.

Evidence.

‘They must be relatively fresh, right?’ said Sabira, ‘The ash would cover it otherwise.’

‘Lots of soldiers love the stuff,’ said Danlin, leaning down to examine, ‘keeps them occupied in all the boring times, and there are a lot of boring times.’

Sabira couldn't imagine why anyone, but particularly an Ignatian, would want to put burning stuff into their lungs, but she didn't doubt Danlin.

'Maybe we haven't been wandering randomly after all,' said Sabira. She wasn't sure that she believed in fate, but this seemed like a good reason to. She'd give a big offering to Aderast for this, if she ever got back to the mountain one day. Her frostslover hummed a musical note, quietly pleased. Sabira was about to ask what she was sensing under its surface emotions when Danlin said,

'Not sure if that's a good thing if it means going in there.'

That was when it really hit her. They were going back into caverns and darkness. Like it had been inside Aderast.

Sabira moved to rub her eyes and found that her hand was shaking. Ignatians. Underground. Again. She mentally took back that gift for Aderast. Maybe this was whatever the ember-priests believed in, the land itself pushing them on. She shuddered, not liking the idea of some nameless god in this place. What god would create a place like the ashlands?

Power flows here. Feel it deep.

The words were among the most complex her frostslover had yet managed. It was learning, growing with Sabira, if much faster. She wasn't fond of what it was saying though. Yet this had to be done. For her father, for Hadatan and the rest before clocks of justice ticked down. For her people – and even the Ignatians – that would suffer if the prospect of war flared again.

'Come on,' she said, before her nerves could fail, 'this shrine of theirs isn't going to find itself.'

Danlin nodded, and together they walked inside, disappearing into shadow.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The cave was not quite the same as those in Aderast.

Within the mountain, everything had been freezing cold, cramped and with an uncomfortable amount of water. Sabira still remembered the freezing pool that had almost claimed her life like it was yesterday. Here in Ignata though, there were different perils.

Heat leaked from certain cracks in the ground, pressure deep below forcing it up from whatever unseen fire produced so much ash. They heated the tunnels enough to make them both sweat, and every time they were near one, Sabira couldn't help but feel a spike of fear that it might suddenly break open into a full geyser, spraying them both with deadly hot ash.

Sometimes, in other channels in the rock, she spotted small bulbous growths, as grey as the ash and unpleasantly organic. They reminded Sabira of the snow-spine that had nearly killed her on the mountain with its venomous tendril stinger, a thought that sent a shiver through her despite the warmth of the tunnels, and made her give them a wide berth.

Yet, in many ways, this was a much easier place to navigate. Instead of sudden drops and tight squeezes, the tunnels seemed almost like corridors, channels cut through the rock leaving easy access to whatever squatted at the centre of this web. That was even without the oil lanterns they found strung up on the walls once they got a little way in.

Though they did not stop to light any, the things were a trail to follow, making it impossible to get lost – and Sabira was glad beyond belief of that. It had been hard enough to walk into this confinement. She didn't think she could have continued in for hours, getting more and more lost without breaking down.

'I hope Turaqai and Jaliqorbei are alright,' she said, though distracting herself from one bad thing with another didn't feel great.

'They were still on their ponies, and riding on the road last we saw them. They'll find their way back. They'll be fine,' Danlin said, though if he was sure, he didn't sound it. Sabira chose not make any counter argument. They'd already talked the subject to death.

'We were lucky no one was guarding this,' she said, walking by his side. They had abandoned the mask system some time ago – the air down here was still hot and thick with solids, but far, far better than that on the surface.

'I think there must be a lot of ways into these tunnels,' said Danlin, 'or there would have been.'

'Or they were meant to, and they got tired of standing out in the ash fall,' she suggested.

'Sounds like conscripts to me.'

They didn't see any soldiers though, conscripts or not – not for an hour or more. Instead, they just followed the oil lantern trail by the light of frostfire, heading deeper and deeper into the darkness. Sabira knew that whatever they found at the end of their hike was unlikely to be good, but she desperately wanted to get there anyway. The anticipation was a nest of writhing snow-spines in her stomach.

Yet even if this was the shrine, could they still get out of the ashlands? They had no mount, and no direction to head in. A problem to be put to the back of the mind and looked at later, Sabira thought.

Then, as the passage they were in began to open up, her frostsriver began a hum of worry in her head.

'What's wrong?' Sabira asked, but the hum only grew more intense. Danlin looked at her, but she could only shrug. They crept forward, keeping their eyes peeled. The chamber they were entering was larger than any they had yet passed through, and had a deep ravine at its centre, splitting it from end to end.

Things in deep.

'What do you mean?' Sabira asked, the frostsriver's word sounding ominous.

Not sure. Feel things. Look?

She glanced at Danlin, who shrugged and said,

'We decided to come down here. No point in stopping now.'

They approached the edge of the ravine, dodging around puffs of steam and ash blowing from cracks in the dark rock. Together, they peered over, fearing what they might see. Sabira was imagining some monstrous eye opened and peering upwards from the head of the ember-priest's god. That was not what they saw.

Rather, they were met with a drop that rivalled the ash-mounts for height, with a bottom that wound through in a wide ribbon of writhing life. For a moment, Sabira thought that the very rock itself was alive, but then she recognised that it was an immense river of ash roiling past.

'What is that?' Danlin asked, surprising Sabira. She had been about to ask him the same question.

'This isn't normal?' she said instead.

'You tell me,' he replied, 'That stuff inside the ash look normal to you?'

He pointed, and Sabira stared until she saw what he meant. In the torrent of grey, little surges of pale blue passed through the river, wandering in sudden aimless bursts. That low light was the only reason that they could see the bottom of the ravine at all, she realised.

‘You felt that,’ she said to the frostsriver, ‘What does that mean?’

She was starting to get an idea but wanted to hear what her partner had to say.

Connection. So familiar.

That was what she had feared – or hoped. This seed of an idea that was building in her was wild, and she wasn’t sure what it meant for it to be true – but the more she looked into the ravine, the more she believed it.

‘What’re you thinking?’ said Danlin, forcing her to give voice to it.

‘I think,’ she said ever so slowly, ‘that ash river might be part of the Tears of Aderast.’

‘The... the glacier, you mean?’ Danlin said, taken aback. Then his eyes narrowed in focus. ‘Makes sense, I guess.’

‘It does?’

Sabira only felt that it was true. She didn’t know how it could be.

‘Yeah,’ Danlin continued, ‘the meltwater from the glacier tips off Aderast eventually, right? I remember you told me that. Well, that water has got to go somewhere. Every chemic knows that what substance you start with never just disappears. Transforms, sure – even into something radically different. But it’s always still there, built from what it once was.’

It felt right. Curse him, but it did.

‘It must flow underground all the way to Ignata,’ Sabira guessed.

‘All the way to the ashlands, at least,’ said Danlin.

Only here. Strongest here.

If that was true, there must be a reason for it. She was starting to see it, unfurling in the back of her mind like an awaking frostsriver.

‘Glacier meltwater, only in the ashlands,’ she said aloud, the sound of it helping the idea build.

‘Something changed the ash geysers,’ said Danlin, continuing the thought, ‘a catalyst of some kind, centuries ago that made them start to grow stronger, more violent.’

‘Something that did a similar thing to the Aderasti mountain range not so long before that,’ Sabira completed. It was all too clear to her. Those ash-cats acting so unnaturally. The growths they had seen, all too similar to monstrous things she had already seen. She looked into the ravine, into the ash river and its internal, flickering frostfire.

It all made sense. Aderast’s Nightmare, long gone from her people’s memory, had never truly vanished. The time long ago that the mountain had tried to kill those upon it with weather and abomination. The Deep Explorers had delved down to destroy the black stones that were its source, but its echoes had still persisted, flowing out from her mountain home to infect this place, and who knew what else besides.

‘I think we know now why Suwei and her people decided to build out here,’ Danlin said, gritting his teeth. Sabira saw that he was right – the ember-priests had found this and realised at least some of what it was. Maybe this was what had set both of their countries on a path toward ruin – certainly the ember-priests’ stole had been around Colonel Yupin’s neck when he committed to his crusade against Adranna.

The colonel and his allies had blamed the Aderasti for their troubles. Claimed that they hoarded magic to themselves when they needed it to save their country. She had thought them deranged, filled with anger and jealousy until they broke open under the pressure.

Now, Sabira was forced to wonder if they might have been right all along.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Deeper into everything, the path was no less straight, but much more difficult. Sabira felt the weight of every footfall as they pushed into the dark, the knowledge that all these problems stemmed from her own home a constant companion on top of the one she already carried.

Not your fault. Not our fault.

The frostliver was firm about it, keen to let blame lie with the worst and leave it there. Sabira wasn’t sure she could think quite so rigidly. Especially when those icky growths kept showing up. They didn’t seem to do anything, and definitely

had nothing like a snow-spine's stinger tendril, but they did pulse in and out unpleasantly in their rocky recesses. Almost like they were breathing.

Other than that, there was no sign of life. If there had been local wildlife in these caves before the Ignatians occupied them, it had all been exterminated. Not even an ash-rat scurried on these stones. A shame – she was hungry enough that she might have been willing to try eating one. Deeper they pressed, frostfire quietly guiding them into the dark.

The first major clue that they were getting somewhere was when they started to come across lit lamps. Somebody must have been through here, and recently – and if they had left the flickering things burning, they'd be back soon. Sabira and Danlin went on, but more cautiously than ever – and they were right to be so. Just as they reached a crossroads in the tunnel, footsteps sounded from one of the other passages.

Together they moved back out of sight, holding perfectly still against the cold cave wall. Hoping that they weren't coming this way, Sabira had her frostslover pull back inside her clothes, dousing the frostfire light just before the patrol passed by. They were not that attentive – who was there to guard from in a place as desolate as this? They were however close enough to hear them talking, especially since Sabira was holding her breath in fear.

'I never want to see another cave after this,' said one Ignatian voice.

'After? You think we're ever going home? The ember-priests aren't ever going to give up,' said his partner.

'Too right. I'm all for belief in kindling our own futures,' the first said, 'even thought about going for one of those stoles they give to lay preachers a few years back – not sure I'd want it around here though. Not sure what they'd make me do.'

'Those things they're making are creepy,' said the first.

'Too right,' said the other, 'What are we even doing down here?'

'Orders were to help these weirdos out however we can. I'm not risking a branding by questioning that.'

'Fair, but don't you want to know what's going on?' said the first.

'No, I really, really don't,' said the second, and they walked on in silence. Sabira looked at Danlin, silently communicating. Neither of them did a thing for a good minute, long enough for quiet to descend on the caves once more.

'Well, don't know about you, but my heart is about ready to give out,' said Danlin. They had been lucky. A different patrol route, and there would be blood now. Too close. But

there was good news too. If these soldiers were about, they must be getting near to the ember-priest shrine.

‘It’s about to get a lot harder not to get caught,’ Sabira said, quietly.

‘Hmmm,’ said Danlin, cocking his head to one side in thought.

‘What...?’ she said, suspiciously.

‘Maybe we should make use of one of your old moves,’ suggested Danlin, ‘and get to know those guards a little more closely.’

Sabira had a bad feeling that she knew what he meant.

‘If you mean the time I almost poisoned you to death with snow-spine venom, we are kind of lacking it here,’ she said, and he nodded.

‘That would make this a lot easier.’

Not that she wanted to agree, but it probably would. Danlin wouldn’t look out of place in a borrowed Ignatian uniform – he had worn one often enough – and though Sabira absolutely would look wrong, it might be enough to fool people from a distance in the dim light of the caves. Of course, that would mean capturing two soldiers first, and that didn’t seem too promising.

She never would have expected that she’d find herself pining for a snow-spine and its paralysing venom, but lots of things had happened to her lately that she had never imagined.

Sabira wondered for a moment if the strange growths they kept seeing down here might have similar venom sacs to snow-spines. They were both a product of Aderast’s Nightmare, after all. A nightmare that kept on returning it seemed, much like Sabira’s own.

Bad place. Hurt. Long, long healing.

Her frostslover was speaking its feelings again, probably without knowing what they meant, but it helped Sabira make a decision. If a piece of the glacier could feel the wrongness in this place, it had to mean that it needed fixing, and that they were the ones that needed to do it.

‘If we don’t get the evidence, my father and the others are doomed. No time to waste.’

She said it to remind herself of the stakes, to force herself to action. This time. This time she was being bold for the right reasons. Make Kyran proud.

'Can't disagree,' said Danlin.

'Let's get after them,' she replied, feeling that it was best to do this while her courage held, 'Stay behind me though, only one of us can afford to get shot.'

Me? Is it me?

'Yes, and be ready,' she told her frostslover, 'we're counting on you to keep us safe.'

The frostslover hummed contentedly, pleased to be so important.

After only a minute or two of walking and whispering plans, they caught sight of the soldiers' dancing shadows. After getting as close as they reasonably could, Sabira silently counted down with her fingers and, on zero, charged.

The Ignatians were not expecting an attack, and barely had time to unsling their muskets before she was on the nearest, reaching for his face as they had agreed. Glowing ice surged from her sleeve, flowing into the man's face and covering his nose and mouth. He tried to hit her with his weapon, but she was too close and he was too panicked from suddenly being unable to breathe. He fell over, and she went with him, counting down the seconds of air he had left in his lungs.

She had no time to do anything to the other one though. That one was in the act of bringing his musket around toward Sabira when Danlin cannoned into him, seizing the man's weapon and using surprise to wrench it out of his grip. A second later he had turned it to whack the butt into the soldier's head. He went down, hurt but conscious as Sabira's own target struggled less and less.

Fearing that Danlin's fight was about to turn deadly one way or another, Sabira heaved herself and the suffocating soldier over to them, and encouraged her frostslover to take a second victim. More threads of liquid ice leapt from the first, thinning it and causing Sabira's heart to hammer faster than the fright of combat already demanded. But then, to her immense relief, both soldiers lay struggling on the cave floor, unable to do anything but kick and silently scream as their air ran out. It was awful, and she felt even worse about being pleased to see it, but at least this would not kill the men, despite their fears.

Sabira's father had taught her that a person could only go a few minutes without air. She had to be careful, or these soldiers would never be waking up again. Her own heart racing, she continued to count out the seconds, desperately hoping that neither of the men had some kind of heart problem. Eventually, it was done, and the two men went completely

limp. Sabira had the frostslover pull back and checked their pulse and breathing as her father had taught her. Both were steady.

‘We have to be quick,’ she said, ‘They won’t be unconscious for long.’

People tended to come around in minutes after being knocked out – any longer tended to mean that something much more serious had happened. Sabira didn’t want that – she’d already been responsible for the deaths of too many conscripts.

Between her and Danlin they managed to strip the men of their uniforms quite efficiently, and by the time they began groaning and coming around, they had changed, and tied up their two victims with strips of cloth cut from their now unnecessary Aderasti clothes.

‘We could question them,’ Danlin said, ‘Sounded like they don’t like what they’re doing here.’

‘In an open tunnel?’ Sabira replied, ‘We’re lucky no one’s come along already.’

‘I know. I just...’ Danlin said, pausing, ‘I’d just like them to have the same chance I got.’

‘Would you really want that for them?’ said Sabira, ‘What I did to you... You’ve not had a good time of it since.’

‘Wouldn’t take it back,’ he replied, gruffly, ‘Maybe you’re right though. This way maybe they’ll get in trouble, but they won’t get executed for being traitors.’

Sabira didn’t ask if that was what he expected for himself if Suwei’s people caught him again. She didn’t want to hear it said aloud. Instead, she said,

‘So, what do we do with them?’

‘Someone will find them... eventually,’ said Danlin, not sounding like entirely confident how long that would be. Sabira wasn’t totally happy with that answer, but what choice was there? She let it go.

‘This feels weird,’ she said instead, adjusting the tar-smelling coat and pulling the soldier’s black goggles over her eyes. They darkened her vision in the already dark cave, so she pushed them back up.

‘You’re telling me,’ said Danlin, in an army uniform once more.

‘Ready?’ she said.

‘Probably never,’ he said, but began to walk anyway.

They didn’t have far to go.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Together, borrowed uniforms ill-fitting and uncomfortable, Sabira and Danlin took the path laid out for them. It was one of paranoia about what was around the next corner, but it was at least a short one.

In fact, it took less than half an hour before they saw bright light up ahead and heard a murmur of busy voices. They paused to listen, but they didn’t seem to be coming closer, so they walked nearer, hoods pulled up, goggles on and doing their best to look like they belonged in case anyone was watching.

To the edge of the cave mouth they walked, where a wooden platform had been fastened to it, allowing vision over the entire cavern below. This had to be the ember-priests’ base, for it was full of Ignatian activity.

They had built the place up a lot. No more was this a simple cave, but instead somewhere that people could live, complete with wooden floors, platforms, stairs and balconies built up where the stone had formed into ledges and boulders. It was one of those balconies upon which Sabira and Danlin stood, looking down on the expanse of the shrine below.

It wasn’t what Sabira had expected when she had heard the word ‘shrine’. She had been imagining something like those the frost-clerics maintained back on Aderast. Calligraphy and prayers and carvings and incense – though maybe with some disturbing ember-priest style to give those things a frightening new life. She wished that had been the truth, but what she saw was no religious gathering place, no room of quiet contemplation or even an altar to some dark god. Unless of course, that god was pain.

Cages littered the cave, large and small, full of flesh that had no place being there. Many contained animals, miserable, dishevelled and thin. Many were held here in spaces barely larger than their own bodies. From the rest of the scene, Sabira got the sense that these were not so much captives, as test subjects.

Tables occupied the central area, some scattered with notebooks and measuring instruments, others filled to breaking point with beakers, stills, tubes and other glass

paraphernalia. Worse than all that though was the ominous transparent vat containing a roiling of ash and blue light. Bottled magic.

This wasn't a shrine, not in anything other than name. It was a laboratory.

'What're they doing here?' Sabira whispered.

Bad things – can feel them.

'It's all connected,' said Danlin, 'This, that ash river. Maybe even that poison Suwei used on you. It has to all come from the same place.'

With both the chemic and the frostsriver saying so, Sabira had to agree – particularly when she looked at that lightly glowing vat. Had she been touched with some of that stuff? It seemed to be gone now, but was it? What if that stuff had melded into her frostsriver, tainted it somehow?

I am fine.

The words, strong as a bell, were almost outraged.

'Can you be sure?' she said.

Sure am fine. All the same glacier.

Sabira's fears were not soothed by that. She looked again, drinking in the detail. Ember-priests were working at the far end of the cavern in their tasselled robes, shifting things about – or ordering some of the guarding soldiers to do so.

'I thought the army didn't answer to the ember-priests?' Sabira questioned.

'Apparently the ember-priests didn't agree with that rule,' Danlin replied, 'Or with basic laws of nature.'

He nodded down at the test subjects, and Sabira looked again – before having to hold in a gasp. There were more than just small animals in those cages.

A grey figure shifted behind larger bars, feline form still powerful despite the trap it found itself in. An ash-cat! How they had managed to catch and cage it, Sabira had no idea, but the animal looked a lot less majestic huddled against the bars in one corner, constantly changing fur matted and dark. If only that was the worst of the creatures, but no, Suwei had true abominations locked up here.

In the largest of the cages sat several four-legged beasts as different from the ash-cats as a human was from a yeti. From their wildly varying sizes, Sabira guessed that they had once been a number of different creatures before the ember-priests got their hands on them.

Whatever they had once been, their features were now indistinct, the limbs, heads, their whole skin enveloped in an ever-shifting blanket of what looked like hot ash. Even if that were something possible, Sabira knew what the stuff really was from the blue glow under the molten surface. This was a result of the ember-priests' experimentation with the glacier meltwater. It could be nothing else. Each animal had been unwillingly attached to a diluted fragment of the glacier and morphed into these monstrosities.

'Ember-Priest Suwei!'

At the words Sabira instinctually pulled back into the passage, but not before she caught sight of the woman entering the shrine from another entrance, shrugging off a grey cloak and handing off a pair of goggles to an attendant.

'We didn't expect you back so soon!' she heard one of the ember-priests say, sounding worried.

'There have been complications,' said Suwei, 'The girl was imprisoned as planned, but has somehow gotten loose in these lands. She may never be recovered alive. Most likely she and her helpers will choke to death out on the surface in a matter of days. They may already have done so.'

'Then the risk was for nothing?'

'I didn't promise my parents that would end this blight on our land to stop at such a low hurdle,' Suwei replied, serious as a stab wound.

'But the data we could have gathered – without it, we may be delayed by months. Years, probably!'

'That may prove to be the case,' Suwei agreed, dispassionately, 'We must redouble our efforts – if our best avenue of investigation is gone, we must make up the difference with others. How goes experiment 356?'

'The last of our human subjects expired shortly before you arrived. Procuring more is of high priority. Acquired data was limited due to the experiment's short duration – only seven seconds longer than our previous best.'

The other ember-priest began rattling off further scientific information that Sabira didn't understand, and from the look on Danlin's face, neither did he.

'Well, every failure is useful data,' said Suwei when the report was done, 'I assume it is all adequately noted down.'

‘Every bonding attempt. Every use of the meltwater,’ the other ember-priest agreed. A spark of an idea lit in Sabira.

‘If we could get those notebooks, we might be able to prove what Suwei’s up to,’ she whispered to Danlin.

‘I doubt she’s written down “And tomorrow, in a fit of evil I will poison a visiting dignitary and murder one of the highest judges in the land, muhahahaha!”’

‘She doesn’t have to,’ said Sabira, exasperated, ‘As long as we can get evidence that her poison exists and what it does, we might have a chance!’

‘That’s assuming the High Tribunal will be giving one out, after what we’ve done.’

He could be right, but Sabira wasn’t going to give up now, not when they’d gotten so close to what they had come for. What would be the point of setting off that detonation stick, and all this running, if they didn’t at least try? Her father, Hadatan and the rest were counting on her. Adranna too, if contact between the nations continued to worsen. A day or two more. That’s all they had.

‘You can go back if you want,’ she said, ‘I need to get that evidence. How else can we fix all this? If it doesn’t get sorted out, our peoples are going to go back to hating each other – because of us! Because of me. I’m not going to abandon our only shot at solving that.’

Righteous is good. Feels... right.

Danlin breathed in, and out, composing himself. Deciding.

‘We’ve got these uniforms – they could be enough to get in there?’ he said eventually.

Still look like us.

‘That’s true,’ said Sabira, ‘We don’t exactly fit in here. You might fool them in a soldier’s uniform, but I won’t. The wrong glance at me and they’ll know.’

‘I guess,’ said Danlin grimly, ‘I’ll have to go in there on my own then.’

‘I... that’s...’ Sabira tried but didn’t find an easy way to dispose of the idea.

Could work if lucky.

‘See, even the icicle monster agrees with me,’ said Danlin, though he didn’t look too pleased about it. Sabira certainly wasn’t.

‘This is really dangerous,’ she said, ‘And you don’t have magic armour to get you out of trouble.’

‘I am better at getting in to trouble, that’s a fact,’ Danlin agreed, ‘but unless you’ve learned how to turn invisible, I think this is what we’re doing. Getting the notebooks was your idea – and I don’t see another way.’

Sabira fell silent for a moment, thinking. Then, she said,

‘Alright, let’s get this over with before those guards get found.’

She didn’t like this plan at all – but what choice was there?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘If you even think they spot you, run.’

‘Yes sir, Colonel Sabira!’ Danlin said, saluting and smiling nervously.

‘I mean it. Promise me,’ she hissed. She wasn’t losing him now. They had been through too much. He stopped trying to be funny and nodded, as serious as she’d ever seen him.

They held each other’s gaze for a second, and then it was time to act. Danlin strode into the cavernous chamber like he was just a part of the scenery, and then went to one of the ladders down – the one furthest from the main group of ember-priests. Sabira turned down the closest lamp, and stood in the shadow of the entryway, hoping that it would be enough to obscure her. She needed to see this.

In one little stroke of luck, the soldiers were all facing out of the chamber on guard, and she and Danlin were wearing the uniforms of the ones that must have been meant to guard this particular entrance.

Still not safe.

No, it really wasn’t. As Danlin’s soft footfalls descended, Sabira prayed to the mountain that the ember-priests’ little meeting would go on forever. No need to do anymore experiments today.

After what felt like an eternity, he reached the bottom, got off the ladder and began to walk as quietly as it was possible on a wooden floor. Sabira’s heart beat as if she was holding back an avalanche with her frostsliver, but she didn’t spot any reaction. The ember-priests were too far away – or at least too absorbed in their discussion, and the few soldiers

were still not patrolling. They didn't have to walk into him to be dangerous though. Just one wrong glance. Just one...

She had never known a minute more tense as Danlin walked lightly and nonchalantly among the work tables. Nothing to see here, just another Ignatian soldier guarding this awful torture facility. Sabira almost couldn't watch but had to. She needed to be ready to spring into action if he got into trouble.

To her eye, he looked far too stiff, far too much like he didn't fit in. They were going to see through his disguise instantly. No, they weren't turning around. No one was going to see anything. Please. Please.

He was scooting around a worktable. Be careful, don't knock that flask! Alright, no one noticed. His elbow didn't smash it, just pushed it a little. Everything is alright, there was no need to panic.

The beasts growled at him from their pens, voices rendered unnatural by their liquid ash forms. Was there flesh underneath those monsters' skins? No, it didn't matter. Only Danlin mattered. Past the poor cringing ash-cat. Good, don't roar, don't attract any attention...

Just a few steps...

One more heart-stopping, breath-holding, endless moment, and then her frostsriver dinged loudly in her head – success! He had made it! That was the bench with the largest concentration of leather-bound notebooks. All he had to do now was pocket what he could, and they'd be away!

'You, soldier, what are you doing?'

Bad. Bad. Bad. Bad. Bad.

It was Suwei herself, staring towards Danlin with a suspicious intensity. The ember-priests had finished their meeting.

There was no time to think. No time for diplomacy. Now was the time for action alone, and Sabira's frostsriver hummed with the feeling as she charged out into the shrine and leapt from the balcony, icy armour forming around her legs as she landed in a protective roll.

She didn't know what she was going to do, but she knew that they weren't going to take Danlin. He was already moving, running as orders got shouted –

soldiers were being summoned. Sabira stepped up onto a table, smashed her way through the stuff there and carried on without breaking her stride.

Just get to him. Faster, she thought as a voice yelled out,

‘Halt! Halt or I fire!’

She didn’t stop, knowing that her frostsriver would protect her. Danlin though, seeing the muskets being levelled at him from close range, did as he was told. They clustered round him, at a distance that they couldn’t miss.

Sabira generated a frostsriver blade from her now fully encasing armour. She wasn’t sure what she was going to be doing with it, but if only she could get there across the sea of tables and experimental equipment she’d work it out.

‘You should do what they say,’ came the voice of Suwei suddenly, ‘if you want your companion to survive the next five seconds.’

Her even voice broke through Sabira’s panic, and she slowed. Taking in the situation fully, she saw how bad it was. The Ignatians had Danlin in their power, and she was still seconds from reaching any one of them. Suwei and the ember-priests were further back still – there was no getting to any of them.

More soldiers were piling into the shrine, roused from some nearby barracks. They were outnumbered ten to one, and worse by the second. Musket shot would bounce off her armour, but even with how inaccurate those weapons were, they would have no trouble hitting Danlin. If she could only get to him, and get out from being surrounded, maybe then she could shield them both.

Too far.

Her frostsriver’s tone was despondent, like it felt it was failing her. She didn’t need apologies – she needed an answer, some way out of this horror. Except that any wrong move could be the end. She stayed frozen in place as Suwei stepped to the front of her people and calmly demanded,

‘Surrender. We have him, and you can’t escape. You could kill plenty of my men before you went down, I’m sure, but I think we both know that you won’t choose that door.’

Suwei had total confidence. There was no bluffing her, Sabira could see it in the woman’s eyes. She could charge, try and get to the ember-priest before anything bad could happen? No, the woman was standing well away from Sabira – she understood the threat a frostsriver posed all too well. There were no answers.

Would Danlin want us to run?

No answers that she was willing to accept. She bowed her head, fighting back her sickness and fear.

‘I’ll do it,’ she said, ‘Don’t hurt him.’

Danlin opened his mouth to speak but seemed to realise that now wasn’t the time. His eyes spoke volumes to her though. They showed how much he cared, how sorry he was they had gotten to this point, how much he wished that she at least could be safe. It was too late for that now.

‘Then drop your defences,’ said Suwei, ‘I want to see that frostsriver in the palm of your hand.’

Her gaze did not waver, boring into Sabira like she was some disobedient pet that needed training. Without other options, Sabira did as she was told, her frostsriver silently vibrating in protest in her mind. It did as she asked though, the armour liquifying, melting away like it was nothing.

‘All of it. I want no surprises.’

Sabira braced herself for worse to come, then felt her injured knee buckle painfully as her frostsriver stopped supporting it. All of her magic, all of her bonded partner gathered up into her hand in a solid cube, not a tendril of ice left for any other task. Suwei smiled.

‘Good. Now, at last we can have a proper talk, you and I. That’s all I wanted, all along.’

From the skin-crawling smile on the woman’s face, Sabira did not wish to know what they would be talking about. Yet, as she was directed by soldiers to an empty cage, she knew that she was not going to have a choice – all too soon she was going to find out.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘Fortune favours the fervent.’

Ember-Priest Suwei stood in front of Sabira’s cage, still with a smile painted on her face. It was the smile of a person that didn’t understand why others did such things but was copying them anyway. Someone wearing the skin of humanity, but inside had none themselves. Sabira felt her frostsriver’s impulse in her mind, the

desire to fight – even to kill the enemy. It would be so easy to reach through the bars with a spike of ice. To finish Suwei with the weapon that she had been so pleased to see used on Judge Xaoten. To give in to that desire would be death.

Soldiers with muskets raised stood around Sabira's cage like she was some rabid and deadly animal just waiting to murder them all. Out of the corner of her eye, she even saw one younger man struggling to hold his weapon on her without shaking. What kind of monster had she been painted as to these people?

Did make quite an entrance.

Her frostslover had a point. All they had seen of her was her doing incredible things, the power of living ice proving whatever legends and campfire tales they had already heard. They feared her and were quite happy to threaten her life because of it. Danlin's too.

He was in a cage opposite her, also surrounded by guards. They were less tense than hers, but still ready to pull the trigger at the first sign of trouble. Suwei had found a way to keep Sabira exactly where she was, despite how easily she could cut through the bars of this cage and flee.

'I could have waited a year for your trial to complete, but it seems you've made my life much easier. So thank you for that,' the woman said, still with that fixed, false smile on her face.

Sabira didn't reply. All the things she wanted to spit at the ember-priest would not end well for her, or Danlin. Or both.

'We were lucky,' Suwei continued, 'Our little experiments with the meltwater in controlling ash-cats almost ate you before you could arrive. It's a good thing you're resourceful enough to find us anyway. Or perhaps it was that Turaqai's doing – I'm sure that was her on the road. We'll deal with her and that bodyguard soon enough, if they haven't already expired.'

Still Sabira stayed silent. The woman had even corrupted her childhood symbol, one of the most important memories of her brother. Even without trying, she was a monster.

'You're going to have to be more talkative than that,' Suwei said, sweetly, 'Otherwise we'll soon have no reason to keep you around.'

'Sabira, I...' began Danlin, but Suwei's terrible gaze swung to him and she cut him off.

'Quiet. I'll have none of that from you, or you'll lose a hand. You don't need all your body parts for this, and you definitely don't need to speak.'

‘You’ve got enough pets to talk to, why do you need me?’ said Sabira, trying to get her attention off Danlin, who looked shaken. She was too, but to show it to this woman would be the end. Suwei would sense weakness and strike, much like the predators and monsters she had trapped here.

‘These things?’ the ember-priest said, indicating the nearest flowing, misshapen abomination, ‘I suppose you would call them yeti or similar. We have, for a time now, called them slaghounds. Originally, I thought they might be usefully trained, but, well... just look at the things. Useless for anything besides experimentation.’

She paused, thinking, then added, leaning in closer,

‘Not so far from you two, really. Speaking of which, I wish to know everything you do about the process of bonding a frostslover. Your instruction. Your experiences. How it is done, and how it can go wrong. Everything.’

Knowledge not for you!

Sabira’s frostslover was braver than she was. She watched with bated breath, praying that the outburst wouldn’t provoke Suwei. The ember-priest’s expression hadn’t changed. She blinked slowly, once, twice. Lizard-like.

‘I’m going to tell you a little about myself,’ the woman began to say, ‘Just so you understand some of who I am, and how bad an idea it would be to think that I am in any way joking.’

Sabira stood there, listening. She didn’t have much choice.

‘When I was young, being raised in my parents’ mansion, I did not know what I would become. My father decided that I would be put on the road to the judiciary. The easiest road to the highest heights. That was the kind of thing he expected. The kind of man he was. The kind of man that, when I saw the ash fall increasing, proved to have a head for science and at the age of six swore to my parents that I would save everyone by fixing it, chose to hit me in the face hard enough to knock me over. My mother stood there watching, and didn’t say a word.’

Sabira didn’t know what to say to this stream of personal information. Was Suwei trying to get Sabira to have sympathy for her? If so, it was working a little – but only a tiny fraction.

‘That did not stop me though,’ Suwei added, ‘I was a stubborn child. I would learn the law books they forced in front of me, and then go back to drawing mathematic theory on whatever scraps I could get my hands on. I progressed to chemic theory after a few years. None of that mattered to them beyond angry outbursts – until the day I was old enough to join the ember-priests. That was the last day I saw my parents. The last, except one. I spent years learning the workings of the ashlands, from chemic composition to the Aderasti legends of the Deep Explorers breaking the black stones. Long enough to gain an understanding of what the Nightmare did, and what its remnant still does. In a way, that was the cause of our final meeting. The ash gets so many of us in the end, and it came for my father, settling into his lungs and deeper. On his deathbed I made the same promise that six-year-old me had, right as the last of his strength left him, and smiled. It was the last thing he heard.’

Suwei looked to have no more grief about the event than if she was talking about some pottery she had once smashed. She continued,

‘Over the years since I did my duties, gained support and built this shrine up with my own hands. The costs have been great, but calculable. You see a fraction of it in the slaghounds, but there have been more, and worse. I will fulfil that promise – and every year I grow closer. I recently thought I had the final piece, when I recruited Colonel Yupin to the cause. He had lost a parent to the ash, as I did, which made it easy to find ways in. He was bigoted, yet fanatically loyal – a useful combination. I don’t care about race or revenge like he did. I care about results. I knew what he would do. I may have even encouraged it a little. Holding Adranna would have meant a steady supply of research and test subjects. This problem of ours would be solved in a year – though your people might not have agreed that it was worth it in the accounting. So, if I am indifferent about the suffering of an entire city, if it will get me closer to curing this land, imagine how little difference the life of one teenage traitor makes to me.’

Suwei glanced toward Danlin.

‘Those secrets are meant to be only known by bonded,’ said Sabira desperately, knowing that the ember-priest would not accept that excuse. Suwei didn’t anger, but she did grow colder still. She indicated Danlin like he was no more than a pet, and said,

‘Perhaps my tale was not clear enough. If you don’t tell me, when this one attempts to bond one of my embershards he will simply have to face the consequences without the

benefit of whatever knowledge you hold. In fact, bring me a sample right now.

There's no reason in dragging this out further.'

Other ember-priests scurried to obey, going to the terrible vat of corruption and drawing a large beaker full of the constantly moving liquid from a tap on the side. A pair of them carried it back with great reverence, then actually knelt down to hold it before Suwei like a strange kind of witch's cauldron.

'Excellent,' she said, frostfire lightly touching her face, 'Ready the conscript.'

She didn't ever bother to use Danlin's name.

'Stand forward,' one of the soldiers demanded, 'arm through the bars.'

Eyes wide, horror building, Sabira had to watch as Danlin was forced to comply. They were fully in Suwei's power, and nothing could stop the woman from doing whatever she wanted.

'If I tell you, you'll let him go?' Sabira said as the beaker was moved towards Danlin, not sure if she was pleading, bargaining or just stalling for time. In her desperation, all three seemed likely. Suwei was unmoved.

'No, I will not let him go. I am not negotiating. He is going to attempt the bond, no matter what. It is up to you whether you want to help him. The only worth in a soul-branded like him is in making you cooperate, and if you will not even to save his life, then he is utterly without value.'

There was no anger behind the words. Just the clinical calculation of a woman that simply did not care about anything beyond her own tasks. This was the most efficient means to achieve her ends. It would be done, without hesitation.

'Alright,' said Sabira quietly, 'You win.'

Must not. She must not. Must not win.

Sabira would have taken any suggestion, but her frostsriver had nothing but its string of urgent worry sounding in her head. It wanted to fight, but she couldn't, not from this cage. Not with Danlin a second from death at Suwei's command. Suwei looked on expectantly as Sabira began,

'I don't have all the answers, but I know that not everyone is mentally suitable for a bond. The frost-clerics pick the best of us.'

'Then we had better hope that the conscript meets that standard,' Suwei said, levelly. Sabira went on, finding herself talking directly to Danlin. It was easier

that way to convince herself that she wasn't giving up her people's secrets to their enemy. He remained quiet and absolutely still, except for an obvious shake of fear.

'Remember to let go. Do not resist,' Sabira eventually repeated, having said it multiple times already, 'If it's anything like mine, it'll be terrifying, but you just have to give in, or it will destroy you.'

She thought for a moment, desperate to impart something more, something of use. Anything that would improve Danlin's chances.

'There's... something at the bottom of the bond,' she tried to describe, 'Aderast, I guess. It's... vast, and so old. It feels like it could squash you like a bug. Less than a bug, like it wouldn't even notice it was squashing you. But it won't. It's... I think it's an ally – or it least it cares about us on some level. I don't know. Just... don't fight it. That won't help. You just...'

She had been starting to babble, but there was nothing left, nothing more she could do to save Danlin's life.

'Alright then,' said Suwei, finishing the notes she had been taking, 'Is that it? Then we can begin.'

The beaker was moved closer to Danlin's outstretched arm, held there by the soldiers, the looks on their faces as grim as his was scared. Sabira got a flash of another cave. A different Ignatian forcing a bonding on another. She remembered the death that had followed.

Now there was nothing Sabira could do to stop it from happening all over again. Danlin's eyes grew wider and wider, filling with frostfire as the beaker was brought closer.

'This is happening,' said Suwei, 'So if there's anything else you want to say, you'd best make it now.'

Sabira searched for anything else she could add to help Danlin and found nothing. Nothing that Suwei was going to allow. This ritual was not the quiet, calm contemplation that was the way a frostslover was supposed to be bonded. No, this was a brooding thing, an evil being slowly unchained.

Sabira wished for some inspiration, some escape from this nightmare – even some idea that would make the perversion of a bonding work and leave Danlin alive and whole. He couldn't become one of those slaghoums like Kyran had become a yeti. Not him too. She couldn't lose him too.

‘I...’ she found herself saying, ‘I... You’ve got to come back. Let the glacier carry you away, but when it’s done, I need you to come back.’

She wasn’t making much sense, but with the beaker so close to Danlin’s hand she couldn’t think over the terrified noise in her own head.

‘Sabira, I’m sorry, I just...’

Then his fingers came into contact with the roiling liquid, and there was no wishing it away.

Danlin froze up, and then began to twitch as the entire contents of the beaker leapt out of it and ran straight up his arm. The liquid ash vanished up his sleeve in a flicker of frostfire, but the process had only just begun. Unable to control his own body, Danlin clattered to the ground in a boneless heap. There, flashes of frostfire burnt bright beneath his clothes at random, as if that magic ash, that embershard, was rapidly flowing across his entire body. All Sabira could do was watch in horror as her friend went through seizure after seizure. She couldn’t even go to him, and she knew from her own experiences that he couldn’t hear her while he was lost in the glacier’s power. She shouted anyway, something incoherent and heartfelt. She screamed at him to come back to the world, until the twitching and convulsions stopped, and the frostfire faded away, leaving no evidence of the embershard behind.

It was done. Over at last. Danlin lay still, all too still on the floor of his cage.

‘Check him,’ said Suwei, ‘But carefully. If he attacks, wound him if you can.’

The soldiers did as instructed, keeping weapons trained as one of their number opened up the cage and knelt down next to Danlin, who was pale and still hadn’t moved. The soldier slapped Danlin, to no reaction. Sabira thought she was going to throw up as the soldier put his ear to Danlin’s chest, listening.

‘Can’t hear anything.’ The soldier reported.

‘Well, it was closer than anything we’ve tried before,’ said Suwei indifferently, ‘No mutation reaction. Get the body on an examination table. Perhaps an autopsy will reveal something.’

‘No!’ Sabira cried, rushing forward and banging her fists against the bars, ‘No!’

He was fine. That thing hadn't taken him, hadn't corrupted him into one of those horrible slaghounds. He was fine. He was...

Danlin was being carried limply by the soldiers, hauling him from the open cage by his limbs as if he were no more than a sack of vegetables.

'Put him down! You have to help him!' Sabira yelled at them, uselessly.

Must stop. Is done now. Stay alive.

'I'll stop you,' Sabira cried, ignoring the voice in her head, rounding on Suwei and still not accepting what she was seeing, 'I'll set fire to all of this. I'll...'

'Stay right where you are, for now. You've been useful, and may continue to be so, but don't stretch my patience,' Suwei replied, ice in her veins. She then walked away without another word towards where Danlin's body was being put onto a table for further examination.

Sabira wanted to shout after her, to threaten. To plead. Suddenly though, she couldn't do anything. Not even stand. Her inner fire had gone out. She barely even felt her knees hit the ground as she fell into a kneeling position. Her head was full of fever and terror, and regret. A burning forest. An icy dagger. Danlin's smiling face.

On the floor of her cell, Sabira huddled into a ball and, inconsolable by even her frostslover's soothing voice, felt tears run down her face until no more would come.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Long ago, Danlin stood under sunshine on black volcanic sand. The waters of the Sealake lapped against the shore, disturbed by the gentle breeze.

It was the island he had lived on all his life, a place you could walk from end to end in a day without trouble. The air was clean, the food was good and the people were family.

He looked up and saw that there were uncountable faces in the sky, inhuman, ancient and like no animal Danlin had ever seen. Feelers and mandibles, and shell-like things of the sea. No. It was just clouds in blue sky.

'Danlin!' a voice called behind him, and he swung round to see the old chemic that had accepted him as an apprentice years ago, putting up with his mistakes and bad jokes in his cramped little workshop on the outskirts of town.

‘What’re you doing out here?’ the man asked, his wispy beard lifting in the wind. Danlin pointed out over the water, to where little brown shapes bobbed slowly towards the island. Dozens of them, where usually only a handful of visitors came.

This was a moment that Danlin had been looking forward to, coming here to watch whenever rumours started to circulate – as they often did on a small island. The mainlanders had been on their way for a long time now. Every year people said they’d come soon, bringing gifts of invention and plenty.

Now, they had finally arrived.

‘This’ll be great!’ said Danlin, ‘They’ll want to buy all sorts of stuff, and they’ve probably got all sorts of new chemic recipes.’

‘Hmm,’ said his master, noncommittally.

‘Oh, come on,’ Danlin complained, ‘This has to excite you, or nothing’s ever going to again.’

‘At my age, such things are not so worth shouting about,’ came the reply. Danlin didn’t agree. This was going to be life changing. Soon. All he had to do was wait a little longer. The scene shifted.

Something below. Something vast. Something he was attached to. The feeling was gone in an instant.

Then, Danlin was elsewhere. He was disoriented for a moment, pulled along by something, but in a blink of the eye he was on the town docks, half a day later, with all the townsfolk gathered around, from the town elders to his master chemic to the poorest forager.

Danlin’s parents were there at the back somewhere too, but he didn’t see too much of them these days, now he was so far into his apprenticeship. He had the work they had organised for him to take up, and they had their hands full raising his younger siblings and keeping their lumber business going. Wood was worth a lot on an island, and it had always kept them busy – busy enough that Danlin had felt distant from his parents even when he still lived with them.

The first of the boats were just nudging into the shore and the jetty, black uniformed soldiers leaping out to tie them up and begin unloading. Danlin had never seen soldiers before and was impressed – they all seemed so strong and capable, so quick to do their part for the nation. They weren’t the only arrivals though.

Civilians from the mainland had come too it seemed, probably to trade. The one at their head was no merchant though. She was a woman in tasselled robes that reminded Danlin of the old provincial judge that tottered his way through a pointless visit to the island every year or so. These robes held opposite colours though and were far finer than the frayed garments Danlin had seen before.

The ember-priest, for she could be nothing else, strode out in front of the rest and addressed the crowd.

‘For too long our people have not been united. Those here in the colonies have long been left to fend for themselves in a world where it is all too easy to fall to darkness. For you, that ends today.’

The crowd exchanged whispers. That sounded good, but hadn’t they been managing fine until now? Were things about to get even better?

‘Things will change,’ the ember-priest continued, ‘They must, for our great land has been showing its displeasure. Too much of our world is disorderly and immoral, and the ash rises in response. That will not continue, and by order of the High-Tribunal this island, and all colonies will be reorganised, their work and output made efficient. Production will swell as your roles are reallocated. Your excess will help those on the mainland make our nation even greater, and as Ignata rises, so shall you all.’

This wasn’t what they had been expecting at all. The whispers grew stronger.

‘Be not worried,’ the ember-priest added, face blank and emotionless, ‘Toil and upheaval are small prices to pay to save souls. We will get through this together, to a brighter future!’

‘Who do you think you are?’ Danlin said, before he could stop himself, ‘This is our island, we’ve kept it well, never bothered anyone – just ask our neighbour islands! Why would you do this to us?’

The ember-priest’s face changed. A spark of interest where there had been little. Someone who had been reciting a script now seeing an opportunity. Danlin suddenly felt like he had stepped on a poisonous puffer fish. The ember-priest smiled with no humour, pointed theatrically at Danlin, and spoke.

‘You are the poison that fevers our land! You and those like you. Have you no shame? Do you all have no shame, allowing one such as this to pollute your minds? You should chastise him, even cast him out if he should fail to change his ways.’

Danlin was taken aback by the sudden accusation. He hadn't expected to say anything here, let alone be the centre of attention here. Some of the islanders didn't look happy at this new arrival talking in such a way, but when one or two began to step forward, several of the soldiers dealing with the cargo stopped what they were doing. They didn't point weapons. They didn't spout threatening words. They didn't even come over, but it was clear that if anyone did anything unwise, there would be consequences.

'You resist the knowledge,' said the ember-priest, 'It is natural when the poison is used as garnish on every meal that it taste sweet. But the food is still poisoned, and it will affect us all in the end. We come to you from the land feeling those effects. The true Ignata, where the ash falls. The land itself rages against our sins, and we must no longer stand for them if we are to survive. Do not reject the truth. I know many of you are ardent followers of the same ways we ember-priests practice. Do not throw away your faith for one such as this.'

Danlin realised that the other islander had backed away from him slightly, leaving him alone and exposed. He swung his gaze around, looking for someone to back him up, and finding none. He could see it in their faces. The words were turning them. Maybe, they were thinking, maybe people like Danlin were the reason for Ignata's troubles. Hadn't the taxes gone up this year again? Weren't firefruit harder to come by? Why, even the fishing hadn't been the same these last years. Someone ought to do something.

'Apologise to the ember-priest,' one man suddenly demanded.

'Yeah, we can't risk the wrath of the land,' a woman said. A few more murmurs of assent were added, and some nodding heads. Danlin looked between the faces, worried, sympathetic and annoyed.

He should apologise. It was the sensible thing to do. A way to get out of this.

'Were you bullied as a child and this is you getting even?' he found himself saying to the ember-priest, 'or do you just like turning people against their own?'

'Your insolence will cost us all!' the ember-priest said loudly and coldly. She paused for a moment, as if praying for guidance – though Danlin didn't believe that for a moment. 'If you will not sanction ones such as these, then I must do it for you,'

the woman eventually said, with theatrical but grim finality, 'I see what you are, and what is necessary for the good of all. There is no other way. I soul-brand you!'

Danlin gaped as the ember-priest extended a finger to point at him. He had heard the stories of course. They were the only place anyone was ever soul-branded. It was for traitors and those of truly evil mind. A mark on the soul that could not be hidden or removed. A sign to all that the branded one could never be trusted in society again.

'Soul-branded?' the mutters began.

'You know what that means?'

'Terrible thing... terrible.'

'Always thought there was something wrong with that one...'

'Had to be done.'

Danlin whirled around, and found the mood turning ever more against him. Expressions hardened. Words became harsher. The ember-priest smiled.

Danlin ran from the scene before anything worse could happen, pushing people aside and cursing himself all the way. Shouted condemnations from the ember-priest followed as she preached hate and drew the islanders, Danlin's own people, further under her spell.

That had been the start of it, but not nearly the end.

Months flew by, each worse than the last.

He still did his work, learning the practice and trade of the chemic. What measures of material did smiths need to forge the best steel? What could be mixed to make poisons to safely deal with vermin? What was the proper composition of blasting powder? That last was an ever-present job as hunters were always using the stuff up in their ongoing war with the Sealake's vast bird population, which no one ever won but produced a lot of casualties on the flying side.

All the while though, more mainlanders continued to arrive, and that first ember-priest calmly informed every single one of them that Danlin was soul-branded, a troublemaker, and not to be trusted. They in turn took up the hobby of poisoning the islanders' minds, preaching the same thing the first had, with ever greater venom.

Soon, Danlin was met with suspicious glares everywhere he went – from those he had known all his life to people he barely recognised. There was no escaping it. Even on the other side of the island there were other ember-priests arriving to spread their words of

division and distrust. The whispers made him feel like an intruder in his own home. Like a traitor to his own kin. Even his own parents could not meet his eye – and that was not the end of it.

‘I’m taking over the blasting powder production,’ his chemic master finally said, ‘It’s not that I don’t trust you with the explosives, but...’

‘But no one else does,’ Danlin had snapped, bitterly – and his master had not contradicted him. That had been the beginning of the end of their relationship, which had never been warm, but had always been professional. Weeks after, it was barely more than a series of silent sulks and shouting matches. Weeks after that, it was over.

Danlin had nowhere else to go, but he knew where he could go. Ignata was huge, and full of towns, cities and opportunity. Somewhere out there had to need a mostly trained chemic, if only he could find it. He packed a bag, determined to at least make the attempt. If he found nothing in Cinderstone, perhaps he could go on, to the plains nations – or even the Aderasti mountains.

He returned to the docks to find passage to the mainland and managed to get it with a good chunk of his meagre savings. No doubt he had been overcharged, given the sullen looks everyone there gave him. Danlin gave his island home one last long look, and almost wished he hadn’t. It was still the pleasant place it had always been, but it had rejected him – not a soul had come to see him off.

Except the ember-priest, a thin smile on her face, like she knew this would be the result all along.

Feeling sick, Danlin stepped out onto the boat, and it was pushed out off the beach into the open Sealake. Then he was upon a great stream of power, endless and without equal. Force enough to bear him away in a moment. Light, blinding and magical.

Then it was gone, and he was walking the trail to Ignata proper, the grey columns of the ash-geysers in the distance, a meagre pack on his back and a road companion by his side.

Hang on, a companion? He had come to Cinderstone alone, Danlin remembered. Had? Wasn’t he going there now? Something wasn’t right.

Danlin slid his eyes to the one walking beside him, not wanting to give away his suspicion.

A boy, about the same age as Danlin, dressed in bright colours – nothing like the browns favoured back on the island. The boy wore no pack, and had a serious expression, like one that had been through a lot – as much as Danlin, and more. He glanced away, wrong-footed.

Danlin didn't know the boy, but he also somehow did. An Aderasti he realised, judging by the features, but he'd never met anyone not Ignatian. Weird.

He looked back, and suddenly found the boy replaced by a hulking creature of ice, studded with spikes and looming large over Danlin. Danlin blinked, and the boy was back again, a hint of frostfire in his eyes.

'You're Kyran,' he said, halting in shock, 'Sabira's brother. The...'

'Yeti?' finished Kyran, when Danlin didn't, 'Yes, I am. Sort of. This isn't all of me, just what's left in the glacier. A lot of me is gone, but the gaps has been filled in with other knowledge.'

Danlin's mind was still struggling to be in the moment.

'I... This isn't then. We're...'

'You're in that cave still,' Kyran confirmed. And you're down here with me, too. The embershard provides a connection. Like a frostslover... and not.'

He looked to his hand, where a tiny ice ash-cat clinked its jaws.

'Well that's not creepy at all,' said Danlin.

'You don't seem all that frightened,' Kyran noted.

'Should I be?'

'Not necessarily. But it would be no surprise if you were to resist all this. A minute ago you were busy reliving your own memories. Now you're talking with a dead boy, and maybe something else as well.'

Danlin shrugged.

'What would be the point in resisting? Sabira told me I had to give in.'

'There are different ways to do that,' the one that looked like Kyran said, 'It's good advice, but it's not enough on its own.'

'She never told me about anything like this,' said Danlin, indicating the whole dream world he found himself in.

‘Much of what she saw faded from her afterwards. Besides, things are... different with you.’

The embershard. The glacier, corrupted. It was here too, Danlin knew. He could sense it somewhere... everywhere? That little connection to the infinite. Kyran looked out, over in the vague direction of the Aderasti mountain range and smiled.

‘Do you feel it, down there?’ he asked, ‘I know you do. The sleeping god, they say. It’s almost right, but not quite. Some things are just bigger than the words we’ve got to describe them, you know? Like the ends of the stars, and the bottom of the sea.’

Danlin didn’t quite understand, but he felt a hint of it. I knew that he was within the glacier’s rushing power but protected from it. This was like a bubble, but bubbles always popped eventually.

‘I don’t have long, do?’ he said, ‘One way or another.’

‘No,’ Kyran agreed, ‘and neither do I.’

‘Are you... will you be alright when this is done?’ Danlin asked.

‘Maybe one day you will know. Maybe one day I will.’

Danlin didn’t think he was getting more of an answer. Perhaps Kyran wasn’t sharing – or he just didn’t know. Hopefully he did know a little more though.

‘Will I be alright? This isn’t... usual, I know,’ Danlin said, thinking of the malformed slaghounds. Coming back would be one thing, but going back like that... It would be too much like what happened to Kyran. Yet, could he refuse, if he had even a chance of helping Sabira? His fate might be sealed, but hers wasn’t. Not yet. As if reading his mind, Kyran said seriously,

‘You’re on a hard road, and it’s not going to get easier.’

‘Sabira’s still on it. I don’t want her to have to walk it alone.’

‘Well said,’ Kyran agreed, and then paused, turning to Danlin and putting a hand on his shoulder before continuing, ‘You know, she doesn’t need taking care of, but take care of her anyway, would you? And maybe get her to take care of you. I fear my memory is hurting her. Driving her to push herself to do things that will make her a different person than she wants to be – but she’ll always be my sister, and I’d hate to think she’d change herself to please some shadow of me. An even thinner shadow than I am here.’

Sabira's big brother, still trying to protect her even now. That felt like the most genuine thing he'd said, the least tinged with the power and knowledge of something inhuman. Danlin nodded, and said,

'Let's get this over with then. Can't stand about here nattering all day!'

He walked forwards, right out of one place and into another – a bustling city tavern room with shabby floorboards and furniture, but full of patrons.

'I remember this place,' Danlin said, walking up the bar and finding Kyran already sitting there.

'I would think so, given where it led you,' said Kyran as Danlin sat down. The bartender, as burly and brusque as Danlin recalled, placed a large glass in front of him. Very large in fact, and the grey, swirling contents were shot through with frostfire. He averted his eyes.

'This was the first place I came to when I got to Cinderstone,' said Danlin, 'I was full of hope for the future. Thought it'd be easy finding work as chemic with this many people around – and not a one knowing I'm soul-branded. Thought I'd get good drink and a meal to celebrate arriving.'

He looked at the container holding the liquid embershard. That hadn't been there on this day, that was for sure.

'Then they arrived,' narrated Kyran, and Danlin swung round in his seat to see three soldiers walk in. Their uniforms were immaculate, and not a single other patron would meet their eye. Why hadn't he noticed that then?

'Young man, you look like just the kind of patriot that the Ignatian army needs!' said the one in the lead, with very shiny silver symbols on his shoulders.

'Needs for what?' Danlin found himself saying, 'Polishing your medals?'

'Maybe you could earn some of your own!' the recruiter replied, making his way over with his compatriots. The rest of the tavern breathed in, letting them pass by and trying not to be noticed. Danlin just laughed at the man. That hadn't been his wisest move. Back then he hadn't seen the twitch of anger, quickly hidden. Maybe he could have avoided it all if he'd just kept a civil tongue.

'You could see the world!' the recruiter tried, no hint of that anger in his voice, 'Meet all sorts of new people - and kill them, if they're the enemies of our great Ignatian nation. Be a hero, why don't you?'

‘Why don’t I?’ said Danlin, with a little laugh. Had he said that then? Being a hero was not in his nature. He was just the screw-up, the one that couldn’t bring himself to do what he was told. The one that talked back to everyone and made trouble in his wake.

‘It’s not going to be an easy path,’ said Kyran, ‘There’ll be no one who’s gone this way before to ask.’

‘You mean that after training as a chemic, it’s me that gets to be the experiment?’

Danlin laughed, and Kyran smiled.

‘I guess I do. The time of decision approaches though. The leviathan below – Aderast – needs your answer, and that body of yours isn’t going to wait forever for you to get back to it.’

Danlin stared at the embershard. Its dark, twisting form did not look like a good answer. This might all be some trick concocted by a corrupted piece of the glacier, trying to get him to agree to evil. It didn’t feel like that though. It felt genuine. An offer for a new start – one that Sabira had already offered him and he’d never quite seized.

‘Just give the word, either way,’ said Kyran, his shape taking on a fading, translucent quality lit with frostfire, ‘It would be fair to ask for peace. We would understand. It has been good to meet you, Danlin, even if it is only an echo of a meeting. I’m glad you made it out of the mountain.’

Danlin smiled, nodded in acknowledge. Peace would be good. Didn’t he deserve some after these last long years? But then, how many would lose that chance if he simply gave up? Then there was Sabira to think of too, back in the ember-priest shrine. That meant that there was only one answer.

‘So, what do you say then?’ said the recruiter.

‘No to you,’ Danlin replied, ‘and yes, to you.’

The embershard leapt at him, flowing into his mouth and down his throat, causing him to gag. Despite the awful hot sensation though, he didn’t move from his seat.

‘Suit yourself,’ said the soldier.

Then someone hit him from behind, and everything went dark.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sabira couldn't look at the world.

If she did, it would let in the knowledge of Danlin's fate. She hugged her legs tighter, until it hurt.

She should have said something else to him. Something that meant something. Her last words to him, what had they even been? Not good enough. She hadn't done enough to help him, and that was why he hadn't come back.

He would not want this.

Her frostslover. It had been speaking to her for some time, and she had not been listening. Perhaps she should. Perhaps there was refuge in that, a place where the pain could lessen.

We have to look.

She didn't want to. Why did she have to?

Cannot retreat. Cannot fool ourselves. Must get free.

Sabira couldn't do it. She knew that she couldn't let him go so easily.

Not let go. Stoke fire. Grieve later.

Her frostslover's will was like iron. It had been born to deal with an awful situation. Apparently, it knew what was needed now too. The other one had been like that too, urging her on in the darkness of Aderast's tunnels. It was all very well for them, with their bodies of ice. They couldn't feel the same tear that ached in her chest, could they?

Look. You must look.

What would Turaqai do if she were here - and still alive? Not give up, surely. She'd face what she had to. Be strong even where she wanted to be weak. Sabira had to be like that now.

She opened her eyes. Still in the cavern shrine. Still in hell.

The soldiers had all gone back to their normal duties, save for the two that guarded Sabira's cage on either side. They were still attentive to her, muskets held lightly, but ready to be aimed at the slightest sign of resistance.

The ember-priests on the other hand had gathered around a table, their gemstone encrusted ribbons making them look like feathered predators picking at a...

She couldn't think it, but it was still true. Suwei was leading her people in looking Danlin over, searching for what had gone wrong. Everything, Sabira thought, everything had gone wrong.

The ember-priest was efficient, but thorough as she inspected his eyes, opening first one eyelid and then the other, before moving on the teeth. The surface examination continued methodically, the ember-priest ticking things off a checklist as she worked. There was no more emotion to it than a trader unloading cargo. When she was satisfied, Suwei waved the others off.

'Finish your other duties, and then return. We will start the autopsy proper then,' she said. The other ember-priests all bowed and went off to do as she said. Suwei herself turned away to sit at a side table and begin sharpening a series of medical scalpels, and the sight almost made Sabira vomit.

With the activity fading, she no longer had an excuse not to look at the table where Danlin lay. Where his body lay. Where...

Then, Danlin's undead corpse sat up on the table.

Sabira would have screamed, if it were not for her utter shock flooding her. It did not make sense. She had to be seeing things. He blinked, shook his head. Was that a twinkle of frostfire she saw? It didn't matter. He was alive!

She fought to control her emotions. If she didn't do something, they would see him, and then things would be no better. Almost worse – she felt sure they'd love to experiment on a live bonded, just to see what made him tick.

The guards by her cage were staring at her, she realised. They must have seen her expression change. She couldn't give them the chance to think what she might have seen.

'What's going to happen to me?' she called out, hoping against hope that it would distract the ember-priest from looking behind her as well.

'I can't imagine you want to know,' said Suwei, her sickly smile back, 'but if it helps, you'll be alive for a while yet.'

She got up from her table and came over, still sharpening a large and gleaming blade.

'I need to understand why,' Sabira said, carefully staying clear of anything that even referenced Danlin.

‘Why what? Why you’re here? I would have thought that would be obvious,’ said Suwei, clearly bored by the question.

‘Why did Judge Xaoten have to die?’ said Sabira, desperately buying time. Danlin had got down off the table and was tottering on unsteady legs. At least he was holding on to enough sense to remain as quiet as possible.

‘The Judge never did like ember-priests being involved in policy,’ Suwei explained, as she completed sharpening her knife, ‘But I didn’t kill him – you did. I simply took advantage of that in an attempt to bring you, ultimately, here. And here is where fate brought you in the end. To the shrine that will one day be remembered as saving Ignata.’

She wasn’t willing to admit her poisoning aloud then – probably wouldn’t look good to the soldier guards. She couldn’t chance a glance over Suwei’s shoulder, but in the corner of her eye she saw Danlin start to move – toward her.

Sabira saw too that the glint of frostfire she had spotted had been real, but it did not come from a frostsriver like Sabira’s. Instead, a snake-like ribbon writhed out of Danlin’s sleeve and into his hand, like the ash river they had seen in the ravine, only smaller and alive. It didn’t solidify like a frostsriver either, wriggling and flowing constantly and seeming incapable of staying still for any length of time. Danlin’s expression was one just short of panic – he was disoriented by whatever had happened to him, and maybe was overwhelmed by the strange thing he was now bonded to.

Sabira could remember the confusion she first had when she bonded Tserah’s frostsriver, and Danlin must be in an even worse state – at least Sabira had known some of what a frostsriver was and an idea of what it could do. Danlin had awoken in this terrible place with some new kind of power but didn’t seem to have any idea how to use it.

Still, with more bravery than Sabira thought she could have managed, he crept up towards the ember-priest and the two soldiers’ backs. It was an impossible ask though. He had just been through an awful trauma, and stealth like that would have been difficult at the best of times. Danlin’s still awkward leg brushed a table leg, and every little bit of glass on it clinked. The three other Igantians swung around.

‘What?!’ said Suwei, as shocked as Sabira had heard her sound, ‘Stop him!’

One of the guards by Sabira’s cage followed her order, striding out toward Danlin around the tables, unslinging his musket to threaten with. Danlin charged forward, obviously seeing little other option, the embershard bursting up in his hand, a sudden

fountain of frostfire, as if he was generating a weapon made of flowing ash. The guard came up short, suddenly fearful of what this new magic might do to him. Danlin smiled.

Then the liquid sword wobbled and collapsed. It was about as dangerous as a wet paste. The soldier, recovering from his surprise, began to bring his musket up. Danlin swung the embershard, more out of desperation than belief, and the ash-like form stretched out into a lithe flicker of frostfire. The dark grey and blue substance whipped into the soldier's side, and knocked him clean off his feet, before pulling back into Danlin's hand like a living lash.

'Move!' Sabira shouted at him, for he looked like he was going to stand where he was, bewildered by what was happening. At her voice, Danlin launched himself towards her cage, just as the other soldier levelled his musket. Danlin's eyes widened and he dived to one side just as the blast went off, tearing a chunk out of the table he had taken cover behind.

'No!' shouted Suwei, though it was unclear whether she wanted Danlin alive, or if she was simply angry that her world was less ordered than it should be.

Sabira didn't care. With the moment it gave her, she slashed at the lock of the cage with her frostsiver, sheering the metal in one motion. She charged the door open and barrelled through, knowing that the muskets would take a good few seconds to reload. She chopped the guard's weapon in half before he could even begin, ducked a swipe by Suwei with her medical knife and sprinted for Danlin, who had attracted the attention of every armed person nearby.

We will protect!

A heartbeat passed, and she worried that she again would not be fast enough.

Then, she was once more by his side, frostsiver shield expanding to defend against musket shot moments before it met flesh. The impacts made Danlin's eyes go wide, and the embershard vanished up his sleeve, fleeing to circle his neck like a collar made from a burnt down campfire. Its voice, a rapid crackle somewhere between sticks snapping under heat and the crunch of broken glass underfoot sounded out.

Hello Sabira it is good to see you were remembering you and we are new and back and this is good.

What? What?

‘What?’ said Sabira, only starting to get her mind around the rapid words.

I’ve known you before or part of me has and we can help make this better but how! I’m not sure.

There was no time to try and understand the embershard, what it wanted or what it was doing as the frostfire collar vanished, flowing out to Danlin’s other hand.

‘How do I work this thing?!’ called Danlin, panicking and shaking his hand up and down, the embershard constantly bubbling into new, indistinct shapes.

‘How should I know?’ Sabira shouted back over the sound of more musket blasts. They couldn’t wait around here figuring it out – she could feel her frostslover’s pain through the bond and knew from bitter experience that she couldn’t defend them forever.

‘This thing...’ said Danlin, ‘it’s in my head! I don’t... I can’t... It keeps saying stuff!’

‘It doesn’t matter, we just have to run!’ said Sabira, and they did, her frostslover armour forming around her, her shield becoming smaller but more solid and moving to her arm.

Musket shot slammed into it one at a time, the cracks slowly healing up. The soldiers would get more organised soon though, and then there would be salvos coming at Sabira. She didn’t know if she could defend against that.

‘They’re getting very angry!’ she told Danlin, trying to use humour to mask fear like he did. It wasn’t working.

‘Maybe we should give them something else to think about?’ he shouted back over the clamour, doing his best to point while juggling the bubbling embershard. Sabira saw what he meant despite his difficulty, and sliced through one metal bolt, then another, and another as they passed by. She wondered if they were about to regret this decision, but as it was already too late, kept on moving, Danlin ducking beside her.

Behind them chaos erupted as cages broke open, the slaghounds within released to wreak havoc on their tormentors. In an instant, the soldiers forgot all about Sabira and Danlin as misshapen claws and teeth began to sink into exposed flesh. It was horrifying, but once again, Sabira could only see it as the surgeon’s choice. She hated it. Hated Suwei for bringing her to this again. Hated herself for not finding a better way this time.

‘Enjoy!’ Danlin yelled at the fighters as they ran, dealing with the violence in his own way.

‘Enough of that,’ said Sabira, ‘We need to go!’

Not without the books we need the books I will help don't know how to help but will help...

She didn't catch much from the embershard's stream, but 'books' stood out enough for her to remember why they were here in the first place.

She darted over to one of the least ruined worktables, shoulder charging a soldier out of the way as she did so. He might have come after her, if a slaghound hadn't taken the opportunity to seize him by the leg and pull him away. The man disappeared into the melee, screaming.

Doing her best to let that horrible image go, Sabira seized a nearby satchel and stuffed the thing with every paper and journal she could pour into it. There was no time to check if any of it was useful – even those few seconds were nerve wracking.

Filled satchel on her shoulder, she looked over to Danlin, who was crouched down near the ash-cat's cage, hiding from the violence as best he could.

‘Can we go now?’ he called, ‘I think we've wrecked this place enough!’

She dashed over, another thought coming to her on the way.

‘Might as well finish the job,’ said Sabira, and cut through the lock on the ash-cat's cage. For a moment creature did not realise that it was free, cowering at the back away from the door. Then, as Sabira swung it open a little and got out of the way, it suddenly charged forward, banging the barred metal back on its hinges and springing free in a burst of frightened power.

An unfortunate soldier was right in its path and was knocked clean across a worktable, landing with an ugly crunch. The ash-cat barely even seemed to notice what it had done. The thing wisely was not interested in fighting it out any further and made for the nearest exit with the staggering speed of a top predator.

‘I think it's got the right idea,’ said Danlin, and Sabira agreed. Still flinching at every blasting powder bang, they sprinted out from the clutter of the work tables and cages and away after the ash-cat.

Into the tunnels they fled, leaving the monsters to fight it out behind them.

'I don't understand anything anymore,' Danlin said as they hustled along, their way lit only by frostfire.

'Did you ever?' jibed Sabira, buoyed by their survival and escape from the shrine laboratory.

Understood he should help you.

Her frostsriver meant Danlin's actions under Aderast. As seemed usual, the embershard was far less clear.

Rightdecision!dsaybutthenI'veonlyexistedforminutesorratherforeverbutnotlikethis.

'I need everyone to be quiet!' said Danlin, shaking his head as if to clear it. He wasn't dealing with the bonding well, Sabira realised. At least she had been expecting it and had somewhat known what she was getting into. Danlin's every experience was new, never before seen. She gave him a moment to sort himself out. They didn't stop though – the sounds of battle still echoed through the passage, faint as a bad memory, but that wouldn't last forever.

How long did they have before soldiers got after them? Sabira expected she and Danlin would be Suwei's first priority, as soon as she was no longer in mortal danger. They were escaping not only with research notes, but evidence, and on top of that they had 'stolen' the ember-priest's prize, the culmination of everything those sick experiments had been building towards - the embershard Danlin now carried, flowing and writhing around on his skin.

Suwei had succeeded in creating this thing, and anything that woman wanted to make had to be bad, didn't it? Or was the fact that it was as much a fragment of the glacier as her own frostsriver enough to make it something that could be used for good?

It's helped us so far.

Her frostsriver spoke silently, and for that she was grateful. She wouldn't have wanted to put that thought into Danlin's head.

'It's... I'm feeling better now,' said Danlin, 'We're working it out. The embershard doesn't understand much more than we do though – I hope that stuff is some kind of instruction manual.'

He indicated the satchel containing the research notes. Sabira patted it, but kept walking.

'Now's probably not the time for reading through this stuff,' she said.

‘Right, they’ll be after us soon – if any of them are left.’

‘Suwei will survive,’ Sabira said darkly, ‘I’d bet my life on it.’

Those slaghounds had been wrecking the shrine when they left, but there weren’t that many of them, and she didn’t think they’d be lucky enough that the ember-priest would try to fight them personally. The woman wasn’t stupid. In fact, she had more mind than her slim morals could handle – otherwise this whole thing would never have begun.

‘Sabira!’ Danlin suddenly hissed.

Oh this could be dangerous but may be not but probably will have to think be careful.

Up ahead was a hole in the cave wall, through which a little light was spilling in. Unfortunately, it was the thing it was illuminating that had Danlin and the embershard worried.

Hunched in the light was the muscled form of the ash-cat they had freed, and it cowered back away from Sabira and Danlin, baring its scissoring teeth. In their borrowed uniforms they probably looked exactly like those that had trapped it in the first place. Sabira saw that it had been trying to get through a tiny hole, big enough for its paw but not much else.

‘We could fit through there,’ said Danlin quietly, keeping eyes firmly locked on the ash-cat.

‘Want to try squeezing through while that thing’s watching?’ Sabira suggested, eyebrow raised.

‘I like my rear remaining un-mauled, thanks.’

‘I bet,’ said Sabira, smiling. ‘I expect I could let it out though – my frostsriver could cut that space open wider.’

‘Shame you’re useless,’ Danlin told the embershard, which flowed away from his neck and around his body, sending little flickers of frostfire shining through the stitching of his clothes. It didn’t seem to do much, Sabira had to admit. The whip thing had been impressive, but the embershard seemed unable to hold solid shapes like her frostsriver. No cutting, no armour. Not even any forming into little ice figurines to talk.

‘It must do something,’ Sabira suggested, though she wasn’t sure it was true, ‘For starters, maybe you can keep the ash-cat distracted while I work?’

‘Ah, sure,’ said Danlin, ‘I’ll manage the dangerous animal with nothing but a cocktail with a mind of its own.’

He began to move to do it anyway though, the embershard rattling out,
IcandothismaybemorethanthisIthinkIcananddomorelikeotherslikemehavedone.

‘Sure, whatever you say,’ said Danlin sounding like he was struggling to trust in new partner. Sabira for her part willed some of her frostsilver armour to return, just in case the embershard was being overly optimistic. One eye on the softly growling ash-cat, she slowly generated a glowing blade. She’d cut stone before, in much more of a panic than she felt now. She could do this. This could be done.

Her hand was shaking, she realised. This had all gotten to her more than she had realised. The danger, the decisions under fire. Losing Danlin and his return to her. It had been a series of emotional highs matching the ash geyser blasts themselves for power. Calm. Be like Turaqai. Never be flustered. Never lose your cool. Don’t think about the fact that the khanum and Jaliqorbei fled before creatures just like this.

Danlin stood between her and the ash-cat, looking dubiously at the embershard that had pooled in his hand and was now flowing from there, around his wrist and back again, always in motion. His eyes flicked to the predator in front of him every few seconds, worried about an attack. No doubt he was right to – the ash-cat appeared terrified and cornered, and that was an animal at its most dangerous.

The embershard must have told Danlin something internally, as he gripped it in his hand like the hilt of a weapon and began to swing his arm. The thread of ash and power elongated until it had once more become something like a whip, flicking lightly like it was a ripple in water. Then Danlin’s swing became a rotation, spinning the length of the embershard in a wide circle in front of himself that only just cleared the ceiling of the cave. Faster and faster it moved, becoming a blur of grey and blue.

Faced with the display, the ash-cat shrunk back even further, still angry, but more submissive. They had a little time before it could pluck up the courage to go near the strange glowing circle this human was making before it.

Sabira got to work, chopping at the hole, widening it.

Don’t need that big.

‘We do if the ash-cat’s going to get out too,’ she replied. Sabira wanted something today to feel right, even if it was just a little thing. She doubted Turaqai would be so weak,

but she continued doing it anyway. People had died during their time at the shrine. Soldiers that might have had families. Maybe even some of the ember-priests had been there out of fear, or the desire to save their homeland rather than the uncaring willingness to inflict pain that Suwei displayed.

She thought about that as she worked, chiselling away more and more stone and using frostsriver enhanced strength to push away broken chunks. She thought about the journals that she now carried, the evidence that might prove that Suwei had engineered Judge Xaoten's death. Surely at least they would show the woman's lack of ethics, of how she was willing to kill or torture anyone if it would get her closer to her goal. They should put an end to all this – except that a niggling thought was growing at the back of Sabira's mind.

Maybe Suwei wouldn't be punished at all. Maybe she would be rewarded, honoured even, for making Ignata's very own source of magic. Danlin was proof of the ember-priest's success, after all, along with that glowing circle he was whirling. What would be most important to the High Tribunal, the means, or the end? Sabira had no idea, and they had more immediate problems.

The ash-cat was not pleased with what they were doing. In fact, it was getting increasingly agitated with every slice of the frostsriver, and every circle of the embershard. Its dark pupils were fixed on the end of the whirling whip and were beginning to bulge into the deep pools that indicated it was about to strike.

'Sabira, it's telling me to do stuff!' said Danlin urgently, 'What should I do?'

He wasn't used to this, she realised. He probably felt half way towards losing his mind. She didn't really know any better, but maybe she knew someone that it.

We are from same source. Feels a little wrong. Not much. Not like monsters.

'My frostsriver says you should trust it!' said Sabira, only lying a little as she closed in on her final cuts.

'Fine!' said Danlin unhappily and lashed the embershard right at the ash-cat. The thing was lightning quick, but not fast enough to avoid that. Sabira gasped in surprise, the ash-cat made a strangled yowling sound that seemed like it should have come from a much smaller and weaker creature, and Danlin grunted in concentration.

Then the embershard was lightly wrapped around the ash-cat's neck, dangling between it and Danlin like a magical collar and lead. Sabira expected it to start struggling, to fight tooth and claw against being captured again, but after a moment of panicked confusion, the ash-cat actually sat, like it was in a mood to begin cleaning its paws.

'Danlin, what...?' began Sabira, but realised that he was in no state to give a response. His eyes were shut, but she could see them twitching under his eyelids like he was having a vivid dream. His outstretched hand was in motion too, the fingers writhing as the embershard flowed around and through them.

'Should we do something?' Sabira asked, worried.

Nothing to be done. Must wait.

No comfort there then. Sabira took a few moments to finish her work, widening the hole into one that even the bulk of the ash-cat could fit through with space to spare. Anxiety built within her with every cut, and she kept glancing at the two beings connected by a thread of frostfire. No change.

Then, just as she made her final cut, Danlin's eyes snapped open.

'It's weird having a voice in my head, but weirder still that things it says to do work out,' he said.

'What happened?' said Sabira, 'What did you do?'

Found away in the resatiny bit of glacierness in the re like all creatures but them more than most.

'I... We... kind of explained to it... her... that we're friends. That we don't mean it any harm. I think it's a bit like what Suwei did to you with the meltwater poison, but nicer.'

Danlin grimaced at her, obviously hoping that the comparison had not offended her. Sabira wasn't bothered about the rights and wrongs of it in that moment though – he had just saved them from being savaged to death by an angry ash-cat after all.

'Nice work!' she said, 'Can you give me a hand with these last rocks then? Even with the frostsriver, they're heavy.'

He grimaced again and gave the embershard line a very light tug.

'It might be best not to disconnect this. I'm not sure if the influence will last.'

Friendly for a while maybe but not forever.

Sabira finished the job without another word – she wasn't about to push their luck after everything they'd already been through.

‘Let’s go,’ she said poking through and checking that there were no Ignatians nearby. Just the usual suffocating grey of the ashlands as far as she could see.

‘Soon as I work out how to let this thing go without it savaging me,’ Danlin replied.

‘Well hurry, we don’t have much time,’ said Sabira, conscious of the other people that were still in these tunnels.

‘I know, I know!’ he said, ‘But it’s not going to be much better out there! There’s a long way to go, we’ve got no horses and they’ve probably got plenty.’

Sabira had to admit that it wasn’t an ideal situation.

‘Can we even find the way back to Cinderstone?’ she asked, the new worry popping into her head. On foot could they possibly make it back in time before her father was given some terrible sentence? She thought the chance were slim.

‘If we can find the path again,’ said Danlin, ‘And I think I can recognise a landmark or two.’

Sabira certainly didn’t. Every ash geyser looked the same to her – but she trusted Danlin.

‘It’s going to be hard on foot,’ she said steeling herself for it. Could they make it without food? How were they going to avoid their pursuers?

‘I have a ridiculous idea that I’ve just got to try,’ said Danlin suddenly, taking a pace towards the ash-cat. ‘Good kitty?’ he asked it and reached up to rub the ever-changing greys of its neck fur.

‘Danlin, I don’t think...’ said Sabira, but it was too late – he had already done it. The ash-cat stared at Danlin for moment, as if contemplating whether to eat him. Then it shut its eyes from the obviously pleasant stroking sensation. It looked almost about to roll on its side to expose its belly for more rubs, but the top predator managed to keep its dignity and stayed on its paws.

‘Guess that worked,’ said Danlin, ‘Now I’ve just got to...’

The embershard leash pulsed blue for a moment, and he was quiet for a moment more, as if listening. Then, he grinned and said,

‘I think... I think it’s going to let us get on.’

Sabira stared at him for a moment, before saying,

‘I think there might actually be something wrong with you.’

‘Probably,’ Danlin agreed, moving around to the animal’s flank, gingerly enough that Sabira suspected that he wasn’t quite as confident in this plan as he was pretending. Nevertheless, he gripped a handful of the ash-cat’s fur and hoisted himself up to mount it.

‘So... How is it?’ Sabira asked, staying where she was.

‘Kind of awkward,’ said Danlin, ‘but her fur’s so soft!’

The ash-cat made a kind of growly purr as he reached to stroke its head.

‘You’re sure this won’t be a problem?’ she said, walking gingerly up to the powerful feline.

‘Sure, I think,’ said Danlin, and offered her a hand, the other still occupied with the flowing embershard leash.

By the mountain, what had her life come to?

‘Alright,’ she said, extending her own hand, ‘Why not? Why not ride around on a predator in a foreign land with an Ignatian and two of the Tears of Aderast. What else would I be doing?’

And then, in a moment that Sabira would have sworn could only happen in a dream, she too got up onto the ash-cat’s furry back and padded forward into the desolation of the ashlands.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

As her ridiculous dream continued, Sabira thought of her family, and what they would say if they could dream this too. It wasn’t like anyone would believe it if she simply told them about it. Riding an ash-cat between geysers, fleeing from dangerous villains? Sure, pull the other one. Kyran though, he would smile. He’d always called her little ash-cat, after all.

The rush of the wind lifted her braided hair out behind her, and she held on to Danlin tighter, trying to enjoy the incredible experience.

‘Whoa!’ said Danlin, as the ash-cat careened around a little hillock, nearly throwing them off and rather breaking the spell.

‘You’re not going to kill us, are you?’ said Sabira.

Trynottobuttherearenoguaranteesinlifeorinanything.

‘This is all new to me – to us – and I’m not exactly a plainsman to start with,’ Danlin added.

‘Doing better than I would,’ Sabira replied. She’d barely seen more than a picture of a horse back on Aderast, let alone been shown how to get on one.

‘Maybe Turaqai can teach you to ride when this is all done!’

‘You as well,’ Sabira jibed. He wasn’t exactly fully in control here. She remembered the khanum’s calm command of her pony – this wild flight was nothing like that. Perhaps you couldn’t expect such discipline from a cat. Or from Danlin.

Again her mind drifted to those she cared for. Her mother, oblivious of all this back in Adranna, helping out Uncle Mihnir while her father was away. Sabira smiled, thinking of her mother the hunter’s bedside manner. Someone had needed to stay with the great bear of a man though, or he’d have done himself an injury. Even now, he had not fully recovered from his brush with death on the mountain – though soon he would be as healthy as he was going to get.

Mihnir couldn’t carry as much as he used to, when he still had all his fingers and toes, but he still carried more than he should. Nothing would ever stop Sabira’s uncle, she thought. Even the mountain god Aderast had failed to.

Then there was her father, the one they were now speeding back to. She prayed that her actions hadn’t doomed him. Time was running short. At best they’d get back to Cinderstone after nearly two days. Was that enough? How many hours were left before summary sentencing? The High Tribunal surely wouldn’t stay their hand for long.

‘It’ll be so good to see father and the others again,’ she called over the ash laden wind, ‘Even dry old Frost-Cleric Hadatan! I’ve missed them.’

Danlin didn’t reply immediately, and Sabira sensed that something was wrong.

‘Do you know something I don’t?’ she asked, starting to worry.

‘No, no – it’s not that,’ he said hurriedly.

Is something.

‘I guess that’s true,’ he said, and then paused as if debating how best to put something into words.

Should just speak that’s what I do then everyone hears and knows.

‘Alright! I was getting there! Anyway, Sabira, you should know, when I was out - bonding the embershard I mean – I saw your brother.’

She froze, solid as her frostslover. Danlin continued.

‘It wasn’t quite him, more a shadow that knew far too much, but he said nice things. He said... I don’t even remember it all. He... he wanted you to be you. You could never let him down. Never dishonour his memory. It’s still kind of a blur – but I do remember he said to try and take care of you even though you could take care of yourself and... and that maybe you should take care of me too.’

The last words were quieter and quieter, as if he was embarrassed to say them.

‘That’s... That’s nice,’ said Sabira. It was all that would come, her mind almost seized up at the sure knowledge that something of her brother had survived. How many nights had she stayed awake, replaying the moment when the dying yeti form of Kyran had plunged into the pit that the glacier swelled from. It had happened because he saved her life. It had been her fault. She’d felt that ever since, true or not. She’d been living her life trying to justify what he had done for her. To make herself somehow worthy of it. It wasn’t what he wanted at all.

‘I’ll try to do what he said,’ said Danlin, sounding like he had a lump in his throat, ‘I know I can’t be anything like what he was to you, but...’

She hugged him as tight as she ever had, burying her face into his back to hide her moistening eyes. They didn’t need more words.

Sabira lost herself in that moment for a good few minutes, letting her past, her memories flow through her. These last days had been some of her hardest, a twin to her time under the mountain – but at least here she had never been truly alone. Her decisions – and mistakes – had brought them out here, but maybe, just maybe they might now end up doing some good. Hearing something, she came back out of herself and looked around.

‘Are you alright, Sabira?’ Danlin was asking, but she had no chance to reply. Over her shoulder, she caught sight of something that made her stomach drop. A plume of dust amid columns of ash.

It was moving. The Ignatian cavalry, the group that had escorted Suwei out here. It had to be.

‘Danlin!’ she cried out, ‘They’ve found us!’

Could an ash-cat outpace a horse, and with two riders on its back? They were about to find out.

‘Go!’ urged Danlin, and for a moment the embershard collar burned bright with frostfire.

Instantly, the ash-cat sped up from a gamble to a long, bounding run. The speed felt amazing, but Sabira was not surprised when Danlin swung them around a fork in the path and called out,

‘We can’t keep this up - got to try and lose them for a while! I think the embershard’s helping, but she’s built for sprints, not long distance.’

Sabira hoped they could – there weren’t too many safe routes through the ashlands, as far as she could see. It was a tense few minutes as they galloped along, and Sabira spent them alternately glancing back looking for their pursuers and around for any clues as to where they were heading. She saw few – really only that they were in a valley, and it was narrowing. This was not the path they had come into the ashlands on.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Sabira, looking up at the increasingly sheer valley walls. Even a sure-footed ash-cat was not going to be able to scale that. They were still heading up hill. What if the path ended the same way? They might be trapped already and not know it.

‘Don’t have much choice,’ said Danlin, ‘Stopping is going to be much worse.’

Then they came around a bend in the valley, and it became immediately clear that it was going to be worse either way. Sabira saw that her fears had been well founded. It wasn’t solid stone that was going to stop them though – it was a wall of a different kind. She should have seen it coming, but it was too late now.

There was only one thing you found at the tops of these hills, however steep, and that was an ash geyser. This one, despite its low peak, was no exception. In fact, the belches of grey poison coming from it seemed, if anything, more powerful than its size would suggest. As they rode towards it, the gouts of ash seemed to grow thicker. The air certainly did, polluted even more than what Sabira had become used to in the ashlands.

‘No way round!’ said Danlin with alarm as they approached the end of the line. The mouth of the geyser met the valley wall on both sides. The only way forward was over a deep drop and through hot ash.

‘Maybe there’s a way to climb!’ Sabira suggested, not believing it but desperately looking for an answer. Danlin halted the ash-cat and she swung down, legs feeling stiff and awkward from the ride. She had no time to waste complaining about the pain though and began to crawl towards the edge of the geyser, frostslover masking her face from the heat and debris as best it could.

The strongest blasts were not constant. There was always some ash being thrown up, but at times Sabira could just about see through it to the other side. They were so close, but the sight was only ever there for seconds.

‘Be careful!’ Danlin called as she reached the edge of the rock.

‘Thanks,’ said Sabira sarcastically, ‘If you hadn’t said that I’d have just jumped right in!’

They were both under pressure – though not nearly so much as the substance below the geyser. Between the worst of the blasts, she poked her head out for a quick glance into the hole.

More of those organic growths were inside the rim – and more still were there the deeper she looked. Right at the point before darkness and ash made vision impossible the things seemed larger, as if the source of them was right at the bottom. It probably was, Sabira thought – it was the glacier meltwater and that ash river below that was causing the agitation in the ash geysers after all.

Wait a minute.

Now that is good idea.

‘Danlin?’ said Sabira, scooting back from the edge, ‘Fancy being a chemic again? Because I’ve got a really big reaction for you to soothe.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sabira had to wait for a particularly long geyser blast to abate before she could explain her plan. Danlin looked at her with a mixture of confusion and anticipation until the deafening sound died away. Every second was torture, another moment for the cavalry to close on them.

The moment she could shout over the geyser, Sabira began, her words almost as rapid fire as the embershard’s speech.

‘I think we can get through! That thing of yours can talk to other stuff it touches, right? This ash-cat, and the others. It talks to you, and the meltwater it’s made from did something to me, even if it was awful. Well, these geysers are at least a little bit alive too. You and the embershard could maybe calm it enough for us to get past!’

Danlin looked down at the flowing, living rope in his hand, unsure.

‘It’ll never be able to get down through those blasts of ash,’ he said, ‘It can’t even stand up straight on its own.’

‘Maybe it doesn’t need to do this on its own,’ Sabira suggested, ‘Right?’

We are together.

Her frostsriver’s words were a rallying cry, a demand that they all get through this – even the newcomer embershard. It had proved itself, Sabira supposed, but this really was going to be the final test. Two kinds of power, two sets of bonded, working as one.

‘We can do this,’ she explained, ‘We can protect you and the embershard while you connect with... whatever is down there. The glacier, the land, doesn’t matter. All we need is safe passage.’

‘Oh, that’s all,’ said Danlin sarcastically, but he didn’t argue as he dismounted too. After waiting for a moment to make sure that the ash-cat wasn’t going to panic without the embershard leash touching it, he began to move up beside Sabira, saying, ‘If I’d known all that stuff the ember-priests say about the land being angry with us was a bit true, maybe I’d have rethought my life choices.’

‘No, you wouldn’t,’ Sabira mumbled to him through her frostsriver mask.

‘Hey, you might be surprised,’ said Danlin, covering his mouth as best he could, ‘It’s not that I’m not glad to be here with you, but I might prefer to not be exactly *here* with you.’

Good as it made her feel to hear him say that, the constant ash was a real motivator to keep her mind on the job. Focus, she told herself, as her frostsriver began to solidify into a tube set against the inner wall of the geyser. It stretched and stretched, dripping down into the mouth of the spewing geyser until it was obscured by ash. Sabira felt herself stretching out with it, her heart racing. How far could they push the bond before it broke them? A frostsriver could only flatten and elongate

itself so much, and Sabira had seen what happened if you pushed things too far - Frost-Cleric Tserah had died holding back an avalanche with her bonded partner.

That in mind, her frostsriver stopped masking her face, leaving her to cough in the poisoned air. This was not time for dividing their strength. This task was going to need everything they had – and maybe more besides.

Trying not to breathe, and narrowing her eyes against the stinging ash clouds, Sabira waited, and pushed and hoped for her racing heart to keep beating. A few more paces down. A few more. The heat was intense – she could feel that through the bond, and the frostsriver's descent was slowing. A few more seconds, each one of which put a painful strain on Sabira, and it came to a halt.

Her frostsriver had pushed itself as far as it dared, and with Sabira's encouragement it fully solidified into a tiny protective tunnel down the geyser side. The angry thing gave a monstrous gurgle and spewed out an even bigger column of ash, as if it knew that someone was trying to do something to it.

'Danlin, now's the time, and hurry! We can't do this for long,' she said, and her friend acted without another word.

Like a river bursting its banks, the embershard blasted out from Danlin's fingertips, holding on only by a thin thread. The glowing ash substance rushed into the tube Sabira and her frostsriver had made, and flowed on down, protected from the battering force and heat of the geyser. It didn't move with the controlled ooze that her frostsriver did though, it was more energetic, excited almost. The difference between a frozen river and one freed of its prison to surge and run, Sabira supposed.

Then she realised what it would mean for something that wild to be asked to move through a long, confided space with precision. This was really dangerous, even more so than she had initially thought. Sabira knew from experience that a frostsriver touching another part of the glacier wasn't good news. They absorbed together into a greater whole, and she feared that might happen here if frostsriver and embershard were to touch.

'Be really careful...' she managed but could not say any more. The atmosphere was too thick, and she felt about ready to suffocate.

'Just got to... there!' Danlin said suddenly, and then went still, as if in a trance. He was quiet for an uncomfortably long time, and Sabira waited as seconds went by, never sure if she would make it through the next one. Just when she was starting to worry that Danlin

had fallen into the same kind of coma that had come with his bonding, he opened his eyes and said,

‘The growths - they’re not distinct. There aren’t hundreds of them – it’s all one thing, connected through the rock!’

Sabira didn’t reply, not wanting to distract him from his work. The geyser rumbled again, warning of a heavier ash burst to come. The distant thunder of hooves echoed it. She had to reply after all.

‘Not to hurry you, but...’ she said.

‘It’s doing something!’ he announced, unhelpfully.

Sabira glanced back to the oncoming cavalry. Blinking against the ash, she could pick out individuals now, and was that the tasselled robes of an ember-priest riding among them? Suwei, she guessed, coming to retrieve her property. They were almost out of time.

‘Danlin, whatever you’re doing, you’ve got to do it faster!’ she warned with the last of her breath.

‘I’m trying, it’s just difficult not to...’ said Danlin, and then a shock of icy contact stabbed through Sabira.

Suddenly she was back with the glacier, rushing along in its power like when she had bonded her frostslover. No, not quite like that. She wasn’t fully immersed – more like they were skipping along the surface. They? Yes, she caught a hint of others here too. Her frostslover for one, but there were others. Was that... Danlin? And behind him other presences too. As familiar as family.

A word drifted up to her, maybe from her frostslover, maybe from the embershard. Maybe from Aderast itself.

Infection.

She felt its truth, all the way through her. That was it. This land was infected, or at least it was recovering from one. A fever that had broken, but still left the patient weak and sickly.

Maybe that was it. Maybe Aderast’s Nightmare had been more like a fever? What in the world could make a god sick? The idea put a knot of fear into Sabira that she expected would stick with her for her entire life.

The speck of relief behind that was that the continent was recovering. It might be years, centuries before it was right again, but one day these geysers would bring life, not death, once again. The nightmare would eventually end. The problem was that Sabira and Danlin didn't have centuries to wait. Those galloping hooves were almost on top on them.

Show the way, little ash-cat.

The phrase pulled at her, nudged her across the sleeping god's stream of power. There was still more here, she sensed. Not a consciousness, like Danlin, or even like the living power of the glacier, but something far more primitive. A sense of growth, and... was that anger?

Sabira had never felt anything like that before in these brushes with the mountain god, yet it still felt like it was Aderast here. In fact, though the glacier's touch was in all living things, here it was actually stronger than most.

Look closer. I'll help.

She sensed that focused power came with a dark price. Those hot stones in the glacier's flow were touched by Aderast too, but more harshly than anything Sabira recognised from her god. It was like it had been goaded into it long ago by some insidious foreign power, and the results had been dreadful.

Undo the knot. Repair the damage. Be the example.

Sabira reached into the power with her mind, Danlin coming along with her, trusting, supporting even though she had no idea what she was doing. Gently, never forgetting to let Aderast's power carry her, never fighting the eternal, endless mind at the bottom of everything, she brushed the burning knot in the world and willed peace into it. In that moment, for a heartbeat or less, her thoughts melded with frostsriver, embershard and Danlin besides. All acting as one.

The infection, if that's what it was, receded, like their consciousnesses were salve to it. For all the power in it, there didn't seem to be any push back. Its anger was source-less, undirected as if it had forgotten who had told it to be so enraged and was glad to be calmed. It was slow though, and the connection began to fade once more before it was done.

It was only then that Sabira heard the ringing of her frostsriver, urgently warning them to get out, and with its voice to guide her she began to pull back. More tumbling

moments under the eye of Aderast passed, and then suddenly, she was out, lying on her back by the geyser and gasping in ash laden air.

Her frostsriver had collapsed back into its most basic form, an icicle hung from Sabira's neck. She sensed that it was as exhausted as she felt, in its own way.

Good work done.

She smiled as she heard the words, and looked over to the geyser, where the blasts of ash had ceased and the grey clouds above it were slowly thinning. For one moment, she just lay there and appreciated the bond that she had, one that had never felt more important, or more vital.

Every brush with the power of Aderast seemed to deepen the connection, as if it were cautiously letting a new friend in on its secrets.

'That voice.... The infection... It... Did you do that, or did we do that?' she said as she tried to get a grip back on reality, and found her voice hoarse and ragged.

'Don't know,' breathed Danlin, 'Don't care.'

He was right, they hadn't exactly saved the world. It still felt great.

Together they had soothed a monster, an affliction that had troubled this land since before they were born – and it had almost killed them several times over. That was something amazing, even if didn't last.

Aderasti and Ignatian. Daughter of a healer and an apprentice chemic. That seemed right to Sabira. Who better to have done this? Forgetting herself for a single, wonderful moment, she wrapped Danlin in a hug, grinning.

Then a rumble vibrated up from beneath their feet, a reminder that the geyser wouldn't stay calm forever. They looked at each other and dashed back to the ash-cat, settling onto its back as the first musket crack sounded behind them.

The poor ash-cat seemed very confused by all this but recovered its composure the moment Danlin got her embershard collar and leash back on.

There was suddenly determination on her pose, all coiled strength and lifted weariness. Danlin wheeled her around, aiming straight for the geyser, the air over it still clean, for now.

With more time they might have found a way to climb across safely, but at that moment there was the unmistakable sound of a musket crack. There was only one answer.

‘Jump!’ yelled Sabira, and Danlin urged the ash-cat forward, right towards the lip of the geyser, the rumbles below building with each paw step. Seconds, they had only seconds. More sounds of blasting powder. A musket ball pinged off Sabira’s back armour, making her feel very fortunate that her frostslover had returned to defending her. Then the ash-cat was at the edge of the drop and over it, leaping with powerful back legs built for deadly pounces on unsuspecting ash-rats.

Time seemed to slow as they floated above the dark hole, the rumbling fury at its bottom only briefly calmed. If they fell, the fall would kill them Sabira knew, but despite her fear, she had a firm confidence at her core. The glacier was with them. Aderast was with them in every way.

The ash-cat’s front paws landed on the opposite side, its weight crashing down them right after. The huge beast scrabbled at the rock for a moment, and then pulled itself free of the hole onto solid ground.

Sabira twisted in her seat to see the first of the Ignatian cavalry cresting the rise – but that was all she saw of them as the rumbles below grew to a crescendo and with a great boom, the ash geyser returned to its previous power. The column of ash was ejected so violently it seemed to Sabira like the geyser was making up for lost time.

Heart racing, she looked back and saw a wall of grey blocking their pursuers. They had made it. They were on their way out of the depths that they had been forced into. Back to civilisation, and just maybe, the light.

Not free, but a little closer to it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The return journey to Cinderstone was not easy, even once they found their way back to the road, but not deadly either, so Sabira couldn’t complain. The hours lost made her anxious though and her aches and pains were much worse. She was hungry, tired and thirsty, but she was glad to be free of the cloying greyness that had filled their every waking moment since they entered the ashlands.

The cavalry, which had to be pretty angry at having chased Sabira and Danlin all this way, had needed to take a long way around to get back on their trail. They were still there, and catching, but not quickly enough to reach them before they made it to the city, which it looked like they might make it to before full night.

It was stunning that it had been so easy, really. Despite barely stopping for rest and having to stay wary for any more meltwater entranced wildlife, they had not had any disasters to overcome, and their mount was still going strong.

Sabira didn't think that even an animal as powerful as an ash-cat should have been able to run like this for so long, but perhaps the embershard really was doing more than just convince her to continue helping them.

'Once we're done, I'll make sure you get home,' Sabira swore to the ash-cat, patting her gently on her furred flank.

'Assuming we have the chance, said Danlin, darkly. It was true that it was by no means assured. They had to get through the city streets and to the judges without incident – and that was without the even more difficult part of convincing people of the truth.

It was something Sabira had been worrying about for hours now. She had been searching through the papers and books they'd stolen – or as best she could while being bouncing around on the ash-cat's back. Though the motion made her feel pretty queasy, it was the contents that made her truly sick.

It was dry stuff for the most part, full of numbers, equations and repetitive, time marked notation. None of it seemed to lay out Suwei's plans in detail. Sabira didn't read Ignatian writing well even with a year of occasional learning, but even so, she felt sure that she had not missed some smoking gun of evidence. She turned over her current paper, still hoping to find some clear guilt, but instead found it blank. Ice grew in her heart, and not the pleasant kind of her frostslover – a chill, despondent kind that went with the end of all things.

She had reached the last page. Sabira desperately sorted through the satchel, searching for even the smallest note that she might have missed. Nothing.

Not a word mentioned experimenting on animals and people until they died or became monstrous. Never had the ember-priests written of the plan to frame Sabira using the meltwater – not in the material they had stolen anyway.

The books were useless – at least for proving Suwei's motivations. Surely, they were valuable to the ember-priest, but technical formulas weren't going to show motive to a judge. Sabira had sagged a little more with every page that she

read, and now she deflated completely. All this, every danger and heartache had been for nothing.

‘They’re useless,’ she declared, ‘We’re just riding back to get put into prison again.’

What else could they do though? If they didn’t go back, her father and every other Aderasti would pay. All they could do was tell their story and hope it would do some good. Danlin made an indistinct noise of unhappiness, and then suggested,

‘Maybe we could drop the notes for the cavalry to find. It might stop them chasing us.’

He didn’t sound like he believed it, and she certainly didn’t.

‘Suwei will never stop looking for us,’ said Sabira, ‘Not while you’ve got that embershard.’

‘Maybe she knows all she needs to know to make more.’

It was possible, but unlikely. Sabira had told Danlin and Suwei both plenty of secrets of the bonding, but she had actually kept something back.

The choosing. The interview that Frost-Cleric Tserah had conducted with Sabira, measuring her, judging if she was emotionally stable enough for the task. That was how the frost-clerics sorted which people were mentally suitable for bonding. What the ember-priest still didn’t understand was that even with the right techniques, a bonding would still fail if the human part of it wasn’t a good match. She hadn’t spoken of it because the knowledge couldn’t have helped Danlin, and because she’d had faith that he was worthy. Judging by the frostfire-ash ripple that continuously moved across his skin, she had been right.

‘Unfortunately,’ she said, conscious of how bad it was going to sound, ‘I think she’s going to want to dissect exactly why your bonding works – especially when her experiments don’t keep working in the future.’

‘Oh good. Happy to hear it.’

Not exactly unhappy any way could be worse or better but mostly worse.

Ahead. Choices to make.

At her frostslover’s voice, Sabira turned her attention back to the road. They hadn’t been able to see much of the city of Cinderstone through the ash haze and past the various hills, but now they had come to the top of a gentle hill looking down towards the forbidding sprawl of dark buildings in the evening gloom.

If only that was all they could see.

On the wide, completely open ground between them and Cinderstone was the entire might of the Ignatian army. Thousands of conscripts with thousands of muskets, and plenty else besides.

‘Don’t suppose they’d be open to hearing what we’ve got to say if we just asked to have a chat?’ Sabira said, not very hopefully.

Not likely.

The odds are heavily against such action.

‘If they don’t shoot us on sight, they’ll hold us long enough that Suwei will catch up,’ said Danlin, ‘And I’m betting they’ll listen to her over us.’

He was probably right. The Ignatian soldiers they’d met recently had all seemed to defer to the ember-priest.

‘What do we do then?’ she said, ‘Try and circle around, find a way to the city from the other side?’

‘Even if we can, Suwei would reach the city before we could. I expect she’d make it even harder for us to get to Greyscales than it already is,’ Danlin said, glumly.

‘And the others can’t wait that long anyway, I’d guess.’ said Sabira, ‘Then what? Fly? Burrow? Turn invisible? I don’t think either of us has those powers.’

Nope. Does not look good.

Not methough magic can do lotsof things with the right circumstances just not these.

‘I’m open to any better ideas,’ Danlin said, tugging gently on the ember’s hard leash to slow the ash-cat while they decided.

They couldn’t negotiate. They couldn’t wait here. They couldn’t go around. What would Turaqai do? What would Kyran do, and how could she honour his sacrifice? She could not flinch.

There was a way forward, Sabira realised, and she was the one willing to say it.

‘We go straight through them.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Today, the ash-geysers were angry. They had been busily pumping out clouds of choking greyness for many hours, long before Sabira and Danlin caught sight of

Cinderstone. Perhaps they were making up for the small amount of lost time that the embershard had forced on them.

Whatever the reason, this looked like being a dark day and a darker night. Regiment upon regiment stood lined up before them, some encamped, some armed to the teeth and ready for battle. They were probably only training, but they looked no less intimidating.

Facing the army on their mighty steed, Sabira steadied her nerves. As much as possible anyway, which wasn't much.

'If you take us through the groups that are least alert, that'll be our best shot,' she suggested to Danlin.

'Best shot at not getting shot,' he said, though he didn't sound confident.

'Leave that part to us,' said Sabira, hoping that she her frostslover actually could shield as large a target as an ash-cat.

Will do our best.

'Alright then. Get ready then, I guess,' said Danlin. Sabira wasn't sure how to do that exactly - how could you prepare for that many people trying to kill you – but she tried anyway, sending her frostslover spreading across the fur of the ash-cat. It didn't form armour, as that kind of size would have been too much to keep up for long, but it was at least in place to defend when necessary. She just hoped that they would be able to react in time. There was no dealing with her anxiousness. That was coming with them for the ride, so she decided that they might as well begin.

'Charge!' she yelled, more in jest than with any true martial fire, but charge they did all the same. Embershard pulsing blue, Danlin urged the ash-cat into a bounding run, the slight downhill slope adding momentum beyond ever what the beast's powerful muscles could manage.

The beat of heavy paws on the rock rose until it was like thunder under them, and the wind of their passage pulled at her braids. The army awaited, like a sleeping beast. Powerful. Dangerous.

She'd never done anything so foolish – or so exhilarating.

'Faster!' she urged, and felt the pace increase even further, the ash-cat leaping over small rocks and piles of ash-encrusted pebbles. Sabira stared ahead as best she could past Danlin, unable to look away despite how much easier it should be to not know what was coming.

He had directed them towards one of the areas filled with tents, sensibly deciding that would be where the soldiers were least prepared to deal with a rampaging ash-cat, but Sabira still worried. This was a long run in, and they wouldn't go unspotted for long.

Danlin had their mount use what little hillocks of cover there were, but the only thing really helping their stealth was the ash-cat's natural shifting grey fur, helping them blend with the landscape. It was enough to get them close enough that Sabira began picking out goggled faces in the vast horde.

The soldiers weren't standing ready for them, but why would they? Thousands upon thousands of armed conscripts should be easily enough to stop two teenagers and a chunk of living ice. They hadn't been expecting anything more than a surrender, it seemed – if they had even known that Sabira and Danlin were coming back this way at all. Most likely it had just been a precaution, and maybe not one that the average conscript had been told about. It certainly seemed that way when the first soldier's eyes went wide and they began pointing and shouting. No, they definitely hadn't been expecting this.

Surprise!

At the sight of an onrushing ash-cat though, the army's whole demeanour began to change. Sentries shouted warnings and activity began to surge in waves as more and more people began to understand that something was going on. Likely they didn't all know what they were facing, but gradually the army was becoming more aware. The beast was slowly pulling itself from slumber.

A few wildly optimistic soldiers fired their muskets, but at this long distance the shots were about as dangerous as the puffs of smoke Sabira could see drifting off their spent weapons.

It wouldn't be so easy the next time she knew, as the figures grew before the galloping ash-cat. Even inaccurate weapons could hit if there were enough of them. Seconds passed. They closed. Too close, Sabira realised just in time, and had her frostsriver generate a sheet of ice before them just as newly reloaded muskets discharged. Most still missed, but more than one round cracked into it with a smart of pain Sabira felt through the bond. Next time would be worse.

'Even frostsivers can't take that much fire!' she warned.

'I'm doing what I can,' Danlin called back, but the ash-cat did break into a dead sprint all the same, covering the last of the distance between them and the Ignatians before they could muster up a new volley.

Then they were among the enemy, their firing lines blocked from sight by their own encampment. Barrels and sacks littered the place, along with weaponry, carts, cooking gear, soldiers stealing some shuteye and all the rest of the paraphernalia of war. All of it flashed past in an instant, with no time for Danlin to stop and find the proper way.

The ash-cat leapt over one campfire scattering food and utensils, before plunging straight into an open tent flap on the other side. Sabira's vision was for a second filled with canvas and the shocked faces of off duty soldiers, then they had cannoned through and out the other side, the ash-cat's heavy muscles tearing out the central tent pole as it went.

The chaos was building louder and louder, with people rushing about on all sides. Looking for the intruders, looking for weapons, or even fleeing when they saw the teeth and claws of what was coming through.

The camp was exactly what they needed, every tent and cookpot a little bit of cover from the masses of muskets that wanted them dead. There were still soldiers everywhere, but no space or time for them to become deadly formations.

Sabira still had to stay as alert as she had ever been in her life though. At any moment Ignatians might take aim at them, and from any direction. She caught musket shot with living ice over and over, the stress of it draining her, but not more than she could manage. She would not let this end here. She'd use everything she had if that was what it took. Remember Kyran, and Tserah and the frostslover that had given everything for her to be here. Despite the hardship, she actually began to get into a kind of rhythm, checking constantly, watching for new openings and shouting out directions to Danlin when she spotted something he didn't. They were making progress, and the Ignatians did not seem to be able to find a way to handle them.

It couldn't last forever. Sabira suddenly realised that they were about to pass the last tent in this particular camp, and from here to the outskirts of the city there was no more cover to be seen. There were only formations of soldiers, standing like squares of insects under some kind of disturbing mathematical spell.

This will be more difficult I hope they are not very good at shooting.

Sabira just set her jaw in concentration as the ash-cat barrelled on into the massing people. There was no hiding now, no evading. Only rank upon rank of black leather and gleaming metal. It parted before them like a flock of birds before a hawk, but that didn't stop the soldiers attacking. Several attempted to attack at close range with bayonets, but the ash-cat swiped and bit at those that were foolish enough to try it. Much, much worse were the ones that listened to their screaming officers and held back, loading and readying muskets in spikey lines of weaponry. Those simultaneous blasts rocked Sabira once, twice and more, each sending an incredible shock of pain through the bond as she blocked more in one moment than she ever had before.

Seconds passed, stretched to minutes, maybe. Stretched to torture, definitely.

Sabira couldn't take much more of this. She'd never extended the abilities of her bond this far before, but she felt sure that soon either the frostsriver or her heart would give out. The army all around them was uncaring though. They fired, and fired, attacking almost constantly, trying to destroy the monster among them.

No more.

'We must...' Sabira muttered back.

We cannot. I am cracked. You are almost broken.

She knew it was right but would have carried on anyway whatever the consequences – except that her frostsriver had other ideas, pulling the icy shields in, trying to allow them both just a moment of rest. It was a mistake, Sabira knew, but it was too late to fix it. Her eyes widened at the sight of an Ignatian sergeant standing with a group of his men, branding lash raised above his head and yelling out,

'Fire!'

'Danlin!' was all the warning she had time to call out, but she knew that there was no time for him to do anything, not even turn the ash-cat to evade. The frostsriver would not protect them from this – even if the smaller shield caught a few shots, it would not stop them all. Danlin was not the only one to hear her warning though.

Almost faster than Sabira could understand, the embershard snapped away from the ash-cat, its glowing leash and collar disappearing into Danlin's hand. She

had thought that the shape changing and emotion affecting touch were the sum of its powers, but the embershard had another trick up its ashy sleeve. It launched itself away from Danlin in a paper-thin wave, like a whip blurring out into a sheet of liquid ash, blocking the path from musket line to ash-cat. Metal peppered the embershard but, shockingly, did not pierce through. Instead, the shot flowed with the embershard, whipping the liquid magic right around Danlin's body and barely missing Sabira's head. The embedded metal flew free, redirected back where it came from at the same speed that it arrived, and screams of pain went up from the soldiers there. Sabira was torn between relief at still being alive, and horror at the violence that had just happened.

'Wow!' said Danlin, shocked but also amazed at what he and his partner had done, 'You really gave them a dose of their own medicine.'

'Remember they're just conscripts!' Sabira said, mostly to the embershard.

They are trying to kill us it may be best to do the same back.

'If we can be better than that, we should be!' Sabira said, the remembered weight of a cavern blown up by her hand pressing on her conscience. She just hoped she wasn't being too hopelessly naive.

'I'll try,' Danlin replied, and she knew he meant it – he could have been among these people, if chance had come down in a different direction. A moment later he proved it, the embershard redirecting fire well over the heads of those that had pulled the triggers.

Together, they progressed through the army, fighting together as best they could. In the moments after the embershard first showed its power, Sabira was buoyed by the sight, thinking that with it they could share the load and make it through. That was before the minutes began to flow past, and the outer buildings of Cinderstone barely seemed to grow closer while her strength continued to sap away.

There were just so many people. It was like they were swimming through a sea of black uniforms, and it was angry. The bursts of blasting powder were constant, so much so that individual musket shots were indistinguishable. The only advantage - the one thing saving their lives - was that the ones further away from them couldn't see enough to get a clear shot.

Again, and again Sabira held them back, each hit wrenching away a little more of her strength. This was what a frostslover could really do – the absolute limit of a bond. She thought now she understood what Tserah had felt, holding back the avalanche and,

ultimately, saving all of Adranna – though the frost-cleric hadn't known what her sacrifice was buying then.

Make it worthwhile.

Was that her thoughts, or her frostslover's? In any case, with Sabira it was different. She saw what was coming, and why. She had been there before, standing before the twisting column of the glacier as it churned up from beneath Aderast. Though she grew weaker by the second, she understood the value of what she was doing.

'Not much further!' said Danlin, sounding weak himself as he caught a wave of musket shot that Sabira had been unable to stop and sent it harmlessly skyward.

So hard. But we are together. All of us.

The ash-cat slammed through a group of soldiers, knocking them aside like scattering snow. Sabira almost didn't realise it was happening. She could barely see what she was doing anymore, and her heart was about ready to rip free of her chest. She couldn't feel her fingers, and her breath only came when she could remember to force another wheeze into her lungs. It was going to kill her. They were going to kill her, not with some grand plan or devious strategy, but through sheer weight.

Blast. Slam. Pain. Repeat.

Was that grey stone ahead? Where had the black leather clad bodies gone? Where was the sea of blasting death?

Suddenly she couldn't keep herself upright anymore and felt herself slump forward against Danlin's back.

'Sabira, come on, you've got to...' he was saying, but she couldn't reply. She could barely hear him, her senses fading in and out. There was certainly nothing she could do about the next volley of musket fire.

Through half open eyes she glimpsed behind them the line of soldiers growing more distant, but they were still close enough that their powder crackle split the air – and something else too. Danlin and the embershard were not prepared, and the stone around them pinged and cracked with impacting shots. Unfortunately, not all of the rounds hit stone.

The ash-cat leapt strangely, and then began to hobble, roaring in pain. Sabira looked down and saw that its front paw had been clipped. The shot had gone

straight through, thankfully avoiding the bone, but still slicing deep into the muscle. Grey fur was rapidly staining red - there was a lot of blood and more coming. Sabira feared that in moments one of its bounds would cause the ash-cat's leg to buckle, and they would be thrown from its back to be dashed on the grey rock.

Bad. Bad. Bad.

'Come on,' said Danlin through gritted teeth, 'You can do this. Are you predator or prey?'

The ash-cat stiffened, as if he had wounded its pride, and then continued on with renewed determination. Whether it was the embershard giving it the power to continue to stand, or just the creature's own grit, Sabira didn't know, and didn't care. All that mattered was that they continued to push forward.

She breathed in, a terrified, involuntary thing. They had not fallen. There was still hope, even now. Even after everything.

Just a little further. Only a little, then they would be well away from the sea of people and moving too fast for people on foot to catch up. Even a wounded ash-cat could outpace a human – for long enough at least.

Sabira pulled her frostsriver back to her, letting go of the thudding drumbeat within her chest. More long breaths. Her head felt like a tightly wound spring, but the tension there was uncoiling, ever so slightly.

She was starting to recover from the ordeal of battle, though her body felt like it had been replaced by a statue. Moving it felt like an unreasonable request, but she couldn't let go yet. There would be more work to be done soon. She couldn't sleep yet. Not yet. Heart still pumping hard, Sabira hauled herself to a proper sitting position and tried to get her exhausted mind to take in the situation.

'We did it! We actually did it!' shouted Danlin, excitement spilling over to the ash-cat, which gave a roar of victory.

'No,' said Sabira, 'we didn't.'

She was looking back, trying to muster up the strength to defend against any errant musket shot that somehow still found its way toward them. That was why she had seen their doom barrelling through the already disrupted Ignatian lines.

Horses. Hundreds of them, the riders in the same black uniforms as the conscripts they were recklessly charging through. Danlin twisted around to see and then back toward the still distant outskirts of the city.

‘I don’t think the ash-cat can outpace them,’ he said, obviously sensing things through his bond. Sabira looked down and saw that it was true. The ash-cat was still running, but it was a ragged, stuttering gait.

She was tired, and rightly so. Days of duty done, and a battle besides. Even without her wounds, she could not have carried them fast enough. That cavalry would run them down by the time they reached the edge of the city.

‘We’ll have to fight,’ said Danlin grimly, but Sabira knew that would be folly. There were too many coming for them – and he must know it too, despite his resolve.

Even with both their powers, they could not match this. They had tried. They had given everything they had. Even the majestic ash-cat had done more than they could have asked of her.

Sabira looked at the icicle in her hand and tried to imagine it once more becoming armour. Her pure exhaustion stole the idea away without a second thought.

She couldn’t fight anymore. Not one soldier on horseback, let alone hundreds. She just didn’t have it in her, and she didn’t think that Danlin did either. All she could do was watch and wait for Suwei and her Ignatian minions to reach them and seal their victory.

This would probably be the most lopsided battle ever fought, with thousands on one side and two riders with one mount on the other.

‘Long odds,’ she heard Danlin mutter.

Not as long as it could be still pretty bad but more than twice as good soon.

Something about the bright chatter of the embershard made Sabira look around, searching for whatever could have made it so optimistic. Then, through blurring vision, she picked out something ahead. More horses. How had the cavalry got ahead of them... and why were there only two of them? Then things came into focus, and her heart danced with something beside fear for the first time in forever.

Despite their small numbers, Sabira laughed with a wild joy, for she recognised the two women in the saddles. There really could have been no one else willing to ride out to meet an army on their behalf. There were probably only two people in all of Cinderstone with the outsized confidence to think that they could do it and perhaps win.

She saw golden horns in the larger one's hair. She saw a furred hat with a sapphire circlet on the other. Jaliqorbei and Turaqai charged across the plain, as they probably had a hundred times in their own land and Sabira found it within her to hope.

Reinforcements were on the way.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

'The light of the plains is upon you! Upon you! Khanum Turaqai, First Daughter of Khan Sartorq, Khan above Khans. Above...'

'Jali, my heart, now's not the time,' said Turaqai, interrupting her companion. They had fallen in beside the ash-cat as soon as they rode up, to the great discomfort of their ponies. Less experienced riders than the two plainswomen would not have been able to stop their mounts fleeing from the gigantic predator that ran beside them.

For its part, the ash-cat was behaving itself and not pouncing on the poor ponies, but that might be as much because of its injury as anything Danlin was doing to calm it.

'It really isn't the time,' said Danlin, just as a bang came from behind, and something whizzed overhead. The cavalry were almost in range.

Sabira craned her neck round to look. Just a single shot for now it seemed, but they had a couple hundred more where that came from. It looked like they were waiting until they could get close enough to make their shots count, but that wouldn't be long.

'Lightning alive, but you have got yourselves into a mess,' said Turaqai, calmer than the situation deserved, 'Yet I can't help but be impressed – where do I get one of those?'

She nodded, and Sabira wasn't sure if the woman meant the ash-cat, or the embershard. Probably both, knowing Turaqai. Suddenly she felt like things might be alright. The plains princess always seemed to know what to do.

'We've got a story to tell,' Sabira told her, still only a few steps from passing out, 'They don't want it told.'

She bobbed her head backwards, indicating their pursuers.

‘All the noise out here gave us that clue – knew you’d survive somehow even though we couldn’t find you! We’ve been on the lookout for your return since we got back, but this is spectacular,’ said the khanum, sounding very pleased to be chased by hundreds of soldiers.

‘That’s a word for it,’ said Danlin.

‘Do you have a plan?’ Sabira asked, feeling that Turaqai wasn’t really appreciating the seriousness of the situation.

‘You don’t?’

Time running out.

‘Quite right, icicle,’ said the princess, ‘I assume this has been a worthwhile adventure then? Proving your innocence and such? Fate of nations at stake?’

‘Yes!’ said Sabira and Danlin simultaneously.

‘Well then, time to get to work. This will cost, but what good doesn’t? I’ve been an ambassador too long - I think I shall end it on my own terms. What say you, Jaliqorbei?’

‘I am by your side to the end, khanum. To the end – but is this wise?’ the bodyguard questioned.

‘No, but this too will be spectacular,’ she said, a sparkle in her eye as if she was imagining some grand victory.

Then Turaqai did something in her saddle that didn’t even look possible. She curled out of it, so that she was somehow hanging on the side facing backwards while still able to take up her bow from where it was slung next to the stubby musket and full quiver. The pony did not seem bothered by this and continued to keep pace with the ash-cat. Jaliqorbei did the same, and even with her larger frame had no problem – it had the look of a practiced tactic.

From her contorted, oddly balanced position, she drew her bow back and fired, sending the thin arrow singing through the air in a high arc. Sabira didn’t manage to follow where it went, but less tired eyes than hers were watching.

‘A little short, just a little, my light of the plains,’ called Jaliqorbei. Her princess grunted, apparently annoyed with herself. She pulled another arrow from the quiver to try again.

Turaqai held her draw for a moment longer this time, her breathing calm and focused somehow, despite holding on to a galloping pony.

‘Try... this!’ she said and released. This time, the arrow shot true, plunging down into the dense Ignatian formation. One dark figure was transfixed, threw up its arms and toppled off their mount, its now rider-less horse disrupting the others around it into the bargain.

The plains princess had no qualms about killing conscripts, it seemed.

‘Excellent!’ said Jaliqorbei, ‘An excellent shot!’

‘Let’s make it fifty more,’ Turaqai called out, smiling and extracting her next arrow. Red feathers, Sabira noted. Red for blood. This wasn’t what she wanted, but Turaqai had committed now, and throwing her decision back in her face seemed unthinkable. Besides, without her, they had no chance at all. Release. Flight. Another death. All for the sake of the cause.

How many lives though? How many for this to still be worth it? If they could even win at all. Sabira took a look at the woman’s quiver. There were plenty of arrows there, but even if each one found its way home, there would still be enough pursuers to kill them several times over.

‘You can’t kill them all!’ she called to the khanum as she fired again. This one Turaqai watched as it flew, saying,

‘Something a warrior learns early, or not at all – the enemy is not defeated by death, but by the fear of it!’

Another soldier fell, seeming pretty defeated by death to Sabira’s eyes. Another blast of a musket firing, again going far wide. She prepared herself, summoning the willpower to defend with the frostslover once more. She hadn’t recovered much, but it would have to be enough.

It was a tense few minutes as the groups grew closer, trading fire. Sabira was desperately glad for the inaccuracy of the Ignatians, for she only had to block a couple of times. Eventually they reached a more dangerous range and let off one great volley that nearly made Sabira black out with the effort of resisting it.

‘Lucky us that they can’t keep that going!’ Turaqai called happily.

‘If they could, I would insist you desisted from this ridiculous endeavour. Insist!’ said Jaliqorbei, releasing another arrow and felling another unfortunate soldier. Sabira feared that their words were just bravado, but quickly she saw that they were right.

The cavalry could not reload with anything like the speed that the plainswomen. They could nock and fire a fresh arrow in seconds, whereas when the soldiers had fired once they were left with spent short muskets not easy to reload on a speeding horse. Nor did they have the same skill in the saddle. Several were wounded with an arrow hitting their knee or arm, but they fell despite the injuries not being fatal and were left behind by the rest in their haste. Screams kept making their way to Sabira's ears. This was what it was to be Turaqai. To do this and still hold a smile.

Sabira could not begin to imagine what it must feel like to see your companions cut down beside you, while you could do nothing to your enemy – especially when you faced only two archers.

They are very effective.

Her frostsliver was right, a fact Sabira was grateful for – but still disturbed by. She forced herself to watch the plainswomen work. If she was going to benefit from this, she did not have a right to look away from the violence.

Soon the horses began to spread out, making it necessary for the archers to pick out individuals rather than firing at the group, but even then, they found their marks – even if it did sometimes take several attempts. The ranks were getting literally thinned out. Still, there were plenty of riders left. They might have all expended their muskets now, but all it would take was another couple of minutes to close in, and they would be able to use their cavalry swords.

'It's not going to be enough!' said Sabira, despite how close she was to passing out.

'Have more faith!' said Turaqai, but even her optimism was blunted now.

'Got any more of those detonation sticks?' asked Danlin suddenly.

'As it happens,' Turaqai replied, an evil grin spreading across her face, 'I do have one. Got a light?'

Danlin motioned for the princess to hand it over and, after digging the explosive out of a saddle bag, she did. Sabira watched him unwrap the thing from its protective cloth coverings and stretch out the fuse.

'Can the embershard do that?' Sabira said.

‘The voice in my head says yes,’ Danlin confirmed, and gingerly moved the fuse to the frostfire glow of the leash he still held.

The tip met the embershard’s power, and after a tense moment, began to fizz and burn away. Danlin waited for a moment, turned as best he could – he was no plainsman with their acrobatic saddle antics – and lobbed the stick behind them, the burning fuse spinning around it almost like a tiny embershard whip. It hit the hard ground, bounced, and blew up throwing rock, dust, ash, and soldiers in every direction. Shock and panic reigned, judging by the shouts and screams, but as the haze cleared and the ringing in Sabira’s ears died away, she did not witness the carnage she had expected.

Instead, she saw that the blast had not hit the cavalry directly but had blown a hole in the ground right in front of them, sending horses rearing or scattering, several riders dumped unceremoniously from their mounts. The formation was no longer worthy of the description, but it didn’t look like anyone had been killed.

Had Danlin done that on purpose? Her heart went out to him for trying to preserve the conscripts’ lives, if that’s what he had done, but that was the last trick they had. What now?

Sabira stared back at their remaining enemies, trying to prepare herself to fight them frostslover to cold steel. Surely Turaqai would have no problems, but she wasn’t sure she could do it at all. The fight was coming though, and in their weakened state there would be no way to defend against it. Except, unless her eyes were deceiving her, it wasn’t coming at all.

Is no lie.

They were actually backing off.

What was left of the cavalry group were slowing, or even stopping, allowing Sabira and her friends to get further and further in front – well out of arrow, or musket range.

And was that the scream of a frustrated ember-priest that Sabira heard, or was she just imagining it?

‘You did it. You actually did it,’ she breathed out.

‘And with an arrow to spare!’ the khanum declared, sliding back into her saddle in the normal position. She was drenched in sweat from her grim work but looked as exhilarated as it was possible for a person to be. Exhilarated. After all that killing.

The other also has one arrow it’s very impressive marksmanship I would say.

Victory.

‘We’ve not won yet,’ Danlin warned, ‘We need to keep our eyes out for surprises between those buildings.’

Buildings?

Sabira swung her tired eyes back to where they were going and, sure enough, there was the first of the structures on the outskirts of the city. They really had made it.

She began to breath more easily – but not too much so. They were here, but they were not yet done. There was still a mountain to overcome, and it had grown much larger with the bodies of those cavalry soldiers Turaqai and Jaliqorbei had cut down. Now, with only pages of useless notes, a magic ash whip and some probably unconvincing words, they had to somehow make the High Tribunal see the truth of what had been going on right in front of their noses. Save father. Save the chance for peace. Save themselves.

Nothing was going to be easy today. Still, Sabira held her head high and allowed herself one moment to be happy that they had at least made it this far. She saw the dark towers at the centre of the city with their orange stained glass windows and remembered what they represented to Ignatians. On they rode as she promised herself that somehow, she would make the costs that had already been paid worth it.

Growing gradually larger in her mind and vision, Grayscales, and the Kindling of Law, and justice beckoned.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

‘If I were a more suspicious character, I’d be regretting shooting all those people now.’

Sabira winced at Turaqai’s words. She had given the two plainswomen a quick explanation of what they had missed in the ashlands, in between dodging through streets and being on the lookout for guards in the gathering darkness. It didn’t sound real to her either, now she said it out loud. From the horrible shrine, to Suwei’s disturbing past, all of it seemed more like something someone would make up than something they had witnessed.

Believe. It is all true.

‘If you say so, icicle.’

Turaqai said it so brightly that Sabira couldn’t tell if the woman actually believed or not.

‘For this you risked your position, khanum? Your father the khan will not be pleased. Not be pleased!’

Well, Jaliqorbei’s feelings were clear at least. Turaqai just made a noise that sounded like,

‘Pffft!’

Sabira couldn’t find it in her heart to be so dismissive. Jaliqorbei had a right to be concerned - getting to the Kindling of Law would be only the first stage of this half-formed plan, and there were plenty of ways things could go wrong both before and after. Sabira could only hope that there the soldiers would let them in – or at least inform the High Tribunal that the escapees had returned. That might be enough to defeat Suwei’s plans. At least it should let Sabira and Danlin tell everyone about them in open court. Truth was their only weapon, but it was a blunt one.

A part of Sabira was even worrying about that though. What if the judges were actually in on Suwei’s schemes too?

Must have hope. Worry no use.

The frostslover had the right of it. Confidence was what they needed now. Like Turaqai. Sabira had to talk to the judges like the princess would. That was the only way they might take her words seriously, and not as the raving, compromised words of a girl controlled by magic they both mistrusted and did not understand.

‘Make way, make way!’ Jaliqorbei suddenly instructed, the shocked citizens in the street rushing to comply. They’d likely never seen an ash-cat before, let alone one walking the streets of Cinderstone.

‘Just a little further,’ said Danlin to their mount. Even going slower now, the ash-cat was still obviously in pain. Sabira thought that she might be able to help with the wound, but there was no time to stop and try. Looking back, she saw that they were still being followed by soldiers, but now only at a safe distance.

‘We are between two canyon walls,’ said Jaliqorbei, in what sounded like a plains saying, ‘Either we reach disaster, or wait for it to catch up. I do not know if I can protect you from this, khanum. I do not.’

Turaqai smiled, set her gaze on their destination and said,

‘Don’t worry, my heart, I know what I’m doing.’

‘If you do, it will be a first,’ muttered the bodyguard, possibly too quiet for Turaqai to hear. Sabira did though, and it kept her worries building. Turaqai’s confidence no longer felt reassuring – it felt false. Soon she would be before the High Tribunal. Could she testify and be believed? The judges would be a much bigger challenge than the two plainswomen. She had to believe that they couldn’t all be corrupted. That was the only chance for peace – for Ignata even.

‘This is bigger than just us,’ she whispered to herself.

Important work we do. No one else to do.

Her frostslover was in agreement then.

‘How much influence do you really have here?’ Danlin asked, negotiating the ash-cat around a group of frightened Ignatians.

‘My father the khan rules the largest of the plains nations,’ said Turaqai, ‘Which is to say, not that much – these Ignatians can be very arrogant.’

Coming from her, it almost made Sabira laugh.

‘So, we have a poor position, and our evidence isn’t up to much,’ she said instead, ‘This is going to go well.’

‘Indeed! I’d say so,’ said the plains princess.

It felt like as great a risk as trying to tame the ash-cat. The danger of the predator biting their arms off was intense. Speaking of which.

‘What’s going to happen to our ride here when we go inside?’ Sabira said, and Danlin nodded.

‘We need to make sure no one hurts her. I kind of promised through the bond we’d make sure she got back home, and it’s not like she hasn’t been patient. She got shot for us – I think she deserves some peace.’

We all do.

The outer wall of Greyscales was fast approaching, and Sabira didn’t think it was likely anytime soon.

‘You... promised it?’ said Jaliqorbei, dubiously looking at the ash-cat’s predatory features. She obviously wasn’t convinced that anyone could talk to an animal like that. Sabira would struggle to believe it herself if she hadn’t seen it herself.

‘We helped her, and she helped us,’ Sabira explained, stroking the ash-cat’s ever-changing fur. A rumble from beneath her suggested that the creature approved. Turaqai laughed.

‘If I were you I would just demand she be stabled and see how the guards reacted.’

That didn’t surprise Sabira – though she had to admit, it would be funny to see.

‘We are going to have enough trouble getting into the tower without worrying about the beast,’ said Jaliqorbei, reaching up to scratch the back of her hand on one of her golden horns.

‘Well, if it is to be a fight, we shall be ready. Never let it be said that Khanum Turaqai does not follow through on the causes she commits to!’

Sabira fully believed her. If anything, the woman was far too enthusiastic about fighting for them. They had only known each other for days – surely to be willing to do this much violence should take more than that?

‘Why did you commit to us anyway? Why believe anything we say?’ she had to ask.

‘Because you’re honest,’ Turaqai told her in all seriousness, ‘You couldn’t have made this all up if you tried. Because he has a lash of magic that no one’s ever seen before, and because I really, really don’t like ember-priests with their sanctimony and prejudice. If their influence here can be burned away, I will do my part in ridding this land of it.’

‘You really don’t like them,’ said Danlin, ‘Good.’

‘No,’ said Turaqai, deadly serious, ‘I don’t.’

Why?

Sabira wished her frostslover had not been so curious. This felt like something that might not be any of their business. Nevertheless, Turaqai answered,

‘They would say people like myself and Jaliqorbei are sinful, and ruinous to the world. I would say that they are ruinous idiots, not long for this world – if I get a say in it.’

Something about her words made Sabira look again between Turaqai and Jaliqorbei. The easy trust they had, the glances that could say sentences.

‘She’s not just your bodyguard, is she?’ Sabira guessed.

‘Of course not! That much should be obvious!’

It should have been, but Sabira hadn't seen it, absorbed as she was in her own way of thinking. It occurred to her, that it hadn't been her only mistake these last few days – and definitely not her biggest.

She saw it now. All her desire to be bold, take action and live up to the sacrifices that had been made to keep her alive had twisted in on itself. She had been trying too hard to live up to that legacy, and too afraid of her past. That echo of Kyran had known that. He would not want her living in the shadow of his life and death. She should have seen it, but instead she had made mistake trying to prove herself to someone that had never asked her to.

Blasting their way out of that cell had been a mistake, however it had turned out. She had seen the Ignatian government as something that couldn't be trusted. Instead of at least trying to work within their system, she had fled at the first opportunity. First impressions – and remembrances of Colonel Yupin - had left her thinking that the High Tribunal was not interested in the truth. Maybe that would still be right, but she hadn't given them the chance to prove her wrong – and that had nearly cost Danlin his life.

'I'm going to do better,' she said quietly to herself.

We are better for trying.

'You've talked enough!' Jaliqorbei called, and she was right – they were out of time.

'I'm going to have to stop,' said Danlin. Troops were gathering at the entrance to Grayscales – just a handful for the moment, but more were undoubtedly on the way, and doors were cranking shut behind them on some unseen mechanism. The two plainswomen reigned in too, and leapt from their saddles, making something Sabira knew from experience to be difficult look no harder than breathing.

She got down with a little less grace, strong enough now for her frostslover to brace her knee and allow her to walk without pain once again, but nothing more than that. There would be no more running, and she was in no shape for another battle. The plainswomen were still spoiling for it though, tense and coiled for action.

'One arrow each won't go far,' Jaliqorbei stated as the guards approached.

‘Then we shall switch to our indoor voices,’ said Turaqai and, quick as the glacier was slow, ripped her short musket from its holster and pointed it at the nearest guard. ‘I expect those pet icicles can keep us in this fight – you soldiers should surrender!’

The conscript guards did not react well, unslinging muskets from their shoulders and aiming.

‘Suit yourselves!’ said Turaqai, and sighted down her weapon for a better shot.

‘No!’ Sabira said, placing a hand on the top of the barrel and gently nudging it down.

She had seen too much violence today, and if there was any more, no one would listen to a word they said. This entire terrible journey would end in prison, and maybe even war.

‘No more fighting,’ said Sabira, loud enough for the Ignatians to hear too, ‘We’re here to talk.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Turaqai and Jaliqorbei flanked Sabira and Danlin like bodyguards on the way up the Kinding of Law. Well, Jaliqorbei actually was one, but that made it no less strange when it was Sabira that they were defending.

She was glad of them though. Ignatian soldiers, bristling with weapons and suspicious attitude surrounded their group, leading them along and following them to ensure they did not go off on their own.

‘We do want to be here, you know,’ said Danlin, ‘Why else would we come back?’

‘They’re just embarrassed you escaped the first time,’ said Turaqai, not the least bit worried. Sabira hoped that was just an act – if any situation deserved some worry, it was this one. Either way, the soldiers didn’t say anything – but she did spot them gripping their weapons tighter. Too much tension. If it broke the wrong way, they were doomed.

This couldn’t be solved with daring action. They couldn’t break into the judges’ rooms and force them to listen to reason. That wasn’t how people worked. If their minds could be changed it would be through words, not at the barrel of a musket. If.

‘Not long now,’ Sabira said quietly – she recognised this route from the last time they had been in court. Hopefully it would go slightly better this time. As least their way was clear - messengers had been sent ahead to alert the High-Tribunal that legal proceedings

were going to start soon, and it seemed they had ensured the route through the building was not obstructed too.

‘I just hope no one decides to shoot the ash-cat,’ said Danlin. He sounded genuinely worried, and Sabira didn’t blame him. Without the ember-shard leash to calm the creature, there was no way to know how long it would refrain from trying to eat someone’s face in panic.

Should be fine for a while but hard to say how long.

‘You told her to behave herself, didn’t you?’ said Turaqai.

‘Yes, but she’s a cat. They’re not famous for behaving,’ Danlin noted.

‘Worry about yourselves,’ said Jaliqorbei, ‘The creature will be fine – if your story is true the ember-priests would rather it be recaptured than dead.’

‘Your weapons! Hand them over!’

It was a soldier at the top of the stairs, one with golden officer’s symbols on his shoulder, and he was backed by others. It seemed that the stubby, gold filigree decorated muskets the plainswomen carried would no longer be tolerated.

‘Come and take them?’ Jaliqorbei challenged – though not so aggressively that it caused more trouble. If she was given a few more seconds though...

‘It is my duty to see that the judges can pass judgement in safety,’ he replied, giving no ground.

‘It’s alright,’ said Sabira, ‘we don’t need to be armed in the courtroom.’

She left it unsaid that both she and Danlin couldn’t really disarm themselves anyway. Turaqai looked at her, considered her options for a good long time, and then offered her gleaming, ornate musket to the officer.

‘Look after that, it’s a family heirloom,’ she said, simultaneously implying that she was handing the weapon over by choice and reminding the soldiers of her status as both diplomat and princess.

The officer sniffed, perhaps biting back some comment in the face of a foreign dignitary, and motioned them forward.

‘The High Tribunal has been made aware of your arrival.’

Sabira recognised the doors he was gesturing toward – they lead to the great chamber they had been judged in once already.

‘The moment of truth,’ she said.

‘Let’s hope they see it that way,’ said Danlin.

The doors swung open, and they were marched in.

The High Tribunal was not the disciplined institution Sabira had last seen it. People were rushing around, removing evidence of the previous trial – apparently their appearance had changed the schedule.

Immediately, Sabira realised with a mixture of horror and relief what the schedule had changed from. People in Aderasti clothes were being escorted from the area in front of the High Tribunal. The area where she and Danlin had stood accused less than only days ago – they had come within an ash-cat’s whisker of facing the court’s wrath. If this went badly, they might face it still. The Ignatian soldiers shuffled them towards an empty section of the viewing galleries that could easily be guarded. There was to be no possibility of escape, Sabira saw. Her heart jumped as she picked out faces that she had wondered if she would ever see again.

Father! Her father was among them, looking haggard and sleepless, but otherwise upright. Frost-Cleric Hadatan walked beside him, as if ready to support him were he to stumble. If they had arrived back only hours later...

No, best not to think of that. Couldn’t think about failure. Couldn’t risk letting the idea in. Sabira had put them all through a lot, she knew. Years of apologies would not undo that, but she intended to try anyway. First though, they had to get through this borrowed trial.

More people were filing into the audience section, and they didn’t seem anywhere close to stopping. The gallery was going to be filled well past capacity soon, and the hum of tension was in the air.

‘Isn’t it nice to feel important,’ said Danlin, sarcastically. Sabira didn’t reply. Her mouth had gone dry, and there was a lump in her throat. Too much was resting on this. On her, and what she could find it in her to say.

One again the two remaining members of the High Tribunal sat in their golden seats by the vacant one that had belonged to the dead Judge Xaoten.

Sabira and the others were brought back to the pen before the dais, the same place they had been before all the awfulness in the ashlands had even been a possibility. The plainswomen stood beside the pen rather than inside, but Sabira thought that was

optimistic – they were on trial here as much as she and Danlin, whether that was officially true or not.

Almost everyone she cared about was on trial this night. She looked to her father, got a glance of support back. He couldn't know what was going on, but he was there for her anyway – not that he had a choice.

The announcer in the silly hat waited a good few minutes for the assembly to quieten down, but when it showed no signs of doing so called loudly,

‘Order! Order that the proceedings may begin!’

Hush slowly settled over the room. Close. Suffocating. Sabira found herself holding her breath as the judges both rose to speak.

‘The previous docket has been suspended, as we must instead turn to an emergency proceeding,’ said Judge Shangao, ‘a high-profile open case with fugitives that have been reacquired. New evidence has apparently come to light also, though it is a most irregular way to introduce it.’

Huawen, the female, elderly judge was painted with a scowl, and you could hear it when she spoke.

‘We will hear this – but I find it hard to imagine anything that could justify your actions. Attempted escape from justice. Violence done against Ignatian citizens! Such matters are never taken lightly by this court – even when diplomatic issues might interfere.’

She stared pointedly at Turaqai. At least they were listening. Sabira just hoped that they hadn't made up their minds so much that nothing new would get through to them.

‘Well in any case,’ said Shangao, ‘let's begin.’

They sat, and each gave a go-ahead motion.

Sabira found Danlin's hand with hers and squeezed it. He squeezed back, and she began their tale.

It took both of them to tell it. The fears that had led to their escape. The dangers in the ashlands. The horrors in Suwei's shrine and even the awful return journey with the violence they had been forced into. Both spoke honestly – anything less seemed like it would not do justice to those that had died. It fell to Sabira to wrap it up and she did her best to make her time count.

‘We don’t have to be enemies. That’s not what I came here for, and if there’s anything in my power to prevent it, I will,’ she ended. It sounded good in her head, but when it came out she worried that the words sounded small, far too small for a place as grand as this. There was a long pause as people digested what had been said.

‘Your story has a lot of troubling things in it,’ said Shangao finally.

‘It’s certainly a story,’ said Huawen, ‘I’m sceptical that it is anything more.’

‘We came back didn’t we?’ said Danlin, outraged at the suspicion, ‘Why else would we risk our lives? Why would we do any of it?’

Huawen scowled at the words, which were just shy of disrespect.

‘I don’t have an explanation yet for why you returned, but your escape seems easily comprehensible. The violence outside the city – and we will get witnesses to that soon enough, I’m sure – may simply be because you refused recapture. We will find the bottom of this, whether you make things up, or not.’

‘If we are making this up,’ said Danlin, ‘then what is this?’ and the embershard lept from his sleeve like a striking snow-spine, writhing up into the air and curling back down in a loop of ash stained frostfire. There were a variety of reactions.

Shock. Gasps. Eyes wide and filled with the sudden glow of magic. Somebody in the audience screamed, which Sabira thought was a bit overdramatic. She just smiled – this was their best piece of evidence. Proof that there was something to what they had been saying.

The hubbub did not seem to be dying down.

‘This is a court of law, not a shadow puppet theatre!’ Huawen shouted. That was enough to quiet things, but not completely. A wave of whispers was still in the air.

‘Good work,’ Sabira said in Danlin’s ear. He grinned.

She knew that without a few theatrics, they were not going to get anywhere. Danlin had done exactly what they had needed, making the whole story not just words, but something real that could be touched.

‘Whatever that... thing is,’ said Huawen, ‘It does not...’

Amanembershardasalreadydiscussed.

The rapid voice did nothing to help things settle. At all.

Shangao was the first to recover his composure, saying,

‘You have to admit, Judge Huawen, this is a compelling piece of evidence. That part of their story at least was...’

That was when the doors burst open once more.

It was Ember-Priest Suwei, sweating, her tasselled robes grimy and worn from her urgent ride back from the ashlands. Sabira thought that on balance she and Danlin were in a worse state, but as Suwei was normally so composed, the effect on her was much more pronounced.

It looked like all the annoyance they had already caused might prove useful after all – this new interruption seemed to push Judge Huawen beyond the limits of her tolerance.

‘What is the meaning of this?!’ she bellowed.

‘I... heard... they had come... had to make sure the truth came out,’ Suwei said between breaths. She smoothed down her clothes as best she could, as Shangao said,

‘I suggest we abandon any pretence at following the rules and simply get to the bottom of this. The formalities of a proper trial can wait until later.’

Judge Huawen’s eyes bugged, as if the very idea of not holding a proper trial was as alarming to her as the idea of not breathing regularly. A moment passed. Another. Eventually, she spoke in a quiet, cold voice that suggested seething rage,

‘Fine. An open fact-finding hearing then.’

She was not fine, Sabira could tell, but this was good news, probably. With no unfamiliar system to navigate, the truth might have an advantage.

‘So, Ember-Priest Suwei, we’ve heard plenty from these young people,’ said Shangao, moving things on, ‘Perhaps you should give us your version, if you’re not too flustered by your... exertions...’

‘I... Now? I mean, of course.’

She made her way to the witness podium to begin her lies. Her version was only subtly different from the truth – but that made it all the more convincing. The way she told it, the shrine had been invaded during sacred rituals as the ember-priests attempted to create an embershard in a secret and holy act to help return Ignata to its former glory. She made no mention of forcing it upon unwilling test subjects, or the monstrous creatures she had been making. Her tale of Sabira and Danlin’s escape and flight back to Cinderstone painted them as terrible villains, out to ruin the nation – and implying that they likely had not yet finished.

‘Many loyal Ignatians have died this day, murdered at the hand of these foreigners,’ she accused towards the end, ‘I saw it with my own eyes as I lead the cavalry in pursuit of them and their monstrous animal. We were lucky that any of us escaped the uncanny death they rained down upon us.’

Turaqai smiled at the description of her shooting. Sabira didn’t think that was helping.

‘And you were leading cavalry... why?’ said the rotund judge. This wrong-footed Suwei a little, but she recovered quickly enough to say,

‘The soldiers were my escort to the ashland shrine, and I requested their assistance in pursuing these two thieves. These two attacked us, desecrated the shrine and made off with what they could! I was wrong to believe there could be any good in them before. I should have seen past the surface – they were willing to murder Judge Xaoten, what wouldn’t they be capable of? Did you know that the conscript is soul-branded?’

Gasps followed that last comment. Obviously, whatever that meant it meant something here. Sabira guessed that some of these Ignatians were true believers in what the ember-priests preached. In fact, as Sabira looked around at the room, she saw all too many nodding heads.

‘I’m sorry, Sabira,’ Danlin whispered to her, ‘They won’t trust anything I say now.’

‘Indeed,’ Suwei continued, taking a vial of clear liquid from her robes, ‘It is truly fortunate that I have this – a holy substance that they deceptively call meltwater, but will I believe allow us to separate the embershard from this unworthy traitor and transfer it to someone more righteous. Someone more deserving of the power to bring Ignata back to the light.’

The crowd was almost rumbling. It liked what it was hearing, even if it didn’t entirely understand. Despite everything, Suwei was turning it around, using those hollow, honeyed words to bend opinions to her will. She had been practicing this sort of thing for what must be years, and it showed.

‘And that beast in the courtyard below?’ said Huawen, ‘Supposedly these two rode here on its back, like it was a horse.’

Suwei didn’t miss a beat.

‘Merely a tamed thing from the ashlands. The animals are frequently around the shrine, and have become somewhat domesticated by feeding on scraps. It was a small

project of ours to train them a step further, that they might become amusements here at court.'

'Which, I assume you are testifying that they stole along with the embershard.'

Huawen was actually filling in details for Suwei, who simply nodded in agreement, letting the deception take hold.

She could not get away with what she had done. Even setting aside the horrors of her experiments, the woman had murdered a High Tribunal judge using Sabira and her frostslover as the dagger. If that went unpunished, what justice did Ignata have?

On the other hand, what if this was the price for peace? The ashland geysers could be healed – Sabira and Danlin had proved that.

It wouldn't be the end of it though. If Suwei got her way Ignata would return to full strength again, but without any calming influence. People like her would hold the power. Power they would use to spread hate and division across the continent. To the plains nations. To Aderast.

They'd be as powerful as when Ignata first got started.

'There is some more evidence!' said Sabira suddenly, the idea still forming as she spoke. A desperate one, but they were all out of anything better.

'And why did you wait until now to bring this up?' Judge Huawen asked, annoyed.

Good timing.

'We wanted to wait until Suwei had spoken so that she would... what's the word for when you lie to a judge?'

'Perjure herself?'

'Yes!' said Sabira, seizing on the lifeline the younger judge had offered her. 'If I can beg the court's indulgence, I can demonstrate that our story is true, and prove that we would rather Ignata prosper than come to home. All we need to take these proceedings down to the courtyard below.'

'And what possible reason would we have to indulge something so outlandish?' Huawen demanded, her temper heavily frayed. Suwei understood

though. The ember-priest was staring at Sabira with unhidden hatred – and was that a hint of jealousy? Sabira ignored it, and gave her reason. It was a good one.

‘Because I think we can cure the First Giver, and by doing so, give all of us a future once more.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sabira was by no means sure that she and Danlin could do anything to the tiny geyser that sat in the tower’s courtyard, let alone cure it.

Yet here they were, along with every observer from the court that could be crammed into the area under the glass. Still other faces watched from windows, unsure what was going on, but fascinated by the spectacle.

‘We will need direct access to the First Giver,’ said Sabira, and Danlin echoed in agreement,

‘The embershard needs to touch it to work its magic.’

True. Can speak if get close.

Not really speaking more like melding or knowing but maybe not good words for it.

At this, Ember-Priest Suwei moved to stand in front of the glass tube, blocking the way. How strange that again it came down to facing the enemy beside a column of contained power. An echo of the scene under Aderast, when Sabira had fought Yupin under incandescent frostfire.

‘You can’t be serious!’ the woman shouted, ‘This would be desecration.’

Sabira saw it in her, that jealous need. Suwei had told a little too much of her personal tale back at the ashland shrine, and now Sabira knew her. Enough to know that the woman would do anything to be the one to fix the geysers. Anything for recognition as the nation’s saviour. Sabira held her tongue. They had already said their piece. If this was to be done, it would have to be the Ignatians that decided to do it.

‘I don’t like it,’ said Judge Huawen after a moment’s thought, ‘But practically I say it is necessary. If there’s even a chance these claims are real – well, we’ve all lost someone to the geyser fumes.’

It was the most human Sabira had seen her, the shell of propriety cracking slightly.

‘Bring hammers!’ Shangao called, but Sabira replied,

‘No need,’ and stalked to the glass, sidestepping Suwei. No one was going to get in her way now. Her frostsilver formed a blade before anyone could argue, and together they cut a neat triangle out of the glass funnel, large enough for people to fit through.

‘You cannot listen to this soul-branded boy! No! You shall not do this!’ Suwei almost screamed as the lead held panes fell away to smash on the stone and ash blossomed from the hole, but the Judges waved for guards to move in and calm the situation. This was going to play out, one way or another.

Sabira stood before the hole, blinking away tears caused by the ash and finding her strength to do something no one had ever done before.

‘Can we even do this?’ said Danlin quietly, coming to stand at her side, ‘We calmed that other geyser, but it was back after a moment. Trying to permanently cure something that came from Aderast’s Nightmare seems like, well... a nightmare.’

‘This is much smaller,’ Sabira pointed out, ‘And have you got any better ideas?’

He didn’t.

We will do it.

Sabira hoped that it would be that simple. If will was enough, she had plenty to spare, despite her tired state. There were enough people counting on her to give her all the motivation she needed.

‘Be careful!’ she heard her father call from the crowd. Sabira didn’t think that was actually possible, but she went to work anyway.

‘Like last time, but more, I guess?’ she said to Danlin, climbing through the hole in the glass and crouching next to the hole in the ground that was the First Giver.

‘Sure, no problem,’ he replied as she began extending the frostsilver shielding tube into the miniature geyser.

‘Stay with me – when it hits, you know. If we’re not together, we won’t make it.’

That much she felt sure of. Danlin nodded, and cast the embershard down the shielding tube, the frostfire distending and trickling down into the dark.

The crowd watched, growing quiet. Sabira coughed a little, fighting off the fumes. Terrible seconds passed, her already battered heart beating painfully in her chest. Too much power used today. The tension built, and she commented,

‘It’s way further down...’

Then there were two of her. Or four. Or was it infinity?

The glacier beckoned. Its rush was so close, a path to it opened by the contact between parts of it.

She couldn’t fall into it fully. There would be no coming back. One way or another, Sabira felt sure that it would be the end. That didn’t make it her enemy though. She didn’t resist its pull, but guided herself by it, gliding above rather than plunging in. She felt others with her. Danlin. Her frostslover. The embershard – his embershard, maybe it should be. Even a touch of her past reaching up to caress her and urge her on. Focus, she told herself. This was all for a purpose.

She looked for what was important in stream. The boiling knots that marked the angry growths. The infection that ailed the land. Sabira could feel her heart still, irregular and quick. That didn’t seem like a good sign – she’d always lost track of her physical body when touching Aderast before.

Focus. She wasn’t important. Only the task was.

The whole was too much, she realised, but one little ball of boiling metal was closer, and comprehensible. That enflamed chunk of molten power was one of many, but they only needed to change one – they did not need to fix the world in a single moment, however tempting it might be to try.

All they needed was this single respite. She reached out a mental hand, felt Danlin’s move with her. The knot of rage shrank back, but they pressed forward, melding their wills together and into it. Sabira’s connection to Danlin deepened, the recesses of his mind opening just a crack. His worries, his fears, his feelings. It was frightening to think that he had the same insight into her, and a little uplifting. Here they were as one, making this one corner of the world better with their magic, both what flowed from the glacier and what came from inside.

Then pain wracked her, right from her very centre. This was killing her, she suddenly knew. Like standing in front of an avalanche and expecting to shield others from it. She did not stop. It was a worthy end, if only she could succeed. Somehow.

What was that?

There was a voice in the glacier stream, distant but soothing. Whispering important things. Guiding her on. Easing her pain. Could she make out the words? The voice? She followed.

‘Aderast isn’t just the mountain,’ it was saying, the knowledge leading Sabira. ‘It’s this whole continent. We are all living on the back of something else that’s alive. It’s carrying us all, the mountains, the lakes, the beasts and the cities, keeping us afloat in an infinite sea of water. Keeping us going, and we keep it going too.’

Pulse. Pulse. Pulse, went the pain of her heart. From what she still fought, and what she had lost.

‘We’ve got to take care of it, if it’s going to keep taking care of us,’ the voice told her, ‘It’s so powerful, but it’s not invulnerable. It can get sick. It could die while we’re all too busy fighting each other to pay attention.’

She knew that voice, and it gave her strength.

‘Something came for it, got under its skin and scabbed over its heart. Only humans could help with that. Only humanity can clean up the mess.’

And with those last words guiding her, she found her way in. Suddenly she was truly *there* with the knot of angry power. She could almost see it as a real object. Almost see herself reflected in writhing liquid metal. Pain still pulled at her, but she found that she could fight it because she was not alone.

Danlin was there with her, and further echoes stood behind him too. They were being pulled from his embershard, and she recognised them. The embershard had said that it knew her. It had been telling the truth. A piece of it had been with her when she was under the mountain – Tserah was there, frostslover at her neck, both faded but encouraging. Then there was the stronger figure, flickering between giant ice form and that of the boy Sabira had known.

‘You can help. I know you can. All of us together,’ said the figure, ‘I’m with you, little ash-cat.’

Her brother, Kyran. A piece that had found a way to watch over her even now – and here in this place where the bond was strongest, she understood how. He had fallen into the glacier in his icy yeti form, merged into it. All the glacier was many and one. He had found her again downstream, over land and time. Some of him, anyway.

That was why Danlin had seen Kyran in the bonding. The echo of her brother had stayed with the frostslover he had tried to bond and failed. These fragments of Sabira's past had flowed from the glacier into Ignata, and some of them found their way to bond with Danlin and help them both even now.

'The fragments of knowledge. The skills. The will. Every piece of us is needed,' he continued, 'Just keep going. Let the pain go. We'll be there to help you push.'

Sabira didn't need to discuss it. She plunged into the inflamed metal, her bonded army at her side, leading the mental charge to unpick this tumour that still ate at a god. She wasn't alone. The others all moved in too, overlapping her, working together as one. Their mental hands were on hers, adding to her strength. Their power was added to her own. Their will salving her pain.

'There's not much of me left,' the echo of Kyran said as she strained, prying the knot apart, 'I don't think we can talk like this again. But you can do this again. You have the strength now. You know what to do. And remember - Danlin carries all our ashes, given new life. New purpose. I know what that means to you little ash-cat. I you'll make it mean something to the world too. Farewell.'

Live well.

The last words were echoed by the fading Tserah and her frostslover, and as both they and Kyran collapsed into the greater whole that was bonded with Danlin, Sabira launched the last of her strength at her foe. Every bit of it was needed, the remnant of infection stubbornly refusing to heal.

Sabira's heart was going to explode. Trying to do this was tearing her apart.

You first.

It was a single thought, but it was not only her own. It came from Sabira and Danlin, from frostslover and embershard. From the echoes of Kyran, Tserah, and who knew how many other bonded that had come before them. Maybe even from Aderast itself, a moment of its dreams focused on what ailed it.

The thing tore under the force of their will, folded in on itself, shrank, and faded from existence in an explosion of power and a cascade of symbols that seemed to describe the very laws of reality. Sabira felt herself launched out of the stream, tumbling out of control back into her body and a world of pain. She tried to move. Tried to think.

The connection was gone, and she had survived – the fact that everything hurt proved it. She was drenched with sweat and felt like she might need to be sick. She swallowed it back, hissed in at the pain in her chest. Too close. Too close. Without Kyran she might have... without Kyran...

Sabira let him go. She had to.

She shook her head, clearing her vision of molten metal, ancient wisdom and unlimited magic. In their place she saw the glass funnel before her once more. Heard the shocked sounds of the gathered crowd and her heart in her ears. The painful, unstable beat didn't matter to her. It was what she didn't see that meant the most.

The plumes of ash were gone, disappearing into the night sky. In their place thin wisps wafted up, unlikely to harm a smouldershell, let alone a human's lungs.

Exhaustion clawing at her, and feeling barely alive, Sabira looked to Danlin, who was slumped beside her, back against a bit of unbroken glass and looking little better.

'We did it,' she gasped, and fell over.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sabira didn't think that she passed out, but her body might have disagreed.

Either way, the next thing she knew was a discordant set of voices yammering at one another. Her head was pounding, her legs were like lead, and her chest felt like the crowd had stamped on it, but her heart was still just about beating, for now.

'They actually did it,' Huawen was saying.

'So it seems,' Shangao added, beaming. Sabira did her best to haul herself to her feet, and climbed out of the broken glass tube with only a single, brief fall. Skinned knees didn't seem important now, with the future in the balance.

'What does all this prove?' Suwei was demanding, 'I knew the embershard was a wonder – I made it! This is what I intended to achieve all along – just because they stole the credit does not make them innocent! We should remove the embershard at once with my meltwater, and maybe the girl's frostsriver too! I expect they will not be harmed overly by the process, and we will finally have our nation back.'

The ember-priest was extended too far, her emotions showing through the mask she had once carefully used to conceal. Yet, even in her weak state, Sabira knew that the woman's logic was right. They had bought good will, but not proved a case. Would that be enough? Could that be enough, in this country that claimed to prize logic and law so high?

'Don't worry, I've got this,' came Turaqai's voice, suddenly close to Sabira. 'I'm going to need these.'

The khanum took from her the research papers they had taken from the shrine. Sabira didn't resist – she didn't know what Turaqai wanted them for, but it had to be better than what Sabira had managed to do with them - they had not mentioned the documents during testimony, given how useless they seemed to be. Turaqai did not describe them so negatively though, instead waving them aloft and declaring.

'And for our final piece of evidence, these documents will prove that Suwei has been perjuring herself before the court!'

'Serious accusations on top of already serious accusations,' said Huawen, 'Yet we have gone past the point where the outlandish can be dismissed out of hand, unfortunately.'

She was still staring at the space where the ash had been, a look of almost religious wonder slowly spreading across her face.

'You've heard a lot!' the khanum said, continuing to hold the papers high and waving them first at the judges and towards the audience, 'but lightning alive now you'll see a lot more. Here we have notes penned by so-called Ember-Priest Suwei's own hand that show exactly what she's been up to out in the ashlands!'

Turaqai was making no move to take the papers to the judges. She was playing to the crowd – and to Suwei, who was looking increasingly enraged.

'Scared?' Turaqai mocked, 'Think I might be about to destroy you?'

She paced towards the ember-priest.

Sabira looked at Danlin, who shrugged – he had no idea what Turaqai was doing either. There didn't seem to be anything to do but watch and let it play out – trying to do anything else might ruin Turaqai's plan, whatever it was.

'They beat you, took everything you wanted to hoard for yourself,' the plainswoman told Suwei, right to her face, 'But I'm going to finish you.'

'This is...' the woman tried to reply, but she was cut off.

‘Swap you,’ said Turaqai, and shoved the papers into Suwei’s confused hands. Before she could recover, the plainswoman had used the moment to snatch out the vial of meltwater the ember-priest had displayed earlier and unstopped it.

‘Harmless, is it?’ Turaqai said, and upended the contents on Suwei’s furious head.

‘I... You...’ she spluttered, her head twitching.

‘Now we shall see what you are made of,’ said Turaqai, stoking the fire she had built, ‘How will you react to this when you can do nothing to stop me exposing your secrets? For starters, judges, there’s at least a fair chance she murdered her father on his sick bed, if you feel like looking into it!’

Turaqai slowly turned from Suwei, who was clearly filling with cold rage, instead moving toward the judges and leaving her back to the obviously agitated ember-priest.

Sabira could imagine some of what Suwei was feeling – it must be similar to what she had felt before Judge Xaoten’s death. Overwhelming emotions. Loss of control.

Yet, even in that state Suwei had to see the opportunity Turaqai was presenting, the opportunity that was being offered far too freely. With growing fear, Sabira thought she might understand Turaqai’s intent as well. She must have decided that the case was too finely balanced. That greater action was needed. Suwei, looking unsettled and emotional, moved to follow the khanum. Her fists were balled up tight and she was almost vibrating with anger.

‘Not another step! Not one!’ Jaliqorbei ordered from nearby. The bodyguard had not spoken until now, but it seemed she could hold her tongue no longer. However, Turaqai had more to say as well.

‘We have heard much testimony. Seen miracles done. Yet the question remains. Is this woman claiming to be a pious pillar of her religion merely a petty liar – or is it more likely that she is a murderer. A torturer. A failure. Even with all that violence she couldn’t achieve her life’s dream.’

Turaqai pointed at the thin wafts of ash where only minutes ago the anger of the First Giver had been. The accusations were no proof – and they told Sabira that Turaqai believed that more was necessary. More than they had been able to do. That

the only way to solve this was to make the audience really see what the ember-priest was capable of. A stray word or two wasn't going to be enough. They needed to see evil. They needed blood, that was how Turaqai saw it. The mind-altering meltwater was her answer, her way to show the world who Suwei really was – and demonstrate what had happened to Sabira besides. Sabira froze, not knowing what to do, and so exhausted that she wasn't sure what she could do anyway.

Then a little scalpel was in Suwei's hand as she continued to stride forward, and it was too late for Sabira to do anything. Ember-Priest Suwei leapt forwards, raising her blade to strike at Turaqai's unprotected back.

Before anyone else could even twitch in reaction, Jaliqorbei was darting forward, moving fast as a snow-spine despite her well-muscled size. She held no weapon, no sword or dagger – but she didn't need one. As Suwei's hand came up to stab at Turaqai's exposed back, Jaliqorbei spun, golden horns glinting on her head.

The weighted spike on the end of her braid swung with tremendous force, pulled by the bodyguard's whip-like motion. Suwei had no chance to duck, dive aside or even halt her forward motion.

It seemed that it was not some ceremonial decoration at all, but a final layer of defence, should every other weapon be lost, and like every other weapon the bodyguard owned, she used it with precise skill. The braid spike sank in to Suwei's back, and the scalpel was sent skittering across the floor. Screams rent the great glass room, both Suwei's, and those in the audience.

The ember-priest fell to the stone, pulling the bloody spike free. It wasn't that deep a wound, and it was clean, the part of Sabira's mind that had been trained by her healer father thought.

Sometimes it didn't take much though. The human body was very fragile, and someone with the right knowledge, the right strength, the right weapon could break it with barely more than a thought. Suwei had been broken, by her own fears, her own poison, and these two plainswomen.

Turaqai turned, looked down on the woman that had just tried to murder her, and said simply,

'Good work, Jali.'

She tossed the empty vial aside, utterly unconcerned at the violence that had been done to save her. Seeing that made Sabira realise that it was not the kind of person she wanted to be. The idea that the shadow of Kyran had passed to her filled her mind – he wanted her to be her, and Sabira knew the person she wanted to be.

She found herself moving, lurching her almost spent body forward before anyone could stop her. Her feet skidded in blood as she reached Suwei's side, and knelt down, staining her clothes red. She had no desire to save this woman's life, but that didn't stop her fingers from reaching to the wound, examining, applying pressure where it was needed. Behind her she heard Turaqai begin to justify herself, either to the guards, or maybe just to Sabira.

'She wasn't willing to listen. Some people never will. In diplomacy you have to know when to talk... and which people see talk as weakness. Those are the ones we must weed out.'

Saying nothing, Sabira continued to work. Too much blood.

'Father! I need your help!' Sabira called out, seeing him moving in the crowd, 'Let him through, he's a proper healer!'

The guards were trying to restore order, and it was creating a crush of bodies. There was no time for this. She had to stop the blood, but she had no tools, no healer's kit.

You have me.

She did. Her frostsriver swelled to seal the wound together better than her hands ever could.

'What're you doing?' said a soldier, coming towards Sabira. She fixed him with a glare before he could do anything more though, and said,

'Don't touch me, I need to keep her still.'

He backed off, and Suwei made an agonised noise into the floor, shifting slightly.

'I'm not trying to hurt you! Have you ever had any trust in your entire life?'

There was no reply. Perhaps she couldn't. She might be slipping into unconsciousness, or death.

‘Danlin, can you...’ she began, but he was already there, embershard bubbling into his hand. He touched the thing to the woman’s bare skin, and she went utterly still, her mind gaining refuge in unconsciousness.

‘Thank you,’ she said, knowing how little he must want to help this woman.

Doasyouneedtodoweareheretohelpyou.

Sabira did, giving instructions and trying to keep her own queasiness from boiling over. Time stretched out, every second an agonising eternity – especially for the injured woman on the floor.

All around the chaos continued, officials and soldiers, Aderasti and Ignatians milled around shouting, gesturing and generally losing their heads.

And there, amid all the lies she had built, the ember-priest lay, blood leaking away, the rest of her following right after.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

‘This is quite the disaster you’ve put us through.’

Frost-Cleric Hadatan’s tone was not quite scolding, but not far off.

‘Do you remember when you spoke to me when I was recovering in the temple after the mountain?’ Sabira retorted, ‘I feel just as strongly now.’

She had made mistakes, but this wasn’t going to erase them. She knew where she had gone wrong and – she hoped – had learned from them. If she ever stopped being tired. Recovery. That would be nice. The geyser had nearly killed her, and Danlin hadn’t fared much better. They were healing though. Slowly.

‘Never thought this would be my view,’ said Danlin, coming up to stand beside her on the balcony, embershard flowing around his neck like a collar. They had been allowed to live with the other Aderasti in the diplomatic quarters for now – possibly because the only cell the Ignatians had for holding frostslover bonded people was a little exploded right now. Mostly it had just been used for well-earned sleep so far.

‘Well if you’re going to be like that,’ said Hadatan, ‘perhaps we’ll just get back our study. You’ve uncovered so much about the glacier -and Aderast besides. There are years of research ahead of us on this – years!’

A most gratifying pursuit.

His frostslover sounded just as pleased as he was. As he wandered back to the armchair and stack of books he was working through, the door to the chambers opened, and Sabira's father walked in.

'Rabten, you're back, excellent. Now you can look after these two and I can get some peace,' said Hadatan, huffily cracking open his research.

Sabira got ready to object, but stopped. What was the point really? There had been plenty of stress to go around lately – why add more? She'd almost blown up her heart recently, and had no desire to do it again magically unaided. She still didn't feel right now, and wondered if this would be another injury on top of her knee. Sacrifices.

'We've just been a bit cooped up,' she said diplomatically, taking her mind from the aches in her chest, 'We don't mean to cause any trouble, right Danlin?'

He managed to avoid rolling his eyes, just, and nodded instead. Her father took in their expressions and breathed out long and hard.

'I'm just glad you're safe. Both of you,' he said, and rubbed at tired eyes. Her father's nerves were recovering, just as Sabira's were. Should she be worried that this time there were fewer nightmares? She didn't like what that said about her, but she appreciated the rest.hgf

Can only do our best.

'We didn't mean it to turn out this way. I'd fix a lot of things if I could,' she said. Her father nodded.

'I know. And to be honest, for our people it has gone well. The turmoil here is largely not on Aderasti shoulders – though of course not everyone is happy with how things stand.'

Danlin, being Danlin, had a bad joke to add.

'Bet that ember-priest's hopping mad – if she could actually hop right now.'

That was where Sabira's father had been, checking in on the woman he now had a duty to treat as a patient.

'Suwei will live,' he said, 'though she's not going to be up and causing any trouble for some time. I'm not totally sure she will be ever – that plainswoman certainly knows how to hurt when she wants to.'

He paused, frowning at the damage a warrior could inflict in a single moment when a healer's work took so long, and could fail so easily.

'Whether she walks again... that's an open question – that spike went in close to her spine,' he finished.

Sabira wasn't sure how she felt about that. Should she want Suwei to make a full recovery, since she had helped keep the woman alive? Should she be afraid of what the ember-priest might do when she was able? Or perhaps it should be a sense of justice that there had been a price to pay for Suwei, a heavy one that she could be paying for the rest of her days? It must have shown on her face, for her father's expression changed.

'You did a good thing,' he told her, putting an arm around her shoulders and squeezing, 'One I don't know if I could have done in your place.'

'I hope so,' said Sabira. Maybe Suwei would see this as a chance to change, and not a reason to seek revenge. It didn't feel likely. Thinking about it was making her feel worse, so she was almost glad when the door to the chambers banged open again and a voice announced,

'Behold, your saviour and most excellent friend returns!'

It was Turaqai, because of course she was the only person around here that would stride in without knocking. Sabira frowned, not fully pleased to see her. A chime in her mind suggested,

Was hers a surgeon's choice?

Sabira didn't know. Which only made her feel worse. It was easier when there was a straight answer. Good. Bad. Life wasn't like that, she knew – but it didn't make it easier.

'No Jaliqorbei?' Danlin asked. Turaqai wrinkled her nose.

'She has a lot of bureaucracy to work her way through. Nearly killing a senior ember-priest in the court room of the High Tribunal will do that, ha!'

The very idea of the blunt Jaliqorbei doing paperwork was amusing, Sabira had to admit.

'She'll be fine though?' she asked.

'Certainly! She is a diplomat too – of sorts. Besides, it was clear to all what that woman was attempting – Jali simply acted as a bodyguard must!'

'So, you think there was no other way that could have gone?' Sabira asked, her voice getting a notch colder.

‘Excuse me?’ Turaqai replied, but in a tone that showed clearly that she understood the question exactly.

‘Did you know? Did you mean Suwei to die there?’ Sabira asked, deciding to be blunt. The khanum paused in surprise for a moment, but found an answer easily enough.

‘It would have solved a lot of problems in one stroke, but I think the way things have gone is adequate. The people I wanted to made it through intact – you seem well recovered – and that’s enough to please me.’

Sabira opened her mouth to argue, but realised that there was no point. How outraged could she claim to be? It would be nice to say she’d have taken a more moral route in Turaqai’s shoes, but she couldn’t be sure she would.

Either way, the khanum wasn’t about to admit a mistake. Turaqai’s values were not the same as Sabira’s. Maybe it was alright that the world could have a few different answers on how to make it better. Maybe. She had just learned not to look to the khanum for those answers – no longer did she have any desire to do things as Turaqai did. The idea of being as ruthless as Turaqai seemed to be made Sabira feel a bit sick.

‘I’m glad,’ she said instead, flatly.

‘How can we help you?’ said Sabira’s father, ending the tension. The khanum smiled.

‘I wanted to say farewell to these two. We have had most interesting times together.’

‘You’re leaving then?’ Sabira said. She had wondered what the plains princess had planned to do next, and now she had her answer.

‘There is much to do, and I choose to do it,’ Turaqai agreed, ‘I have informed the High Tribunal that my father will be naming a new emissary shortly, while I must return home.’

Sabira suspected that she had told them such partly so that she could quit before the judges decided to expel her. Diplomatic courtesies stretched a long way, but probably not to killing dozens of soldiers in the heat of battle.

‘Best to be far from their eye before they ask too many questions?’ Sabira said, eyebrow raised.

‘I won’t deny the benefits of that,’ Turaqai said, as close to humble as she ever got, ‘But I have grander motives than self-preservation.’

‘You? Grand? Surely not,’ said Danlin, sarcasm dripping. Turaqai ignored him, aside from a little smile.

‘You have uncovered much about this land,’ she said, ‘Facts that had Ignata not been so closed minded, they would have shared long ago. Facts that may affect others in future, even out on the plains. My father the khan needs to know about it all, so that an investigation can be begun. We need to understand the extent of the problem.’

‘You believe that what has happened to the ashlands could happen elsewhere?’ said Sabira’s father.

‘Indeed – I expect it will, in years to come. Perhaps not as strongly. Perhaps not for centuries, when the Nightmare’s meltwater has leaked fully into the entire world. I would rather understand the answer in advance and prevent any damage before it happens.’

‘You must be glad of the excuse to get back to the plains,’ Danlin offered, attempting to steer the conversation away from such heavy topics. Turaqai frowned.

‘Jali will be happy to be home. I on the other hand... I will tolerate it. This is what is needed, for my people.’

‘You don’t want to be there?’ Sabira questioned.

‘My father and I... He is the khan, and that can be a hard thing to have for a father. One day he will ask me to marry some princeling, and I will do it for the sake of peace. Going home hastens that day.’

‘You could just... not do that,’ said Danlin, not very diplomatically. Turaqai’s expression grew serious.

‘It’s what I am for. It’s my duty.’

Sabira suddenly envied Turaqai even less.

‘I hope it goes well,’ was all she could say. She didn’t have much else to offer.

‘You could both come with me,’ said Turaqai, ‘It wouldn’t be difficult to spirit you away, not now they’ve given up on guarding you properly. I could make most excellent use of a frostslover – or indeed an embershard.’

Sabira saw in her eyes that it wasn’t just out of personal interest that she said it. The help of a bonded might end up being priceless in the duty she was intending to take on. Yet, the woman looked more like she would just be happy to have a friend. Sabira wasn’t sure

that she could help with that, but as she glanced across the room to where the red robed frost-cleric was reading, she did think of one way she could make Turaqai's mission easier.

'A frostslover, you say? I think I know who might be willing to take you up on that offer.'

AFTER THE ASH

The ash-cat sprinted away, not looking back at the people that had released it. Sabira didn't blame it. Even with its paw treated, it had been shot one time more than it had been expecting when the embershard convinced it to help.

As its shifting fur disappeared into the haze of falling ash around the ashland outskirts, Sabira, Danlin and the group of soldiers that had escorted them out here turned away, back towards Cinderstone.

'I'm kind of sad to see her go,' said Danlin, his embershard playing through his fingers.

'Me too,' Sabira agreed. The creature had been a good friend, so far as that was possible.

She couldn't exactly think of ash-cats as cute, not after she had seen what they had done to that poor pony, but they were beautiful in their own fierce way. They weren't the toy of her childhood, but then neither was Ignata the terrifying enemy that it had sometimes been in her mind. Both were something greater, and much more complex.

'Does the world just keep getting more complicated?' Sabira asked suddenly, wondering if the extra few years Danlin had meant that he had an answer.

'Hasn't stopped so far,' he said, 'but I'll let you know if it does.'

She gave him a tap on the arm to show that she could punch him there, but was choosing not to.

'Turaqai and Jaliqorbei will probably be gone by the time we can get back to Cinderstone,' she said, thinking of the other friends they were parting with. The plainswomen had a long ride ahead of them, back to their canyon city home with the name Turaqai had told Sabira. She still found the plains word almost unpronounceable.

‘Karn-ack-eye-an-kwa?’ she said said to herself under her breath, trying to remember. She might never see them again, and couldn’t even reliably speak the name of where they were going to be. Danlin cut into her thoughts.

‘Hadatan’s going to go with them. I forgot to tell you before that he’d decided it was the right thing to do.’

Sabira smiled at the thought of stuffy Hadatan trying to keep up with Turaqai – either on horseback or in conversation, he’d fail at both.

‘It is right,’ she said, confidently, ‘They need someone that knows the glacier, and there’s no one better than a scholar frost-cleric and their frostslover.’

‘Except us.’

‘Yeah, except us.’

They could go, a little part of her said. See more of the world, like you always wanted. See those canyon cities, and the dustdevils going by. Tempting.

The ash got to her again, and she began to cough. When Sabira was done, the frostslover wriggled up to her face again to mask it off.

‘I hate needing this,’ she said, shifting her weight off her injured knee, ‘It’s a constant reminder that things here aren’t right.’

Maybe not need one day.

‘Maybe.’

There was hope for that now. What she and Danlin had done for one geyser all too briefly might be possible for more – if more embershards could be bonded, and if Ignata and Adranna could find a way to work together. Big ifs that might take years to answer.

‘That’s a long road,’ said Danlin, ‘And we couldn’t walk it on our own. They’ll have to make it happen – and I find it hard to imagine they can stay civil long enough. I mean, plenty of Ignatians see me as ‘soul-branded’ now, as if that means anything at all! You think they can put differences aside?’

You. Will. See. Things. Can. Get. Better.

It sounded like the embershard was struggling to keep its speech slow, but it was managing it. Like Sabira’s frostslover, it was getting better at communication as it learned and grew comfortable with being bonded. They had all grown during this ordeal. She had to hold on to that. She wondered which of the thing’s words came from Kyran, if any. No. Best not to think about that. Just be glad there was something of him there.

Sabira didn't know if Aderast had a plan for the world. It didn't seem in character for the sleeping god – but if it did, she wanted to do her part. Make things a little better than how she found them. That was who she was going to be, not some living justification for her brother's choices. He was gone, or essentially so, and trying to be someone different for him would help no one. Instead, she would keep his memory close, while not letting it be her beacon fire. Both frostsriver and embershard would make great reminders.

An ash geyser blew in the distance – a big one, by the sounds of it. One of thousands, and each growing slightly worse by the day. The Deep Explorers had never known what would come after their actions. They had been heroic and bold, saving the Aderasti people from the nightmare of a god, only to miss what would happen down the line. A slow doom, far harder to get people to fight, especially when they were used to being on opposite sides.

'She wasn't all wrong,' said Sabira, 'Suwei, I mean. As much as I hate to admit it, her work is going to save lives.'

'Maybe her reward is that she gets to live?' Danlin offered, not sounding too pleased about it.

'Maybe it's not as easy as some people deserving to live and some not,' Sabira replied. Danlin gave a little, mirthless laugh.

'Listen to us – we sound like ancient philosophers debating whether magic proves the existence of a god!'

'I guess we're old souls now, or something,' said Sabira, cracking a smile.

'Old soul-branded,' said Danlin with a smile, 'What a stupid idea. Like you can just say that to someone and suddenly they're marked forever.'

'They do mark us though,' Sabira said, 'Words. Time. People.'

She didn't have a point to make, and neither minded. They walked in silence for a minute, heading for the horses that would transport them back to the city.

'Can't help thinking about what Turaqai said – about heading to the plains nations, I mean,' said Danlin. Sabira sighed. She couldn't get it out of her head either.

'It was a fair offer. We wouldn't even need her help to get away, I'd guess.'

'The easy answer,' said Danlin.

It would be so easy to run. A group of guards this small was nothing when Sabira and Danlin had broken through an entire army together so recently. They had muskets on their backs, but Sabira had come to realise that they were not so scary when compared to the power of the glacier. Those soldiers probably thought the same.

‘I wonder if they carry those just to feel a little safer from us,’ she said to Danlin, ‘It shouldn’t be like that.’

‘You want to change that?’ he replied.

‘You know I do.’

He breathed out. A long, calming breath. One of decision.

‘You want to stay then. Go through a proper trial. Get everything out for the Ignatian public to see. They might still end up locking us up you know – or worse,’ he said.

‘Then it’ll be the least dangerous thing we’ve faced together,’ Sabira said, almost without thinking. She realised that it was true though. After savage ash-cats, abominable experiments and surviving an entire army trying to kill them, what was a little trial in comparison? This was what had been in her all along. Take the road that worked, long or short. Do it for the people that still lived, not just in fear of a memory.

‘It’ll still be hard,’ said Danlin, but she knew that she already had him convinced.

‘We came here to talk, before...’

Before. Me.

We will get it right this time.

‘We’ll do our best, anyway,’ Danlin agreed. Sabira smiled, took his hand and said,

‘Let’s go make our case.’