

# Mirrored Journey

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## Chapter 1

I smelled the blood of the beast. Its body lay on my left, its head on my right. I don't remember what happened.

'Felix?' A voice shouted. It was Saeyl.

Why was I here? I sat up and rubbed my aching head. Oh yeah, half a year of careful planning and it had all come down to an accident. I hadn't meant to meet the beast yet, we weren't ready. But my curse saved me. A lifetime of living in fear had its benefits.

'I'm here!' I shouted in Saeyl's general direction.

My best friend for all seventeen years I'd spent on these worlds jumped over a log. Very graceful I thought, because I would have definitely slipped on the mossy floor. In fact I probably did and that's why I was lying down.

I was about to tease her about, well, anything to get the attention away from me, when she saw me covered in blood.

'Okay, no, don't make that face.' I pointed a finger at her menacingly, hoping to avoid whatever reaction she was about to have. 'None of this blood is mine.'

Her face had frozen in the middle of changing expression. I don't think I'd ever had this effect on her before. She stayed stunned for several seconds, so I stood up. Apparently my action jolted her.

'You idiot!'

Ahh, anger. Saeyl's default emotion when she didn't know what was happening. In her defence, she had just taken a lot of information in. The beast that was currently laying decapitated either side of me was huge. But she knew that because the three of us had been hunting it for the past few months. It being decapitated was probably a shock for her. It being decapitated by a single person, even ignoring that person was me, was probably more confusing.

'Don't blame me because you were in the wrong place.'

'In the wrong...!' I could almost see the steam coming out of her ears. 'None of the blood is yours? Let's change that, shall we?'

'If I had a trok for every time you've threatened to cut me in the past month, I'd be rich.'

I normally thought before I spoke. Right now was an exception that I put down to having only just woken up from whatever bizarre state I had been in.

Saeyl drew her hunter's dagger, and if looks could kill I'd already be dead.

From the other side of the clearing, Gurd appeared.

He surveyed the scene and gave me a look. I don't know what this look meant, but it seemed to convey that he didn't like what I had gotten myself into. Again. As if a seventeen year old boy from a minor house shouldn't have been able to take down a fully grown Skrel all on his own.

Well, he was right - I shouldn't have been able to.

A Rhund of few words, he didn't waste them by telling Saeyl not to stab me. He made a half sigh, half grunt, and walked over to me. A gesture with one of his minor arms made Saeyl lower her dagger. I gave him a lopsided smile and shrugged.

'Uhh, I guess we can go home now.'

He continued until he was within arms reach of me, gave me an appraising look, presumably checking to make sure that the blood really wasn't mine, then hit me round the head.

I ducked, but far too slowly. Gurd was strong, even for a Rhund. I had always thought of them as a slow and kind of stupid race - certainly that's how us humans portrayed them, making their small tusks, rough grey skin, rounded features, and small second arms a joke - but after spending so long with Gurd, I'd realised that was far from the truth.

'That hurt,' I muttered.

'How?' Gurd asked, pointing to the Skrel's head.

He didn't know of my curse. I hadn't even told Saeyl. 'I'm just that good, okay?'

I would like to imagine that my voice didn't become a squeak half way through that sentence. They both knew something was wrong, but Gurd wouldn't say anything. Saeyl though...

'Pfft, I saw you run headfirst into a tree just the other week.'

'Well, this time I ran headfirst into the Skrel.' I rapped my knuckles on my head. 'I guess I won.'

The look she gave me changed. It was no longer outrage at the thought of her not being there when I could have been hurt. It was something else. Not suspicion, she knew me too well. Curiosity.

'What happened here? Really?'

'Exactly what it looks like.' I looked them both in their unbelieving eyes. 'None of us had planned this, but we all know Skrel can be sneaky. It turned on me, and I panicked, okay? I guess I got lucky.'

I had lasted this long without either of them finding out about my curse, although I was sure that Gurd knew I was hiding something. I wasn't going to give in to a few well intentioned questions.

'You got lucky? Felix, even if all three of us had faced it together, we'd have needed an act of the Goddess to pull through. There's being lucky, and there's being blessed.'

'Good thing we've got you here then.'

Saeyl never liked it when I pointed out her likeness to the Goddess. It wasn't an insult, exactly, but right now it was a great way to distract her. Unfortunately Gurd had sat through our arguments enough to see right through my ploy, and held up a hand to stop the incoming fire from Saeyl.

'The smell of blood will attract others. Let's go.'

Saeyl picked up my bow. Why it was on the other side of the clearing to me, I had no idea. 'And without a weapon?'

I waggled my hunter's knife to show I had used a weapon.

She cocked an eyebrow at me. 'I just won't point out that you had to unsheath that dagger, which has no blood on it, to wave it in my face, shall I?'

I coughed nervously, but she walked on. Gurd threw me some rope.

'Ahh, that's why we've got you here, Gurd. Always thinking ahead.' He very graciously didn't remind me that he was ordered to look after us by my mother.

I started tying up the head so it could be easily carried back to camp. I noticed that he wasn't helping, and this was a rather large head to be handling on my own.

'Say, you couldn't lend a hand, could you? Having someone twice my size would help. This is about the same size as me.' I said as I was leaning all the way over the furry cheeks of the Skrel, 'Any chance...?'

'This was your kill, master Felix. It's only proper that you present it. A real hunter now.'

Oh dear. He didn't sound angry, but there was never any reasoning with him after he started calling me master.

The head was stuck on another rock. The moss had made dragging a head the size of a human easy. Grassy glades had been fine. But now we were back to rock and mud. We were all used to it after six months on Orrom, but by this point I was definitely trudging more than walking. We had almost reached the mirrors to Praetael.

Just as the Skrel head decided to grace me with a reprieve of it being stuck on a rock, I yanked it forwards - into a tree.

'This would be much easier if you helped.'

Saeyl was by my side, studiously not helping. 'Oh, I do apologise, master Felix, allow me to help.' She started grabbing small rocks and throwing them in the path of where I had to drag the head, and kicking small mounds of mud together in my path. 'Is that to your satisfaction, master Felix?'

'Actually yes, thank you. That makes my job - no, *our* job much easier.'

'Maybe you'll remember this the next time you decide to hog all the glory for yourself. How helpful I've been, master Felix'

I knew I shouldn't have said it, but I guess the strain of moving the head was making me short tempered. And she knew I didn't like being called master. She started it. 'Oh I shall. I'll definitely bring you along next time so that you can help more, my servant Goddess.'

I had worked up quite a sweat so when the clump of mud hit my face, it was almost refreshing.

'Mmm, tastes like the last time you were on cooking duty.'

Gurd was returning from his vigil on the crest of the next hill just in time to stop anything from going further. For the best, because I was clearly winning. I wouldn't have wanted to make Saeyl feel too bad.

'The mirror is just over the next hill. Put the bickering aside for a few more hours, children.'

'Am I the only one here with any manners?' Saeyl practically shouted in exasperation.

Oh he knew exactly what he did.

'He's the only child here.' She threw another clot of mud in my general direction.

'I've no doubt,' Gurd said, putting away his nomad's spear and crossing his arms. It still looked odd to me to see him at rest like that. His main arms crossed like a human's, but then his smaller arms, just below his main ones, rested by holding on to his biceps. Small in a relative sense of course, his small arms were the length of mine only thicker.

'Almost there, hey?' I strained against the rope holding the beast's head, and thought of my prize. 'I don't suppose that means you guys are raring to get through the mirror?'

'Pretty raring, sure,' Saeyl said suspiciously.

'Enough to help me with this blasted head?'

'Ready to tell us how *you* singlehandedly took down a Skrel?' It wasn't that a Skrel was the most dangerous animal on Orrom, but it was the most dangerous animal beneath the great canopies. They were clearly still having trouble coming to terms with my besting it. Now if it had been one of the sentient trees of Orrom, then I'd be in real trouble.

I thought back to it, and after several hours the memory of blacking out had dived even further out of my grasp. 'The slow way it is!'

With Gurd satisfied I was close enough to the guard post that I wasn't in danger from the wilds of Orrom, he had taken Saeyl ahead to make sure the mirror could be used.

I could see the guard post ahead. I was no more than thirty yards,, but with the head it would take me a while still.

The guard post was a small affair, nothing lavish. The surrounding woods had been cut down to create a clearing for the guards and a safe perimeter, and then used as building materials. The trees were all thin, so the encampment, which was only three small huts and a fence, had a slightly ramshackle look to it, but that was the standard Empire procedure. It made the army more approachable to the locals supposedly, but Orrom had been part of the Empire for generations by now, so I didn't see why they couldn't just send some stone through the mirror. Oh well, this was only a tiny backwater post.

Saeyl was talking to the guard on duty outside one of the huts as I finally made it to the fence. She was bouncing from foot to foot, but that could mean anything. She was always a bundle of barely contained enthusiasm.

She turned at the sound of head pushing mud aside. 'You're not going to like this.'

'If it means I can stop dragging this head, I think I'll survive.'

I couldn't help but notice that the guard hadn't moved the fence out of the way of my glorious triumph. Oh dear.

'Sir, I hope everything's alright?' I said.

'A mighty kill you've got there, lad.'

I ignored the break of protocol. I hardly even noticed after being away from civilisation for so long. 'Thank you. It was a great kill. I think.'

The guard called to someone in one of the small huts. 'Horace! Out here'

Another guard, almost identical to the first, walked out of the hut and stood next to the first.

'What do you need, Rickard?'

Rickard simply pointed to the giant head behind me.

'Ahh.' Horace seemed to imply this was a common problem. 'A mighty kill you've got there, lad.'

'Already said that bit,' Rickard said.

'Right. Got a license for it?' Horace said.

'License? You don't need a license for Skrel. They're on the Menace list, I'm sure of it.'

'That's the truth,' Rickard said.

'Not a lie,' Horace said. 'But you seem to be taking it towards our mirror. Big plans?'

Oh Goddess. What minutiae of paperwork had someone forgotten? I bet it was me.

Paperwork had never been my thing. No matter, confidence would make up for a lack of legislation. 'We're taking it through to Praetael. On to the capital from there.'

Both guards sucked in air through their teeth.

'That's what we feared,' Horace said.

'You see, lad, the license isn't needed to kill Skrel, but if you want to get anything through this mirror, you need to go through the official channels.' Rickard said.

'Our hands are tied,' Horace confirmed and acted out his hands being tied together.

Gurd arrived behind them. He was hard to miss, being nine feet tall and built like a mountain. And everyone, regardless of martial prowess, would be disturbed by a Rhund sneaking up on them.

Okay yes, I had forgotten to get *that* license, sure. 'Sirs, I'm sure we can arrange something. We've just spent months making this kill. Perhaps a share of the glory could be placed on the shoulders of the mighty Rickard and Horace?'

The guards had an identical look of shock on their face. 'Why young lad, we are offended,' Rickard said.

'We aren't glory seekers, merely upholders of the Emperors' indomitable rule,' Horace said.

'Think of us as his personal Altors,' Rickard said, invoking the name of the Goddess' bodyguards in her Great Journey.

Gurd, who I knew to have the patience of the Goddess herself, butted in. 'They want money.'

'Not a bribe, you understand,' Rickard said.

'An administrative fee,' Horace said.

'Well... that's fine, however we've spent the last few months in these forests. We don't have a coin to our name --' The two guards cut in with a sharp breath sucked in through their teeth again. '-- but, that will change once we're through the mirror.'

The guards seemed undecided, so Saeyl said, 'not to worry, I've got some here.'

She pulled a shiny heaxagonal disc from her pocket. I knew she kept it on her all this time as a safety blanket. A link back to her house. She flicked it towards the guards. 'A Kort. You wouldn't really expect to find someone from house Lux without one would you?'

As she laughed her own comment off, the two guards snapped to attention, allowing the Kort to plink off their armour and fall to the floor. I had to admire their discipline, that Kort would pay both their wages for half a year. I also cursed Saeyl for mentioning she was from a great house. They'd never let the Skrel head through now, not knowing a member of any of the great houses was present. Myself and Gurd sighed. Then Saeyl realised what she'd said and joined us. She picked up her Kort.

'Sorry, Felix,' she muttered under her breath.

The guards said in one voice, 'sorry sir, we can't let any indigenous material through. You are free to do as you please.'

I'd seen guards react to a member of the great houses before, so I let my hands drop to my sides. I let out a big long breath of defeat. I choked on the end of my breath and my eyes welled up.

'Let's go,' I said, but didn't move. I wanted to but apparently my brain was too busy thinking of my loss to make my legs work. Too far from another mirror to try and bribe other guards. But I was close to this mirror, the three of us could... the look from Gurd told me that regardless of what we *could* do, we wouldn't. Six months wasted. Skrel weren't even toxic to Praetael - this was about some boring trade agreement between old men! Now how would I get through the new mirror. I wanted to explore, not live the life of drudgery that my parents had set out for me. I

needed to get through the mirror to Laegiyl, and this head was my way through. My proof that I would be a valuable asset in the expeditionary force. At least, it had been. Now what?

Gurd put an arm on my back and gently nudged me forwards. I was still holding the rope which was now attached to a dead weight. A useless object. I cut the end of the rope off and wrapped it around my forearm. It would be my reminder. This common fisherman's rope, drenched in purple-red blood, would keep me going. Remind me that whatever others think, I had done it. It was my talisman.

The three of us headed towards the small gate. Back to Praetael. And now back to my family instead of on to the capital, Spraeive. Gurd was stoic as always. I'd gotten better at reading the features of a Rhund since this journey started, but it was still hard to tell. Saeyl kept her eyes on the ground, her walk almost as defeated as mine. She knew what she'd done.

'I really am so--' she began.

I cut her off with a small choking sound. My voice kept doing that. I cleared my throat and said, 'It's not your fault.'

We approached the mirror. Only a common mirror, it barely fit Gurd within its stone frame. The mixture of different greys swirled and sparkled creating a rift in the air similar to water, yet distinctly different.

'It's my fault. I forgot the licen--'

'It's no one's fault,' Gurd said. 'You don't always need to assign blame if a task is failed.' Wise words. I guessed. He was always wise, and that's exactly why he added, 'Children,' right before touching the mirror and disappearing.

We both stood, slightly stunned at not being able to retaliate.

'Pfft, what does he know, anyway,' I said.

'He's the child,' Saeyl agreed.

I turned to her and looked in her eyes. 'I don't know what to do now.'

'Don't worry. We'll find another way. We'll go back home and figure things out.' She was solemn but confident. She was always confident. We hugged, then her face changed to an impish grin. 'But before we can do that. We need to show Gurd who the real child is.'

We picked up a handful of mud each, and touched the surface of the mirror, two fingers and thumb splayed across its shimmering surface.

With the blink of an eye the humidity, fog, lush green forests, and canopy cities of Orrom were gone, and the rolling farmlands of Praetael stretched before me with its mild sun on my face. And Gurd stampeding away in the distance.



I breathed deep and looked to the sky. I could clearly make out six planets hanging in the sky, and saw Orrom, distinctly greener than any of the others.

## Chapter 2

The journey home felt like a light stroll compared to the months spent tracking the Skrel on Orrom. Paved roads, with nothing more than high grass and crops to our sides. We hadn't spent much time in the canopy villages of Orrom, having to stick to the ground. I hadn't been able to see further than thirty feet for the entirety of my time on that world. I was glad to have it behind me.

Saeyl seemed her usual happy self now that she and Gurd had given up on trying to find out how I killed the Skrel. I knew that really they were still curious, but as they could see I hadn't been hurt, they were willing to let it go as I seemed so reluctant.

She had almost finished deciding in what order she was going to do her top ten most missed things.

'A bath has to be number two, right? Not some torrential downpour leaving you fully soaked, but a real bath. With candles!'

'Wait, wait, wait, what just became number one?' I said, having lost her train of thought.

'It's a technicality really, but a book.' She pulled out her battered copy of Dulcante's Tales. I was pretty sure she'd read it every night for the past six months, and when she got to the end she just started again. 'I seriously underpacked on the book front. I need something new. Don't get me wrong, I love this book, but I need fresh words, you know?'

'Yeah, of course.' I didn't know, but who could get in her way when her smile was ear to ear.

'So I read a book in the bath surrounded by candles. Then I have a meal - a real hot meal prepared by the chefs, and it has to include a fungus trifle prepared by a Siperta chef--'

'Fungus trifle?'

'You've never had...'. Her look of complete astonishment was genuine in a way only she could muster. 'By the mirrors. Okay, so we'll meet your family then you'll come with me and we'll have to do all of this together. No questions.'

Before the run down of her list could continue, Gurd sat up. He had been lying down in the long grass on the side of the road, and caused me and Saeyl to have to hide our jumps of surprise, playing them off as if we were play fighting. We handled it well.

Gurd stood up and joined us. I think he just enjoyed showing that despite him being a third again taller than me and twice as wide, he could still be sneaky. He managed to join us just

when things clicked in my brain, and the surroundings became familiar enough to call home. I knew that in a few minutes my families' house would appear over the hill in front of us, and the great sea would silhouette it. Not a grand affair like one of Saeyl's houses, but then we were only a minor house. A modest country house surrounded by a few servant's quarters, and the trade that made us a minor house, far enough away from the capital that any major political shift wouldn't affect our production. That was how most of the minor houses operated. Our trade had once simply been "fishing" but now, since we added the knowledge of the Siperta to the Empire, we didn't fish, we performed "Aquaculture". As a race of serpent-like fish men, they knew a lot of very useful information when it came to underwater farming - enough to elevate my house from a common house to a minor noble house a few generations ago, and luckily for us, they cared more for knowledge and learning than money and social status.

I never did well in or on the water so I stayed out of the business, which suited everyone else just fine - although they did have an annoying habit of trying to make me study business "for the future" which was obviously unnecessary because I was going to be an intrepid explorer on the new frontier mirror world.

My house came into view and a pang of homesickness hit me. I'd buried that well. I could practically smell the warm bread cooking, and Frool the Rhundian chef, trying to figure out how to make today's catch not just taste like fish *again*. This usually involved excessive amount of spices imported from Brundigarn, the Rhund's home world.

Why not just hire a Siperta chef? Yes, they cooked the best fish, but they were okay with it tasting like fish everyday. At a young age I'd managed to convince my mother that despite the fact that we had to eat fish everyday, otherwise it would lead to rumours among the noble houses, it didn't have to taste like fish - so who better to cook it for us than a race that was known for hating the taste of fish!

Saeyl and Gurd stayed with me up to the front door, then split off to go to the other buildings where they would be staying. No grand farewell would be needed as I'd be seeing them in a few minutes, no doubt, however we all hesitated and shuffled awkwardly before they left. We had been within a stone's throw of each other for the last six month, with many previously personal moments becoming public between the three of us.

I entered without knocking and announced myself as I always did. 'Here enters Felix Fisher of house Fisher!'

Of course I didn't have to shout my name as I entered the house, but it had always irked my mother that I act like a servant as she tried to teach me courtly manners.

No response came. Not quite what I'd hoped, so I dropped my gear on the floor and made my way into the servant's quarters. Not only did I not see any servants in the quarters, but I also didn't see any on my way there.

I heard voices coming from the receiving room. A house meeting perhaps? I headed in that direction, and sure enough I saw my mother stood in her usual business attire, an odd skew of pretending she did practical work on the boats with a functional one piece, black leather boots and leggings that looped over her shoulders, but to show she was business ready, she had unhooked the shoulder straps letting them fall below her waist, and wore a plain white fitted blouse on top. Her hair was in a strict bun, held there by a fish hook and a pen, ready to be used at a moment's notice.

She faced into the room so that I couldn't see who the guests were. But they couldn't be more important than her son returning home after so long. Besides, she had a missed birthday to make up for.

'Here enters Felix Fisher of house Fisher!'

I couldn't keep the grin from my face as she turned to see me. No smile reached her lips.

As I strode into the room, I turned to see the assembled house servants lining the room, and the guests. I didn't recognise them, but their uniforms were unmistakable. Three members of the Imperial Legion stood at the other end of the room. Two wore full armour but held their helmets, a big concession to show that this was a formal meeting, and they flanked a tall man wearing plain clothes. He kept a cap, that denoted some rank I'd forgotten from my studies, on his head.

'And here's the young man now. What fortuitous timing. The commander will be pleased.'

The tall man's voice was refined and smooth, but something about him didn't sit well with me. There was a palpable tension in the air between the Imperial guards and my mother. I scratched at the rope on my forearm which had suddenly started to itch. The red and purple blood had crusted over it and I realised I must look like death warmed up.

My mother ignored my entrance and addressed the tall man with an icy tone. 'Thank you for delivering this message personally. Tell the commander that the "young man" will be along when he's had time to recover. Now good day Captain.'

My mother motioned for one of the servants, a new one I didn't recognise, to show the visitors out. With that done, she dismissed all of the servants, leaving just me and her in the receiving room. It was unchanged since I was last there. Like the rest of the house it used an imported wood from Orrom, partly because it was expensive and so its very construction implied a certain status to any visitors, and partly because it was the best material for the job. It didn't hurt

that at the time of building the house we had just put in a large order for a new fleet of ships with house Carpenter. The unique look of the wood gave the room a dappled effect of white and black, and of course my mother had seen to it that all of the furnishings were appropriate to receive any status of guest. Aside from the Emperor himself, but the chances of that happening were basically non-existent.

The dominant feature in the room right now however, was my mother. Her stare remained icy, and I could tell she was still cooling down from the formal meeting. Or had I done something? Oh dear...

'Hello, moth--'

'Don't you hello mother me. Traipsing in here dressed like that. What am I supposed to do?'

I looked at the dirt and Skrel blood that covered me. And the floor behind me. I suppose I could have cleaned up first.

'Six months and you come in here like that so I can't even hug you properly? And where's Saeyl? And Gurd? I see your first six months away from home hasn't made you any more thoughtful.'

A smile crept on my face as I realised she was happy to see me. The meeting had thrown her into the aggressive mood she was in, and so I leaped at my mother, hugging her.

'Oh for the Goddess, my blouse! And you! I thought you were going to train him better.'

'He's too stubborn,' Saeyl said from behind me.

I let go and said, 'Let's eat. I'm sure the chefs need some practice.'

'And you need practice in manners, young man.' She ruffled my hair but instantly regretted it when she saw what it did to her hand. 'Go and bathe, dear.'

Whilst I bathed, a fancy word for scrubbing myself till my skin was red to try and get rid of months of grime, Frool, the Rhund chef, had prepared a platter fit for a member of the great houses. My mother, Saeyl, Gurd, and I were all sat around the table. Typically the servants didn't eat with us, but Gurd had earned his place and no one questioned that he would join us. Out of propriety my mother still officially invited him, of course.

On such short notice, the chef hadn't managed to arrange for any meat, and so Gurd was sullenly poking at his plate of fish, not doing very well at hiding his disappointment. He had delivered a very brief report to my mother, a highlight of the hunt for the Skrel that lacked all the flavour and emotion of actually being and there and living it, but it seemed to be enough for my

mother. Besides, the embellishments that myself and Saeyl kept adding really spiced things up, so between the three of us, I think my mother got the picture.

'I see. So can we rush the license through to get the head?'

'No,' Gurd said, the only one that really knew. We'd been back on Praetael for a few days now, that was the downside of living in the middle of nowhere and having our trade rely on the sea - no care for being close to a mirror. Another predator of Orrom would have taken the head on the first night we left.'

'Oh Felix, I am sorry to hear that.'

I ate around the fish on my plate, the vegetables more of a highlight than I remembered. 'Don't worry about it. We've already thought about the next step,' I said pointing at Saeyl. 'Sure it's a setback to the original plan, but hey, I got this,' I raised my rope covered forearm and smiled, 'and a whole bunch of experience. Best tracker in the house now.'

'Yes dear. I do wish you would have taken that off when you bathed. And it's a good thing that Saeyl isn't in our house, I suspect? And that Gurd doesn't mind pretending to be a worse tracker than you?'

I snorted. 'Who was it that *just* found and killed a Skrel?'

'It found you,' Saeyl said. 'And frankly I'm still not convinced you didn't just run across an already dead one.'

'Okay, best hunter then, if not best tracker.' In Saeyl's defence, I kind of had just found a dead Skrel. It was me that killed it, sure, but not consciously. 'Anyway, what big news have we missed?'

'Oh, lots of stuff!' My mother said enthusiastically and rattled off a list of "exciting" market fluctuations in the aquaculture industry. Apparently kelp was selling well, just as she'd predicted, so she congratulated herself on her foresight for expanding the kelp farms several years ago. I tuned out the details, but I was glad she was happy and enjoying herself.

'I'm afraid I can't tell you much about House Lux,' my mother said, clearly trying to gauge how Saeyl felt about that. My mother looked after Saeyl like she was her own child, but she also wouldn't mind some information regarding any of the great houses.

'Don't worry about it. I suppose I'll have to head back there soon. Make sure my family knows I'm alive.'

'Oh yes, you must!' I gave my mother a warning glare. She knew that Saeyl didn't get on with her family, but an insider tip on what the great houses were up to would help any of the minor houses immensely. Saeyl didn't reply.

'Any other news?' I asked to try and draw my mother back to a more comfortable topic.

'Hmm. Well, the Emperor is still having his fainting spells. It always causes gossip among the houses when we have our get togethers. Still no official explanation, of course.'

'He's the same age as master Felix,' Gurd said. 'I often caught him sleeping when he should have been helping. Maybe it's just human teenagers are lazy?'

'Hey, that's not--' I stopped myself as I realised that in all fairness, yes, I had taken every opportunity to nap. 'Well, I'm still growing. But Mother, any news from the commander?'

My mother gave me that very specific stare that said I should not call my father his rank in the Imperial Legion. 'Actually, yes. As you may have guessed, that's what the visit earlier today was about.'

'Yes, I noticed that was... tense. Well?'

She started poking at her food, clearly not wanting to talk about it.

'Everything's alright, I assume?'

'Just before you left, several of your cousins began their service, remember?' I nodded. They were the same age as me, but being a member of the prime family in a house had certain advantages. Advantages that I had used to go Skrel hunting to prove myself worthy of the expeditionary force. Much to my father's annoyance. 'They were deployed last week.'

'No guard duty or warm up?' I had deliberately kept my knowledge of the Imperial Legion to a minimum, but from what I had been forced to learn that seemed unusual.

'It's not too uncommon when there's an active war,' Gurd said. 'They would be used as back line support, builders, labourers, logistics. They won't see fighting on Vastus for a long time. Nothing to be concerned about.'

I wouldn't have caught it six months ago, but now I could tell Gurd was hiding something. It was subtle, but it was there. Concern perhaps.

'Exactly,' my mother agreed with him. 'So the next wave of recruits is currently assembling to begin their training.'

'Okay. So what? Is that particularly stressful for father? Must be difficult signing all those death warrants and attending political balls.' I knew I'd gone too far before the words came out of her mouth. Her face turned to fury.

'Felix! Do *not* be so rude. Not about your father, and definitely not about the army and those that join it. Just because you're lucky enough to avoid...' She stopped in the middle of her sentence, and her face went back to normal, the anger draining from it. 'Anyway, that's what the visitors today were here for. Felix, you've got to join the army.'

I almost let out a laugh. 'No, I don't. We did this all last time. Father wants me to do a term, become a Sergeant or whatever, show off my achievements at some ball, prove I contribute to society, and raise his social status. It's pointless mother.'

'It's not about the house this time. It's more serious.'

'Oh right, what bizarre reason has he come up with this time? As if I can't possibly forge my own path and am doomed to failure because I don't follow the socially acceptable way there? That's not my life, and you know it. I'll become great, I'll prove my social status and worth, but I'm not going to do it the routine way he wants.'

Throughout this my mother had settled her utensils on her plate, the only one to actually eat all the fish. She had listened and waited for me to finish.

'It's not your father's choice. Well, it is because he's the commander, but it's not you, Felix. No one is exempt from this summons.' She turned to Saeyl. 'I'm sorry dear, I hadn't wanted you to find out like this, but as it seems you won't be going to house Lux.'

'Are you sure?' Saeyl asked.

'I know that the children of the correct age from the other main houses have already arrived there. Everyone is included.' Her voice went very low and soft as she whispered the last words. 'The emperor demands it.'

We sat in silence. The only person with the authority to make the great houses do anything was the Emperor himself. If even Saeyl had to do it, then I definitely had to. There was no way out of this. To deny the Emperor was death. He may be new and inexperienced, his father had only died five years ago, so whatever was happening now was his first real test of leadership, but he was of the royal bloodline. He would be a full Magus. The only known Magus that could use every school of magic. Ultimate power. In theory it could occur in anyone. Scholars weren't quite sure how the passing of magic worked, bloodlines seemed more likely to pass on the ability, and define which school the Magus could use, but it could occur randomly in people with no history of magic blood. Any commoner lucky enough to be born a Magus then ran the lottery, depending which school they were gifted with, the relevant great house would recruit them. Of course, the lottery was whether or not the magic would drive them to insanity or pacification before they fully mastered their powers.

Saeyl was of House Lux, but had no skill with Light magic - or any other. Even among the great houses the gift was rare. But after several minutes of silence she managed to rally. 'Don't worry. We'll just have to use this opportunity. To be honest our last plan *had* been pretty convoluted. This is much more simple. We join the Imperial Legion, prove ourselves as the best,



and they'll give us our pick of assignments. We'll choose to head the expeditionary force. Much simpler, right?'

I gave it some thought, coming back to the present thanks to her words and the itch of my rope. 'You may just be right. But the best in the army? We'll have to really push ourselves.'

'Well, you may have to. I'll be just fine. I'm already the best.'

'Oh really? How many Skrel have you killed?'

'Children,' my mother and Gurd said at the same time.

The next morning I got dressed in the same clothes I'd worn for the past six months and gone to breakfast, at which point my mother forced me back into my room and insisted I change. She demanded that I wear the house uniform for making my trip to the home of the Imperial Legion, Garrison. I knew this was purely for show, because as soon as we reached Garrison, every recruit would be put into the same training clothes, but overnight it had dawned on me that what I was about to do could be the last thing I do. Training for war would probably lead to war. If wearing specific clothing would please my mother, then I could do it without complaint.

The house's fighting uniform was much like other houses' in that it took the uniqueness of the minor house' trade and then stuck armour all over it, and gave you a weapon that probably wasn't nearly as efficient as it should be. In my case I donned my base layer of simple and soft cloth, then stepped into my leather fisher dungarees just like all the workers wore and slipped into the leather overcoat. The only difference between what I wore now and what the workers wore everyday were the large scales that lined every part of my leather clothing. They came from a type of creature that rarely troubled our aqua farms anymore, however back before our techniques were so refined, and what we did resembled hunting much more than farming, fisherman would have had to contend with some of the greatest beasts of all. These particular scales had been harvested from the last of these great armoured krakens that managed to breach our farm walls just before I had been born. I hadn't helped slay the beast, so I felt no affinity with them, but my mother liked tradition.

I pulled out the harpoon from my closet. I brushed the dust off it. Outside of a few lessons when I was a child, I hadn't touched it. Older now, I could see the merit in the weapon. It was identical to the type used by the fighting fishermen of old - A hadn't taken one with me to hunt the Skrel, but I realised now that had been a mistake. A thick wooden haft with a wicked barbed metal end, and a rope allowing it to be thrown then pulled back in if missed. Despite looking

dangerous, it would only act as a long sword to a human - the dangerous looking barb would only work if the blade sunk deep enough on a large animal.

I stepped out, bedecked in my kraken scale leather. The scales still gleamed from lack of use. I teared up a bit as I said goodbye to my mother and it occurred to both of us that we may never see each other again. Gurd had protected me from the Skrel, but an entire army was beyond even him. My mother said goodbye to Saeyl as well, with as much emotion as she had used with me, as if she was losing two children this morning. Despite our protests, she insisted that Gurd was going to make sure we made it to Garrison safely. We didn't argue too much, a final indulgence for my mother, despite the fact that Gurd was now seeming like a babysitter on this trip.

Garrison was on the other side of the capital and the mirror journey would take just as long as walking, so by unanimous decision - Myself and Saeyl wanted to take the mirrors, but Gurd wanted to walk - we walked.

## Chapter 3

The journey to the capital took a week and was incredibly dull. The weather was pleasant, we had regular rest, and there wasn't even so much as a whiff of bandits on the road. We slept in a variety of mediocre inns every night, but it was still luxury compared to the Skrel hunt. Every night I dreamed of the coming training and how it would shortly lead to a quick rise through the military ranks and being able to make my own career in the expeditionary force. With Saeyl by my side I'd probably start out in charge of my own squad. I mused that perhaps I'd recruit Gurd when I was in charge - he'd probably be bored when I wasn't around anymore.

Mine and Seayl's conversations were always deep and filled with insights that were, quite frankly, beyond our years. Gurd was always his stoic self, but he did have a tendency to groan a lot when we made some of our better insights. He insisted it meant something else when a Rhund did it, but clearly he hadn't learned that I'd started being able to tell when he was lying.

The best thing about the trip, and one we all agreed on, was the lack of fish that people tried to make us eat.

On the sixth day of the journey, right on time, the capital came into view. A sprawling mass of concrete and wood and metal. I'd only been once before when my parents had tried to convince me that political balls were good things. It hadn't caught on, but me and Saeyl had made lifelong enemies of the twins from house Ignis.

The capital, Spraeive, contained everything anyone could ever want. All of the great houses, minor houses, and common houses had a representative in the capital. It was the heart of Praetael, the Empire, and money. Everyone came here regardless of social status, race, or wealth. The nobles rubbed shoulders with servants and murderers. They tried their best to avoid it of course, but in Spraeive, it couldn't be helped. At least, that's what Saeyl told me, but she assured me that her books were reliable sources.

We stopped in only one shop before reaching our destination. I hadn't wanted to, but when Saeyl insists... it was a book shop, filled with all the latest texts. Saeyl gave both me and Gurd a very informative lecture on the abundance of trees from Orrom, and the latest in technology advances creating something called a printing press, which just sounded like a mechanical monstrosity to me, would soon allow for even commoners to be taught reading. She went on

about the pros and cons of an educated populace, but I'd reconfirmed my dislike for books as the first one I picked up gave me a paper cut.

And that was what led us to stand in front of the run down shack sat on the water's edge, quite literally as one half of it seemed to be sinking, in the harbour district.

'I remembered it being grander,' I said.

'Taller, at least,' Saeyl said.

'You were both younger,' Gurd said. 'Time and memory change everything. It's all about perspective.'

We gave him a skeptical look.

'I admit,' Gurd began, 'it is looking a bit run down compared to last time. But that's why mistress Fisher sent us.'

'She said it would just be a quick detour,' I said. 'We had to rest another night at an inn to get here.'

'The city is large,' Gurd said as if that explained it all. I suppose it did.

During our trip here, Gurd had informed me that my mother also wanted me to get a taste of the house's business before I enlisted in the Imperial Legion. Apparently there was a "disturbance" at our Spraeive representative.

'Well, let's go in and see what's up,' I said.

We entered the small, decrepit shack, and to be honest, I was underwhelmed. Even compared to the falling wooden panels on the outside, the interior seemed lacklustre. The room was small and featureless apart from a small table by the door, a large dirty puddle with enough bubbles to make me think that something was definitely living in there, and a Siperta sat on a chair behind the table.

The Siperta kept his large black eyes on the table in front of him where he was playing a complicated solo game involving a pack of cards and several dice. It must be a new game as I hadn't heard about it before the Skrel hunting trip.

'We're closed. Come back tomorrow,' the Siperta said. Sensing that more than a single person had entered the shack he looked up. After a squint he said, 'you know we don't actually sell anything here, right?'

I didn't know what the official response should have been in this situation. Technically he worked for me, but I'd never met him before. He seemed like an average Siperta, a head shorter than your average human, stick thin, webbed hands and feet, very fine red scales instead of skin, and green hair that was actually a form of algae, or so they claimed, it always just looked

like hair to me - my mother always told me never to point that out though - and of course their large completely black eyes that took up half of their face.

I looked to Gurd who shrugged with all of his shoulders. He was leaving this to me apparently.

'What's your name?' I asked.

He put his hand of cards down, and stood up. 'You may call me Plick. Liaison for House Fisher. You aren't the normal guys that Rufus sends?'

Like all Siperta he gave his human name. No doubt his birthname could only be pronounced underwater. 'Who is Rufus?'

'He's... well, if you don't know, it doesn't matter. What can I help you with today? Perhaps you'd like to peruse some of House Fisher's merchandise?' He swept his arm grandly towards the bubbling puddle where a dead fish bobbed on the surface but was quickly sucked under by something I didn't want to think about. 'Or maybe send a message to the heart of aquaculture via your humble servant?' With this he pointed at himself.

'Actually, we're here to help you. We hear there was a disturbance of some sort?'

'Wait, wait, let me guess, you're going to offer me some protection next, right? Well you're too late. Like I said, Rufus handles that, and as you can see he's already taken everything. I've got no more protection money for you.'

I glanced to Gurd who didn't seem surprised by any of this, and to Saeyl who was clearly holding herself back from saying anything, allowing me to work my magic.

'Do you mean to tell me that this Rufus is stealing from you?' I didn't really care about my family's business, but I did feel that everyone should earn what they get. I was working hard to live my dreams, and someone stealing them from me was an abhorrent thought. Someone stealing from my family filled me with an anger I hadn't expected.

'I'm glad you see the truth. Well, have a good day sirs.' And Plick sat back down, picking up his hand of cards.

I tapped my harpoon on the floor. 'Plick, My name is Felix.'

'Very good.' He said without looking up.

'Felix Fisher.'

Plick rolled one of the dice, then placed his cards back on the table. He sighed deeply. 'Ahh.'

'Yes.'

'And you are possibly wondering why this shack isn't it's former glory?'

'Possibly, yes.'

'And you're here to... question me?'

'What other option is there?'

'Well, if you were Rufus you'd kill me. A bit drastic I suppose, so maybe fire me?'

'Kill you?' I blurted out. What sort of life did Plick live if death was an option? And although I'd never been into the family business, Plick was in some way my responsibility just as much as my mother's. I owed him something. 'No! I want to help my family, and get this place back into working order. You need something worth working for to enjoy it.'

'Huh.' A light switched on behind his serpent eyes. Interest. That's what everyone needed in life. Interest. He had seemed despondent when I entered, but who wouldn't in his situation. 'I hadn't thought of it that way.'

'Now, tell us all about this Rufus.'

The thought of a common house extorting money from a minor house was ludicrous, let alone *my* minor house. This simply couldn't stand and so whilst Plick was explaining everything, we walked. I was angry and I didn't really know why. Saeyl and Gurd were following my lead so far. Rufus was a member of a common house I'd never heard of, but who could keep track of all of them anyway? Anyone could create a common house with ten signatories and a handful of trok. It did however give them certain protection, in this case I couldn't lay a finger on them without committing a crime even though they were stealing from my house, and every other house and shop owner that set up in the harbour of Spraeive. But ruffians like these probably didn't even know they were stealing from a minor house. All I'd have to do was keep my temper under wraps and inform them of the full implications of their actions.

'So as you see,' Plick rapped on the door of the house, 'it's even nicer than our - sorry, house Fisher's - building.'

Technically true as it had a second floor to it, but it still wasn't much to look at. We'd walked for half an hour and remained in the harbour district, so clearly Rufus didn't have grand plans that extended beyond his doorstep. We had just been targets of opportunity.

'Don't worry, we'll soon change that.'

We waited for someone to answer the door. There were no footsteps, but there was a loud voice coming from inside. I put my ear to the door.

'It's... a prayer. A verse from the Great Journey if I'm not mistaken.'

Saeyl grunted her disapproval. I smiled to myself. 'I think you should go in first,' I said to her.

'I'll teach them a thing or two about subjugation,' she patted the daggers at her hips.

'Let's keep this as friendly as possible. Maybe I'll go first.' I knocked louder as I teased.

'I bet a trok they look at me in awe but refuse to talk to me.'

Myself and Gurd knew better than to encourage her, but Plick...

'You can't know how strict they are. I'll take that.'

Oh Plick. He'd learn soon enough. The voice had stopped and someone opened a small hole in the door. Large old eyes covered by bushy eyebrows looked at us.

'It's the time of the Goddess. Come back later.'

And the viewing slot closed with a thump. We all exchanged glances and I knocked again.

'I was behind Felix, otherwise he'd have been stunned. I guarantee it,' Saeyl said to Plick who just smiled and shrugged.

After a few seconds the slot opened again. 'Go away. I'm *trying* to deliver a sermon to the faithful. You heathens should go to Mirror Square. Maybe it's not too late.'

I stepped slightly to the side so the bushy eyes could see Saeyl. She may not have been wearing the clothes that the Goddess was always depicted in, but the long blonde hair, a rarity on Praetael, was all the convincing the old man needed.

He made a startled noise that caught in his throat and clearly found it hard to take his eyes off Saeyl, but eventually they found their way back to my face. 'I suppose... I suppose my herd here is faithful enough that they can skip a single sermon if it would help the Travellers. A practical lesson of the faith.'

He closed the viewing slot, and we all sighed. Dealing with this sort of person would be easy thanks to Saeyl fitting us in with some perverse religious fantasy, but he'd also expect us to fit certain roles. Which we wouldn't. Saeyl was perfectly capable of doing things herself and we were not her Altors - the Goddesses' bodyguards. He opened the door for us and allowed us to enter.

He was firmer than his bushy wrinkled eyes had made me think. His loose white robes could have hid anything beneath them. 'Sit.'

Knowing he'd insist on the opening pleasantries, we filed in and sat on some low furniture. I'd left my harpoon by the door as it would get in the way, and this was going to be nothing more than a glorified business meeting. Myself and Plick sat on either side of Saeyl facing the door, and Gurd took a seat on the other side of a small table facing the staircase at the rear of the room. My leather coat wasn't really designed for sitting on chairs but I made it work.

A voice came from upstairs. 'What's going on down there?' Some mumbling followed and the voice corrected itself. 'What's going on down there, Silver?'

Silver marked the old man out as a leader of his herd. 'Come on down, boys. Today offers us a different Journey than usual.'

The Silver laid out a cup for each of us and filled it with water. Apart from Saeyl. She sighed, and was clearly working hard on keeping her anger in check. Of course, she also couldn't just get up and get her own water. The Goddess had taken on a very strange role in the Journey. She was the basis for the whole religion, but as she kept on lecturing me at any opportunity, she couldn't do anything and was a martyr. It would be expected that one of her male companions, her Altors, would fetch her water for her. The Silver not serving her was symbolic of the test the Goddess had to go through on her Journey. This did not make her happy, and I thought she may sprain her eyes if she rolled them any harder.

We all thanked the Silver - apart from Saeyl - and I began. 'Is this House Rufus?' Yes, he'd called the house after himself.

'It is. Do you have business with the master?'

'We do indeed. There seems to have been an oversight in your... business decisions.'

A group came down the stairs behind me, and the Silver motioned to them to not interfere.

'You'll have to take that up with Master Rufus himself.' The silver took a step back allowing one of the men to join the conversation. The man, presumably Rufus, stepped into view - big, scarred, and all the hair on his head had migrated to his chest, and clearly wearing a shirt was only for people not called Rufus.

'Well fuck, I thought it was the fish,' he said looking at Plick with a menacing smile. 'I like this new attitude. Having to come to your little shit shack every month was boring. You come here, good initiative.'

I let the insult against Plick slide. He got one pass, he didn't know who he was talking to. 'Sir, I am Felix Fisher. It seems that you have been stealing from my house.'

'Oh. Oh I see.' Rufus said grandly.

'Yes, indeed. An error I'm sure. But now that you know, I'm sure that you can see the problem.'

'Oh yes. A big problem.'

'Quite. Well, we're a fair house, and won't demand instant repayment. We understand how assets may need to be liquidated as this has been rather a... long term problem judging from the state of our offices. So we can set up a plan via Plick here.' I had managed to recall most of my lessons on business negotiations, and everything seemed to be going well despite this Rufus



clearly being a reprehensible person in a general sense. Once he knew who was in charge and given a direction to follow, he would be fine, I was sure.

'Well, it may take a long time master Fisher. And who is this Plick?'

I motioned to Plick. 'This is our representative in Spraeive, I'm sure now that this has been cleared up, you two can work together side by side.'

'The fish?'

I stood up and realised that Rufus was much bigger than me. 'Sir, you will treat anyone under my house with respect.'

Rufus made a gesture, and hands grabbed me by the shoulders pushing me back into the chair.

'You're in my house, and you're my prize. I'm sure the heir to house Fisher will be worth a few Kort.' I heard weapons behind me being unsheathed.

Before I had even realised we were in trouble, Gurd had pushed himself up from his seat and thrown himself over my head, crashing into the group that had just drawn weapons. Rufus pulled out a large blade from somewhere on his person and was about to help deal with Gurd when I lunged at him. I managed to grab his sword arm, but he landed a blow with his off hand in my gut. His knuckles came away bloody thanks to the vicious kraken scales I wore. I slammed my fist down on his forearm, hoping to make him let go of his weapon, but he was too strong. He tried to swing with his blade but I managed to redirect it into the chair.

Pain exploded in my face as he struck me in the only place not covered in armour. I stumbled backwards and fell on to the small table in the middle of the room, breaking it. It took a second for me to gather my senses, but I grabbed one of the broken table legs, reasoning that a dash for my harpoon would not only take too long, but also leave me with a weapon I wasn't trained with. I scrambled to my feet and saw that Saeyl had done what I couldn't. She had brought Rufus to his knees and held a knife at his throat. She'd always been better than me with those daggers.

But she didn't see the Silver running at her. I swung the table leg and hit the Silver in the face. I felt something crack as it connected, but the speed of the old man kept him going forwards, and his tackle connected, dragging Saeyl to the floor. Rufus fell with them. I pulled the old man off of Saeyl, and she jumped to her feet, readying her remaining dagger in case anyone else attacked. Gurd stood in a pile of five, heavily breathing bodies. He'd disarmed and overpowered all of them in the same panicked ten seconds it had taken me and Saeyl to handle Rufus and a crazy old man.

'Are you okay?' I asked Saeyl.

'I've, uhh, I've lost a dagger.' Her voice was shaky and thin.

I looked to Gurd who nodded that he was fine.

'Plick?'

Plick hadn't moved from the seat. Fighting wasn't for everyone. He was looking a paler shade of red than I remembered. He looked up at me with his large black eyes, and then his head rolled back as he passed out. The problem was obvious - I hadn't redirected Rufus' swing into the chair. It had hit Plick's leg. Blood was pumping out of the wound, and I had no idea what to do. In Orrom I'd had to patch up a few nicks and cuts, but this was deep. I looked helplessly at Gurd and pointed.

Gurd moved to help Plick and said, 'Make sure none of them cause trouble.'

Saeyl was still looking a bit dazed so I grabbed her shoulder. 'Help me check.'

She just slumped into a spare seat and buried her head in her hands. I'd never seen her like this before. But then we'd never been in a real fight like this before. Hunting animals was very different to a brawl with humans. I let her deal with it as she needed.

I checked on the Silver. I must have hit him harder than I thought because I couldn't find his pulse. I turned him over and held my ear over his mouth. I couldn't hear or feel any breath.

As I leaned over the man that I suddenly feared I had killed, I was looking into Rufus' eyes. They looked normal. He looked fine. Saeyl's dagger jutting out from his throat and the pool of blood on the floor painted a different picture. The stories always said that their eyes went glassy, and you could tell as soon as the Goddess let them finish their Journey.

I stood up and looked at the pile of men Gurd had floored. They were all clearly alive, in various states of rolling around or moaning.

I turned to face Saeyl. She knew. She must have felt the dagger make its accidental killing strike when the Silver hit her. Her eyes shimmered with barely restrained tears. I hurt for her. I didn't like seeing her sad. I could fix it.

But I'd killed too. We'd both taken our first human life. Was it normal to feel this way? I felt...

'Let's leave,' Gurd said, as he picked Plick up.

Saeyl didn't move. I nodded to Gurd who made his way out of the small house. I knelt before Saeyl. She didn't look at me. She didn't look at anything.

'Let's go to somewhere more comfortable,' I whispered.

Her eyes engaged and she looked at me. Her mouth opened and closed, no words forming. She looked at Rufus, then back to me and nodded.

I helped her up. She had always been so strong. Certainly stronger than me. Better with a blade too as she proved in her fight with Rufus. But now she seemed very frail. The rope on my forearm itched again and I felt an urge to protect her. I didn't know how, but I knew that I wanted to protect my best friend. She made no attempt to retrieve her dagger, but on the way out I grabbed my harpoon.

We'd followed Gurd as he navigated his way through the maze of buildings. At one point he told us to wait, went inside one, and returned without Plick. He asked if we were okay, and my concern was for Saeyl who nodded meekly. He lead us to a nearby inn, one of the hundreds in Spraeive, and we paid an extortionate forty troks for the night. I guessed that was the capital tax in full effect, but Gurd later explained that we were paying for the inn keeper's discretion. I didn't know why we needed that until I realised that we were all covered in varying amounts of blood. Gurd had the worst of it after having to carry Plick, and as a Rhund... well, it was lucky we were in a less reputable part of the capital.

We left Saeyl in her own room, allowing her to clean herself in private, and we found a quiet booth in the corner of the drinking hall.

Gurd didn't start the conversation, so I felt I had to. 'That didn't go according to plan.'

'No. It didn't. How do you feel about that?'

'Hmm. To be honest, I'm starting to feel like my plans aren't the best. First the Skrel plan fell through, and then... this.'

Gurd took a sip of the ale using one of his lesser arms. 'I mean, how do you feel about what happened?'

'Oh. I'm worried about Saeyl'

'She's tough and competent, but ultimately peaceful,' Gurd said. 'Sometimes killing someone can change a person. Are you ready for that?'

I thought about what Saeyl must be going through. She took a life today. She'd been forced to, even if it had been an accident. I didn't know if she felt it was my fault. Goddess I hoped not. I didn't know if I could stand being the one she blamed for her pain.

'She'll be fine... I'll make sure she's fine.'

Gurd just nodded. He'd seen our fondness for each other and knew that I meant what I said. He probably doubted my ability though. 'And how do you feel?'

I sipped the ale. It tasted terrible and reminded me of the dirty pool of water back in the Fisher's shack. 'Like I said, I'm worried about Saeyl.'

'You don't mind... what happened?'

I thought back to when I realised that I'd killed the Silver, and looked into Rufus' eyes. 'No. They were bad people, and they attacked us. Saeyl may be upset now, but could you imagine what they would have done her if we'd let them take us?'

'And to us,' Gurd said.

'Sure, us too. But it's her I'm worried about.'

Me and Gurd made polite conversation for an hour until Saeyl joined us. She entered the drinking room with a bounce in her step. I smiled to see it again, and to see her teeth spreading from ear to ear. She launched into an enthusiastic rant about how great the washroom was in her room, and the fantastic ales on offer. Gurd smiled along, happy to let us talk, and so I contested her love of the ales, threatening to disown her. Eventually Gurd signalled it was time to rest for the night, which suited me just fine, as I was soaked in the ale that Saeyl had accidentally-on-purpose spilled on me during our not so civil discussion. The innkeep cleared our table afterwards and seemed happy that all he had to clean up was drink. Gurd had chosen the inn well, apparently.

I woke several times during the night to some disturbing sounds. I was used to the blaring cacophony of insects and prowling animals thanks to Orrom, but the sound of what I could only assume was someone being mercilessly beaten outside my window, was an altogether different proposition. Maybe Gurd hadn't chosen so well. I did spend a lot of time wondering how he knew about this inn. He'd spent the last thirty years as a servant to house Fisher. All I knew was that he met my father in the Imperial Legion. Apart from that I supposed I'd never really asked much about his personal life. The Rhund can live far, far longer than humans, and I didn't even know if he was old. Maybe he was middle aged. Maybe he was young, just a teenager in Rhund terms!

In the morning, we collected ourselves and checked in to make sure Plick was okay.

'He survived the night and woke up this morning. With that kind of injury, that means he'll live. The wound had been bandaged well,' the doctor said, inciting a shrug from Gurd. Suspiciously modest, in my opinion.

Garrison was some twenty miles away from Spraeive, with a huge road leading from the centre of the capital all the way to the Imperial Legion's headquarters. The Imperial Road was sixty feet across and lead straight to the circle of mirrors in Mirror Square, designed to allow the army to roll their gigantic siege engines to whichever world was currently being brought into the

Empire. That meant, to get to the Imperial Road to take us to Garrison, we had to cross into the middle of the capital, and walk through the religious centre of Spraeive.

'We could just go around,' Saeyl said, but as we could already hear the chant from Mirror Square, a Silver giving their sermon, she knew it was too late.

The sprawl of the cities' buildings stopped, and one hundred yards later, the mirrors began. Twelve mirrors stood in a circle, each sixty feet wide and ninety high. They dwarfed everything else in the city. Four of the twelve mirrors were active, spilling their light over the crowd. The mirror of water had brought us the Siperta from their uniquely underwater world, so had been claimed by house Arduus due to their strong water bloodline. The green gate was Orrom and brought us the great hanging cities and canopy walkways unique to the great trees there. The red gate was currently under heavy guard by the Imperial Legion, a desert world, XXX, that resisted the Emperor and the rule of Praetael. Then the purple gate, it was newly opened within my lifetime, and whatever lay beyond was out of reach for the usual rumour mill, but I wanted to be the one to find out. Each great house claimed a mirror that was inline with its magical bloodline. House Ignis had claimed the red mirror, so it could be called the Ignis mirror, the fire mirror, or just the red mirror.

No one knew anything about the mirrors. They had been there for as long as our records went back. They were central to our religion, supposedly crafted by the Goddess herself as a gift to allow all people to follow their own Great Journey. The only tests on them had shown that whatever object that went through required to be sentient or attached to something sentient. This spout of testing had been brought about by the Arduus mirror, as several of the gates emerged underwater, prompting scientists to try and figure out why those gates didn't cause flooding. We also had no idea why new gates opened. They were a mystery to us, but they were integral to the way of life in the Empire.

Between the buildings and the mirrors currently stood a throng of life. Mainly humans, but there were plenty of Rhund and Siperta dotted throughout the crowd. Everyone stood facing the mirrors, listening to the Prime Silver. His voice couldn't carry to the entire congregation, so other Silvers were around, repeating his words. The Imperial Road could be seen at the other end of the solid wall of life that the worshippers formed, but currently it was an impenetrable mass. We'd have to wait.

'Break through the barriers, did our Goddess,' the nearest Silver shouted. 'Create the mirrors, she did. Ever faithful were her Altors, their names lost to time--'

Saeyl shuffled awkwardly as those around us noticed her hair. I stayed close, just in case someone did something unwise, but the worst she got were the occasional overheard whispers of 'I'd be her Altor' to friends.

'-- overthrow the evil, and gift humanity with ultimate knowledge--'

The Silvers continued until they had the crowd worked into a fervour that only a few didn't match. Myself, Saeyl, and Gurd being one of those few. Thanks to Saeyl, I'd learned that perhaps the Journey wasn't everything it claimed to be, but it worked for the masses. And I had to admit that the Silvers were master orators, and those within hearing distance of the Prime Silver were infinitely more excited than those only hearing the repeated versions.

I drifted off at one point and looked to the sky. In the streets of Spraeive the mirror worlds had been blocked, but in this clearing I could see them again. Only six of the twelve were visible, some as only faint dots, others as massive orbs matching the sun for dominance of the skies.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours, but Gurd assured us it was no more than half of one, the oratory stopped, and the crowd began to part.

We pushed our way through and made it to the Imperial Road. We walked, knowing that by the end of the day we'd be in Garrison, myself and Saeyl would be members of the Imperial Legion, and Gurd would return to house Fisher. It was obvious that a lot of people were making the same journey as us. The Emperor's will could not be disobeyed. There were also a lot of people making the return journey, but these were all members of the Imperial Legion, easily identifiable by their armour. Whether it was a block of troops marching, a lone messenger galloping, or a recruit being punished with a run along the Imperial road, they all looked determined. My nerves grew, and I could tell that Saeyl's did too.

The most worrying thing was that Gurd was also concerned by this, but when we questioned him about it, he brushed our questions aside, saying it was all normal activity for the Imperial road.

It was another beautiful day on Praetael, the sun at just the right temperature, the rain falling on the crops but not the people, and so our walk through Spraeive had been stifling, but more due to the sheer mass of humanity than anything else, and our walk along the Imperial road was leisurely. Until Gurd brought *him* up.

'It's been awhile since you last saw him.'

I grumbled, knowing he meant my father. 'I'm sure the commander will be his usual self. Besides, it's only been a year of me not living up to his expectations.'

Saeyl always kept to herself when it came to these conversations. She knew my feelings about my father, but we both knew that her relationship with the whole of House Lux was strained beyond anything I had ever experienced. She allowed me my, perfectly justified, feelings, but didn't point out that her situation was infinitely worse. She was pretty great.

'Mrs. Fisher updated me a bit. Would you like to know how he's getting on?'

'I'll see him soon enough and find out then. I'm already preparing how to ignore his angry tirade at my lack of discipline and motivation.'

Gurd let the topic go, and we continued our walk. We were probably about half way there when Saeyl spoke up about something other than how lovely the sky was.

'Hey look who's coming.'

With no one ahead of us I looked behind. Two riders on horseback were setting a hard pace and they very quickly overtook us. They didn't even look our way.

'Well that's going to make things interesting,' I said.

'Interesting is a polite way of putting it.' Saeyl's natural smile changed to a slightly wicked grin. 'Maybe they've forgotten. It was almost a decade ago.'

I pictured the two riders in my mind. They had been going fast so it was hard to tell, but their hair had been the same fiery red - not the purple that we had dyed it at the ball. 'Oh yes, House Ignis is very well known for not holding grudges. It's twin heirs even more so.'

Saeyl laughed, and even Gurd couldn't stop an amused twitch from hitting his lips.

'Well, at least your father being the commander will hold off the worst of their wrath. I've heard they've developed a bit of a mean streak as they've grown,' Saeyl said.

'That will be delightful. We get to face the brunt of their vitriol *and* rely on my father's protection. This whole army thing is sounding less appealing, how about we turn back and just make a dash for the Laegiyl mirror?'

'Oh no no no. Felix, why explore new frontier worlds when we can be exploring different hair colour dyes!'

I sighed at the thought of months of torture from the Ignis twins. But Saeyl was infectious.

'Well, I suppose we hadn't meant to make their hair purple last time.'

'Exactly.'

'We didn't account for the red of their hair.'

'Young and foolish. We know better now.'

'Truly our mastery of primary colours will aid our plans.'

'Finally, all those years of teaching and school will be put to good use!'

The conversation continued like this until we reached the outer gates of Garrison, and we joined the back of the recruiting line. It was easily a mile long, and clearly my mother had not been lying when she said that all the minor and great houses had been mustered. The line was practically half nobility. I recognised their insignias and flamboyant clothes more than their faces. Once I had found Saeyl, making other friends had seemed a waste of time that could be spent on adventures. It occurred to me that in my current attire, I was probably sticking out like a sore thumb to anyone else counting the nobles. Mother knew exactly what she had asked - no one would question House Fisher's loyalty.

As we waited, soldiers walked up and down the lines to keep order. Not from any rowdy common folk, of course not, but from entitled great house nobles. The first one we saw it happen to had been from, unsurprisingly, House Ignis. One of the twins had ordered a passing guard to take their horses and escort them to the front of the line. A few more heated words, and one of the twins moved to strike a soldier, acceptable under normal circumstances, a commoner refusing a great house noble, but when that commoner was in the army... the twins' blow never landed, he was pushed to the floor, the other twin moved to the back of the line, and their horses confiscated. This scene replayed itself as new people joined the back of the line.

After several hours in which the majority of our conversation was me and Saeyl complaining that our legs were cramping, and Gurd telling us that maybe this whole joining the army thing wasn't for us, we finally reached the recruitment desks. Gurd stood to the side as me and Saeyl went to separate desks.

'Name?' The guard asked. He was wearing a leather only version of the Imperial Legion uniform, common for messengers and administrative units. Still smart and offered some small protection, but primarily it allowed him to write unimpeded.

'Felix Fisher.'

'Previous training?'

'Well I've...'

'I mean formal Imperial training.' He seemed rushed.

'Oh. Then no.'

The guard turned to a man behind him. The man eyed me suspiciously and said 'medium.' The guard wrote something down on the sheet of paper. If I had to guess, it had probably been "medium".



'Take this paper through to the quartermaster, you'll be directed from there to the magus identity line and... wait...' he unrolled the paper and looked at it, then looked at what I was wearing. 'Of House Fisher?'

'You caught me.'

'You go straight to the commander, then. He's asked to see you along with your house servant. You'll have to deal with the quartermaster later.' He handed over the paper.

'Where is--'

Gurd stopped me. 'I remember.'

So, my father was going to single me out right from the start. Oh good.

## Chapter 4

Garrison was tiny compared to the hive that had been Spraeive, but it was still the second largest city I'd ever been in. Unlike the differing styles and jaunty streets of the capital, everything here was uniform and utilitarian. Gurd was being a very diligent tour guide and explaining the history of Garrison. I didn't know how long he'd been in the army, but maybe a bit too long if his expansive knowledge was anything to go by. Apparently Garrison had been built after the capital, and it served two purposes. Primarily, it was to house and train the Imperial Legion, that was both obvious and well advertised. It's secondary purpose was to act as a fallback position if our armies ever faltered on one of the other worlds, and the great mirrors were overrun. I hadn't noticed it when I was stood in that line for hours, but now that Gurd pointed it out, the walls were absurdly thick and high, and the the inner walls were too. There were watchtowers on the walls, but they would be abandoned as soon as an invading army was seen. Every other building was squat, no more than two stories high, and heavily reinforced.

I hadn't seen my father in over a year. I couldn't help but fidget as I wandered around the small room that was his office. The guard that had let us in assured us he'd be along soon - held up in a meeting. Gurd stood in his usual rigid stance, arms crossed at the back of the room to the side of the door. There was nothing of my father in this room. The role that had kept him from raising me also blanked his personality. I remembered him as a man filled with joy for the first few years, always at my side, helping me learn and play. Then he left. After he found out that I had no interest in following in his footsteps or in helping his political agenda, I stopped seeing him. No, the commander wasn't my father. He was as blank as this office. A functional wooden chair and desk, a waist high bookcase against one wall with a painting above it, and a pile of papers on the desk. The one, single call to who he used to be was that the weight holding the papers in place was a shell, presumably taken from the fisheries back home.

The door flung open and the commander burst in. Unlike the rest of the army his armour was silver in colour instead of the usual bronze. He stopped when he saw me, and managed to lift the corners of his mouth just a bit despite his face remaining grim. Gurd extended an arm and prodded my father in the back.

My father whirled, hand dropping to his sword. I couldn't see his face but I could tell that he was smiling when he saw Gurd. 'Gurd! It's been too long.'

They hugged, all notion of my father's rank gone. It looked odd. My father was a big man, but no human could match a Rhund, and all four of Gurd's arms engulfed the commander and they both laughed.

'You've gotten slow,' Gurd said. 'You wouldn't have fallen for that touch a few years ago.'

'Hardly fair! I was distracted by my son.'

'I'll allow you that. It's not an excuse for why that armour is looking tighter than it once did, though.'

The commander let that slide and slapped Gurd on the shoulder before turning to me. I didn't get an automatic hug. We were at a stand off. He took a step towards me and he must have seen something in me because he stopped himself from taking another and gave a salute.

I was about to give the mirror salute, two fingers and thumb spread apart over the heart, in return, when I finally had a chance to see his face properly.

'How did that happen?!' I jammed my finger at his face. A scar that hadn't been there before streaked up his left jaw, narrowly missing his eye. 'Idiot.' I hadn't meant to say that but he made me so angry. How could he be so reckless?

His face went steely. 'Consider that your one pass, recruit. I highly advise that you never insult an officer again.'

He went to sit behind his desk. 'But how, commander?'

'War, recruit. Things happen.'

This was how most of our meetings went these days. One of us would anger the other, and then both be too stubborn to apologise, and fall back on social formalities. I couldn't ask any more questions, like what was the commander doing in a battle when he should be commanding, or anything else that crossed my mind. A recruit wouldn't do that to his commander, so I saluted and waited.

The commander seemed lost for words with the way the conversation played out, but after a deep sigh he began. 'I just called you up here to let you know that I'd arranged for you and Saeyl to be in the same unit. I know you've resisted this for as long as possible, and I had hoped that you'd come around before an Imperial muster, but... there you go.'

'Thank you, sir. I saw members of the great houses, so I'm sure there was nothing you could do, sir.' I kept my posture rigid and my fingers splayed over my chest.

'Correct. It was a council decision and the Emperor allowed it.'

His eyes moved from mine, to the shell, then up to Gurd. Finally he spoke to me again. 'It's good to see you in the House Fisher armour. It suits you.'

'Thank you, sir. Mother forced me to, sir.'

He smiled, and clearly had to restrain a laugh, any traces of his grim expression gone for a moment. 'I'm sure she did. How is she?'

'Keeping well, sir.'

'Good. I had planned to see the both of you next month, but with the muster... I don't know when I'll next be home. Or when you will be.'

I noted that he said "when" and not "if" we'll next be home. Had to keep the troops' morale up somehow I thought bitterly. Without a question to answer I remained silent.

'It's going to be a gruelling year, recruit.' His eyes went back to the shell for a moment. 'Just know that I'm here, and my door is always open.'

I stayed silent.

'Dismissed. As you were detained here, everything's been readied for you in your barracks, you won't need to go through the rest of the signup process. Gurd, I'd like a word, please.'