

# Seven Winds

Text copyright © AndrewLynch™ 2017

The moral right of the author has been asserted. All rights reserved. This story is published subject to the condition that it shall not be reproduced or retransmitted in whole or in part, in any manner, without the written consent of the copyright holder, and any infringement of this is a violation of copyright law.

A single copy of the materials available in this story may be made, solely for personal, non commercial use. Individuals must preserve any copyright or other notices contained in or associated with them. Users may not distribute said copies to others, whether or not in electronic form or in hard copy, without prior written consent of the copyright holder of the materials. Contact information for requests for permission to reproduce or distribute materials available on this website are listed below:

lynchwriting@gmail.com

All rights reserved © AndrewLynch™

## Chapter 1

### *Daisy*

Daisy skidded to a halt at the rising platform. It would have been perfect to escape the man chasing her, but the magical converter wouldn't accept her magicless touch.

She carried on down the alley, twisting and turning at random. She knew her pursuer wouldn't be fooled for long, but maybe it would give her a few extra moments of freedom. A few extra moments before...

She put the inevitable from her mind, and felt the exhaustion of her muscles flood through her. How long had it been since she'd had so much space to run free? Okay, she was running between squat, single story, grey stone buildings, but at least it was different!

She slowed to a jog, and then when she was breathing too hard for that, a walk. She didn't know where she was, and that's exactly what she wanted. The man knew these streets better than she, so he'd still find her. But for now, she was alone.

The cross streets ahead were actually the back of several houses and formed a small square. She was about to walk across it when a clod of dirt smacked into the wall in front of her. She jumped and pressed herself against the stones.

Two more dirt balls thumped next to her. Then she felt a gust of wind blow back her long blonde hair and rustle her flowing green dress. She heard shouts from ahead. Kids playing! They sounded a bit younger than her, but they already had...

A bundle of rocks in the centre of the square rolled out of the rubble it had been hiding in, and slithered around. They had a Rorm! Younger than her, and they already had an earth Companion. It wasn't fair!

A second Rock Worm chased after the first one, and Daisy could hear kids laughing. Then a Sparrot flew into view and pecked at one of the Rorms, casting tiny amounts of air magic with every flap of its wings.

Daisy crept forwards until she could peer round the corner and see the square fully. Three kids were playing. Two of them faced each other while the other one watched. Between the two that faced each other hung a large ball of dirt. Neither of them held it, but both of them stretched their hands out, willing it to stay there. Or more precisely, to not touch them. Daisy had seen others playing this game. Two casters would pit their strength against each other by trying to push a ball of their preferred element into the other caster. The two boys had looks of fierce concentration on their faces, afraid to have the dirt ball hit them.

Daisy stepped out slowly from behind the wall. No one noticed her. Should she join them? She looked around nervously. There was no *reason* for her to join them. But maybe... well, she wanted to, so she could? At least she could try?

She took a few tentative steps forwards, and the air caster that had been watching the other two noticed her and waved, then went back to cheering the other two on, swapping sides as the ball of dirt began to shake. Daisy jumped out of the way as the train of Companions ran in front of her, the rorms tearing up the cobblestones as they went, and the sparrot completely ruining her hair. Then, she was there. Tight there, with the others. Her heart beat faster. How long had it been since she'd spoken to a new person? She flicked a look behind her, remembering the man chasing her.

'Hi,' Daisy whispered. No one reacted. She cleared her throat and spoke louder. 'Hello.'

The air caster looked up and ignored her too fancy dress. 'Hey.'

Okay. Okay, that hadn't gone too badly. She'd talked, he'd responded. All according to plan so far. She spent a moment studying the dirt ball between the competitors. She concluded it was

definitely a ball of dirt that had been compressed by two earth casters pushing against it with their magic. Fascinating, truly...

'Who's winning?' she asked. Not that she cared, but the idea of a conversation thrilled her.

'Too hard to say!' the air caster shouted, still jumping back and forth between the other two.  
'What do you think?'

Oh wow. A question! Stay calm Daisy, stay calm. He values your opinion, just don't mess up. No pressure, just give the correct answer. Her palms started sweating. Damn it, Daisy, keep it together. Come on, this is why you escaped!

Daisy shrugged. 'Too close to call.'

The air caster nodded his agreement and flashed her a smile.

Yes! See, it hadn't been too long. She still knew how to talk to people.

The air caster looked back to Daisy. 'Hey, want to have a go?'

Her heart sank. Of course she wanted to "have a go". There was nothing she wanted more than to call up the well of her own magic, and to have a Companion by her side. But she couldn't do that. When she felt for the magic inside her, she couldn't sense anything. There was no well of power. There was a drought inside her. She was empty. Nothing. There was only void.

'Oh, umm. No thanks,' Daisy stammered. 'I mean, uhh, I can't.'

The air caster's eyes went past her, and his mouth dropped open. Something must have caught the attention of the earth casters too as they both lost their concentration. One of them took a dirt ball to the gut and doubled over with a gasp of pain, the air rushing from his lungs.

She didn't need to look. She knew. She could hear the crackle of sparks, and the heavy breathing of excitement.

The air caster said in a low voice, 'Woah. Is that a Hondfir!?!'

They'd all frozen – even the one gasping for breath on the floor was trying not to move – they didn't want to risk making it attack.

She heard the footfalls of the man round the corner behind her. She refused to turn and look. Maybe if she didn't see it, it wasn't real.

'Hello, children.' His voice filled the square without him having to raise it. It was deep and commanding, and even though his words had been normal, friendly, they held something unsaid beneath them. Not a threat, but a promise. The three kids turned and ran, the one on the ground finding the strength to save his life. Daisy wanted to join them, but stood her ground.

Chunky leather boots clunked against stone behind her, and she heard the soft padding of paws. She could feel the heat flowing from the hondfir as it pushed itself against her side, its haunches almost level with her shoulders. It would have been uncomfortable if she hadn't been so used to it. A large hand with the tightest grip she'd ever known placed itself gently on her shoulder.

'I really wish you wouldn't rush off like that. Malignis gets hard to control when he thinks he's playing a game with you.'

Daisy focused on the clapping of feet against cobbles disappearing into the distance. Her shoulders rose and fell in a sigh. They'd been too young anyway. But maybe that's what she needed to fit in. Younger friends. Friends that didn't have their magic yet. Hadn't bonded with a Companion. No – any friends would do.

'Did *you* find me, or did Malignis?' Daisy looked down to the hondfir that was rubbing itself against her, its tail wagging back and forth furiously, and scratched its head.

'The honour goes to Malignis, of course.'

'Damn it, Kort!' Daisy exploded, turning around and having to look straight up to meet his eyes. 'I was making friends!'

'I'm sorry, Princess. I didn't mean to scare them.'

'Look at you! You're a giant with a hondfir, for goodness sake!'

'I can't help that.'

'The longcoat makes you look even bigger!'

Kort shrugged. 'It's the official regalia for Lord Protector. I have to wear it. Plus it's very fashionable since the war. I've been told I look very striking.'

Daisy shot Kort a withering glare. Surprisingly, the middle aged swordmaster didn't seem too bothered by the not-as-withering-as-she-imagined gaze a sixteen year old girl could bring to bear. He kept one hand on the hilt of his sword, belted at his side, and one hand absently scratching Malignis' haunches, each stroke of his fur flicking up a tiny shower of fiery embers. She had to admit that actually yes, the navy longcoat really did suit the Lord Protector. But she was aiming for indignant rage and had to take it out on someone.

'Just give me a day! One day by myself, here in the city! Let me meet people and make friends!'

Kort nodded. 'I'll ask the King and Queen if they will allow it.' He got down on one knee, bringing him to just below her eye line. 'I truly am sorry, Princess. I'll recommend that you get let loose upon this city on your own. With Malignis by your side, of course.'

Daisy looked at Malignis who managed to have puppy eyes despite not being anywhere near a puppy. 'Do I have to? I don't need Malignis. Everyone's just as scared of him as they are of you. Come on, nothing's going to happen to me.'

'I just want you to be safe.' Kort looked at Malignis. 'This one just wants you to play with him, but he also knows he has a job to do.' Malignis realised he was being talked about and licked Kort on the face happily. Kort looked back to Daisy, rubbing the red sweltering mark left behind on his cheek by the hondfir's scorching mouth.

Daisy threw her hands up in defeat. 'Fine! I guess. Whatever.'

Kort smiled and stood up. 'Come on! We've wasted long enough. Before you decided to... what should I tell the King and Queen?'

'Oh right.' Daisy had forgotten all of this would have to be reported. Oops. 'I guess, just tell them that we took a few wrong turns. I'm sure they won't mind.'

'Won't mind that you're late to your first official duty as a member of the Royal Family? The first not just in a long time, but ever?'

'Yeah. That's not the kind of thing they care about,' Daisy tried, optimistically.

'That is *exactly* the kind of thing they care about.' Kort spun Daisy around and pushed her forward. 'You managed to run us past the showgrounds, so let's march back.'

'March? In these shoes and this dress?'

'They seemed perfect for sprinting, so no excuses, Princess.'

Daisy couldn't argue with that. She headed towards where she thought the showgrounds were.

'You know, Kort, I've seen the city every day from the Palace, but it's really quite different when you're down here. Behind some houses. I mean... I'm kind of lost. Also, this whole "running away from you and my responsibilities" doesn't change our deal, right? I still get out of classes today because I'm having to do real work.'

'Yes. Definitely no lessons today, so relax.' Kort stepped around Daisy and led the way, Malignis running in front of them, excited by all the new smells.

After a few turns, the sun managed to find its way past the single floor buildings that made up most of Valorge, and bathed Daisy in its warmth. She stopped and appreciated it. It's not that she couldn't get any sun in the palace, it was just that she loved the glow of sunshine. It helped fill that void inside her, even if only by a tiny amount for a fleeting moment.

The Lord Protector cleared his throat.

'They named me after a flower. What do they expect?'

‘I didn’t say anything, Princess.’

She started walking slowly. Regally. She regretted the sprinting now, and the ridiculous shoes she had to wear for the occasion were not designed for easy movement. She took a moment to be thankful that her daily lessons included physical training – the only reason she’d managed to outrun Kort.

‘If it pleases the Princess, we could move more slowly? I hear that continental drift is very *in* this season among the young ones.’ Kort had a fine line in sarcasm.

‘Oh wow.’ Daisy laughed. ‘Did you really say “young ones”, Kort?’

‘A lapse in judgement, I’m sure. However, your next, and indeed only, appointment is waiting.’

Daisy sped up and headed towards the showgrounds at the centre of the city. At least, she thought that’s where she was headed. Kort would let her know if she was wrong.

‘I didn’t realise you were Lord Timekeeper now?’ Daisy poked.

‘No, no. I’m still here to protect you, Princess. But I believe that the last person to be as late to an opening ceremony as you’re going to be was beheaded, so a bit of haste is good for everyone.’

A flood of people appeared before Daisy, and she decided she must be on the main thoroughfare of the city. At this point of the road it was a market, which led to the inevitable fish, meat, and exotic fruits being shoved in her face with reckless abandon. Small Arcarats scampered around, helping their masters arrange their stalls and keep things tidy.

A shout came from a nearby couple arguing and pointing violently. Kort looked at Daisy with obvious concern before saying, ‘A moment, Princess.’

‘Can’t be late, Lord Protector! I’ll see you there.’

Kort cringed, presumably at the thought of leaving his charge alone in the middle of a crowded street, but the couple that had caught his attention were about to come to blows. He turned to interject, taking Malignis with him. Very few people could stay angry when someone with the power to bond with an hondfir was bearing down on them.

Daisy carried on ahead. It must have been Market Lane, as every merchant was in a small stone stall with mountains of their wares spilling out, and the constant shout of haggling was only beaten by the roar of the crowd from the nearby showground.

Yes, the showground, that’s where she was headed. It must be nearby. She looked around, but could only see the tallest of buildings over the broad shouldered workers along Market Lane. There were so many people. More than ever turned up at the palace, and those visitors normally gave her more space.

*Damnit. Why did I agree to open the games? Stupid, "civic duty".*

People were all around her now, and all she could see were their bright day-of-rest clothes, or the blue sky above them. There wasn't even space enough to look down to see her feet.

She could still hear the shouting of the excited crowd close by. One of these people must know. She tapped the shoulder of one of the men. 'Excuse me, sir. Do you know where the showgrounds are?'

The man didn't react. She tried again, tapping harder. 'Excuse me, s—'

He turned and shouted something incoherent, and Daisy couldn't help but flinch away from the aggression, stumbling into a man behind her, who pushed her away from him. What were they doing?! She darted through the traders and gawkers away from the dangerous men, her lithe form allowing her to push between the bodies despite her frivolous dress.

The press of the crowd closed in on her. What were they thinking? Didn't they know she was the princess! She looked around, ready to reprimand Kort for not doing his job, but he wasn't there. She'd left him behind. She couldn't see more than an arm's length in any direction before the wall of people blocked her sight. The people were closing in, and she was without her Lord Protector. Without Kort.

She suddenly found it hard to breathe. Everyone was so close and loud, and there was no space to breathe! She wanted to shout out but her throat had clamped shut. She was sure that everyone was watching her. Watching her be lost, and weak, and scared, and unable to breathe.

Something wet and warm brushed against her hand. Malgnis' nose. His warm fur brushed up against her as he put himself between her and as much of the crowd as he could manage. Then Kort's unmistakable confident grip on her shoulder. 'I'm here.'

Daisy squeezed her eyes shut. 'I don't know where I'm going. Please, help me.'

Daisy followed Kort and his confident strides. He'd been doing this for so long, he still managed to make it look as though she was the one leading him. Not like she had regressed into a scared little girl just because she wasn't used to people.

*Come on. Pull yourself together!*

She managed to focus on where she was going. Kort had cleared a space around her somehow, and was taking her toward the stone rising platform. A new invention. Never before had they been able to move such a large and heavy object with magic alone, but her parents had already filled the palace with the things, so she was used to them.

Without thinking about it, Daisy slipped her hand over the handle. She felt the pull from the magical converter, and felt it tug at that void inside herself. She tried to find some magic and feed the converter, but nothing came. The platform stayed still.

Daisy felt Kort's hand slide on top of hers, and saw the converter light up at his strength. She could feel the magic pass through her hand, but none of it went into her. As the converter drew his strength, the gears started working, and the platform began to rise.

They'd done this ever since she was a kid. One day, she wouldn't need his power to make basic technology work. But for now, the fact she had to rely on him still grated at her.

'Thank you,' Daisy whispered.

'Anything and always, my Princess,' Kort said quietly in return.

As the platform crawled its way up the side of the showground walls, Daisy looked out over the city. The crowd she had just been trapped in now seemed small. The street wasn't even that busy, and above it now the noises weren't so loud. Given the distance, she could see that her panic had all been in her head. She thumped her hand against her leg, angry at herself, and to keep the tears from blurring her vision she set her eyes wide open and stared out at the city. The grey stone dominated everything, but since the end of the war, metal had become available to all, and now glints of warm gold and cold silver sparkled in the bright sunshine. Of course, her view from the palace was better, but this view was much closer to the city's heart.

She felt the platform jerk beneath her feet as it reached the third floor and stopped at the top of the showground. Kort's hand was instantly there to steady her.

'I'm okay now,' Daisy told him.

'Sorry. Habit.' He let go and took a step away from her, but still placed himself between her and the open edge of the platform. 'Are you ready?'

Daisy took a deep breath and tried to ignore her heart attempting a break for freedom through her chest, opting for faked enthusiasm instead. 'Wasn't it you that was just telling me I was taking too long? Can't keep my people waiting!'

She strode off the platform, under the stone archway and almost into the showground's royal box. The problem was, she could now see the thousands of faces in the amphitheatre, and no longer had the stone walls to dampen the roar. She suddenly realised why Market Lane hadn't really been busy. Everyone was here, waiting for her. She tried to gulp, but her throat was suddenly dry.



Malignis nudged her from behind and she stumbled forwards into the royal box. As the crowd saw her arrive, the general clamour of excitement turned into a chorus of cheering, clapping, and whoops of excitement.

The royal box was a large and sprawling affair in one of the six corners of the arena. They hadn't gone so far as to have wooden chairs like in the palace, but it was a good effort regardless. A glance behind her showed Kort and Malignis flanking the door. Malignis kept his dull glow of inner fire, illuminating the shadows around him, but Kort blended into the grey stone like he was a statue. There was also a man kneeling on the balcony. Following the correct etiquette – which her teachers had drummed into her during boring protocol lessons, and which still felt very odd to her – she walked to the front of the balcony and waved to the crowd. The crowd grew even louder at their acknowledgement, and Daisy turned to the waiting footman.

'Rise.'

The man stood up and bowed. 'Good morning, Princess Daisy.' He bowed again. Really covering all of his bases, just in case. 'I am the showground's royal liaison. Anything you need, I'm here to help.'

Daisy nodded politely. He was a tall and broad shouldered man. He might be the royal liaison now, but like most of the citizens of Valorge he had the strong physique resulting from a life spent in a quarry.

'Is the Princess ready to begin the opening ceremony?'

Daisy nodded.

The royal liaison moved to the very edge of the balcony and touched a small tube set into the stone at his waist. It lit up as the magical converter absorbed his power, activating the voice amplifier that hung beneath the royal box.

He tapped the end of the tube to make sure it worked, and sure enough the percussion boomed out to fill every corner of the showgrounds. 'Ladies and gentlemen. Quiet please for Princess Daisy.'

He stepped aside and bowed again. Daisy moved up to the very front of the royal box and placed her hands on the waist height stone wall. Before her, in the massive stadium built before the war, there must have easily been ten thousand spectators. All looking at her expectantly. Half of all Valorge. ((think about this number and what it infers upon the society, and the fact that half of them could take the day off)) The arena itself was divided into quarters. Sand, water, forest, and rock.

Daisy bent over, putting her mouth directly next to the speaking pipe. 'Hello.' She jumped back as the word boomed throughout the arena, and hands clamped ears everywhere she looked - herself included.

'Apologies, Princess,' the liaison said quickly. 'This device has been calibrated so you can stand and speak normally.'

Sheepishly, Daisy stepped back from the edge and repeated herself. Much better.

She'd memorised the speech she was to give. She'd tried it out on Kort and Malignis yesterday, and it had gone down well. Malignis had panted vigorously, and Kort had been enthusiastically neutral.

'I am here to open The Valoran Games. Our most powerful casters and Companions shall test their mettle, and a single champion shall be chosen.' She allowed a hint of sadness to show in her voice. 'It won't escape anyone's notice that these games are the first in a decade. The war took its toll on both our country and our people, but together we have persevered, and finally we can stop merely surviving, and start living.' The crowd stayed silent. She'd rushed it! She wasn't the great orator that her mother and father were. 'Umm. And we welcome the envoys from our neighbouring nations, Praztar and Lysannlig, who we greet with respect, and hope that these games can be the first bonds forged in our path to peace.' Still no reaction from the crowd, but she hadn't expected much as the wounds caused by the war with the Priztor were still fresh in everyone's minds. In fact it was probably just lucky that no one had started booing. 'Let the games begin!'

A few scattered claps and shouts went up from the crowd, and Daisy stepped back. As the first competitors entered the sandy arena and the crowd's roaring enthusiasm rose up, and she was forgotten. Her duties done, she was free to leave and was sure she could come up with a reasonable excuse. No need to mention that seeing the best of the best using their magic, and bond with their Companions, in such amazing ways would just make her depressed about her lack of either. Also that the crowd seemed to hate her. She felt like an imposter after being hidden away from the public throughout the war.

She backed away from the royal box, slumped through the archway, and back onto the rising platform. She couldn't handle any more eyes on her. Out of habit more than hope, she placed her hand on the converter and felt the tug at her void. Kort's hand slid over hers a second later, and she felt the magic pass through her, tingling her hand.

'You did great, Princess.'

She turned to face him. 'Were we at the same showgrounds? That went terribly! They acted like I was reading a shopping list.'

'They sounded fine to me. They cheered when you paused, and went quiet when you spoke of the war. You may have stumbled over a few words, but it was hardly noticeable. A few more speeches and you'll have them enraptured from the first word. Even Malignis thought so, didn't you?'

Malignis barked, a few sparks escaping his mouth. 'See. He agrees.'

Daisy gave Malignis another of her withering glares, but again his panting tongue and puppy eyes soon had her scratching his head. 'Huh. We'll see. Anyway, I was so embarrassed. And I have a question.'

'Yes?'

The platform reached the ground and they stepped off, beginning their walk back to the palace.

'Why aren't you competing?'

Kort was always so sure of himself and what he said, that Daisy couldn't help but notice his hesitation. 'Why would I enter?'

'Well, I mean, you're kind of... the best. Right?'

'Ten years ago, maybe. But times have moved on.'

'Oh come on. That's just false modesty. Exactly what I'd expect from the best!'

'A word of advice, Princess. The kind of attitude required to become the best doesn't lend itself towards modesty. It's a nice thought that anyone with power and skill would be a good person, but the war proved that isn't the case for a lot of people.'

Daisy shrugged. 'Then why are you the Lord Protector, huh?'

'Oh, you know. A job's a job, and this one here,' he stuck his thumb at Malignis, who barked, 'only likes the best food.'

Daisy eyed Kort out of the corner of her eye, sure that he was holding something back.

They left Market Lane, almost empty now, with everyone crammed into the showground for the opening ceremony. A squat looking arch separated each district, and city guards stood ready at each. Seven of them, for purely symbolic reasons. Daisy dealt with guards on a daily basis, so they weren't anything special to her, but there were young and old gawking from the edges of the street. The seven guards were all mounted on Valorge's most common animal, the grox. A hairy and broad beast, typically aligned to earth magic, it was used in the forges, the mines, and for the army cavalry. It wasn't fast, but once it got to where it was going, a single

charge had been known to wipe out an enemy encampment. These grox had the full Valorge regalia, deep browns to honour the miners, and fiery reds for the forges that kept our city safe. It matched the functional, dulled breastplates of the guards riding them.

As the leader of the guards saw Kort, he barked an order and the seven of them halted their civic duties and saluted, open hand over breast, until the Lord Protector had passed. Daisy wasn't sure they had even seen her.

Fountain Square, the heart of the city, was vastly different to the functional and bustling Market Street. This was a place of rest and beauty, filled with citizens relaxing on their only day off. The fountains ran in circles all around the square, creating a maze of stone walls, from the smallest at ankle height, all the way up to the ones that even Kort couldn't see over. The whole square was ringed by a wall of water, maintained by water casters. It was supposed to open and close as someone passed through. With all the skilled casters no longer at war, they needed jobs, and Daisy's parents had vowed to allow everyone to work. This meant a lot of rather extravagant public facilities, just like this water door. As Daisy approached she looked around to see the water casters frantically trying to open and close their creation. None of them were looking at her. She got closer, close enough to reach out and touch the water, and still it didn't open. She caught the reflection of her long blonde hair, and her flowing bright green formal dress. She didn't like it, but her choice of formal attire was rather limited. It was her own fault – she didn't like being fussed over and the tailors were the epitome of fuss, so she rarely got them made.

In the centre of the city, with the showgrounds behind them, Daisy knew that the great war forges were to her left, and the mines to her right. They were both amazing, filled with networks of artisans, casters, and Companions, the quality and quantity from the forges only possible because of the hard work and dedication from the miners. Production facilities that any nation would be proud of, and were one of the deciding factors that allowed the Valorans to beat the Priztor. But the jewel of the city lay straight ahead.

The royal palace didn't have the same lustrous crystal structure as the buildings of Kvannlig or Lysannlig in general, but it was a feat of caster-engineering that hadn't been beaten the world over. As far as Daisy knew – not that she'd ever travelled, but her tutors did have a tendency to go on, at length, about all these sorts of things.

The palace sprawled large enough to be a town in its own right – quite literally, as the ground floor was a large marquee open to merchants – and the spires rose high enough to dominate the entire Eastern quarter. The central spire even stretched tall enough to see over the

surrounding cliffs that encased Valorge in case an enemy army ever tried that treacherous route. It was an elegant mix of sturdy rock, much like the rest of Valorge, and metals of all colours. It looked as if one of the Legendary ones themselves slammed the ground with their fist, leaving the palace connected to the surrounding cliffs at the base. But the marvel of it all was that magic was fused within every inch of the walls. A small army of earth casters were employed to make the palace function – whether it be operating moving platforms like at the showgrounds, or the great shifting walls and doors. The palace was designed to open and close at the walker's whim. An inescapable maze of ever shrinking tunnels to an invading army, but a straight path to anywhere they wanted to go to the royal family.

The main road that led to the palace was lined by the lavish houses of the city's nobles. Unlike the common houses, they were two stories high, with balconies covered in blooming flowers. Typically for the nobles they showed off their magical affiliation. Water casters had blue flowers and blue tinted metal gilt on the corners of their houses. Earth casters had brown embellishments, fire had red, and air had white. Arcane casters drew the short straw, as importing crystals from Lysannlig was prohibitively expensive, and no flowers had the translucent shimmer of arcane magic, so their houses were marked with a polished steel front door - not nearly gaudy enough for most nobles' tastes, but a luminescent silver was as accurate as anything else in nature came to the shimmer of arcane. Very few houses showed the radiant yellows that marked them as a light caster, and fewer still had the dark purple of a dark caster. Or they just didn't want to show their affiliation. Praztar had a strong dark caster streak, and since the war, Daisy had noticed less and less dark magic being openly used in the city. Too many had lost loved ones to the grasping shadows in the dark.

Along the road, Daisy was forced to stop several times by the nobles, one or two even bursting out of their front doors at the sight of her.

'I don't get it though,' Daisy said to Kort when the latest old lady had moved on after some excessive bowing. 'I have no power. Why do they want me to know who they are?'

Daisy could see Kort's face twist into a smile, but he obviously worked hard not to laugh. 'You've been a treasure, hidden away from the public for the past four years. The last time most people saw you, you were a tiny little thing. A lot's changed since then.'

'Cut to the chase. What's changed exactly?'

Kort made a vague motion with his hand. 'During the war, national pride was at an all time high, and you, as the Princess, kept hidden and growing up safe in the palace, were a figurehead of the nation. In a sense, you are their prize for years of struggling and hardship.'

Daisy thought about it as they passed a house of bright red flowers that Malignis had run over to sniff. 'So... I'm an idea?'

'Yes. To them, you are a concept. A very important concept. A concept that kept the nation together during war.' Kort snapped his fingers and a tiny spark appeared, calling Malignis back to his side. 'When a mother lost a son, they'd mourn their loss, but know that it was the right thing to do. The right thing for the nation, the royal family, and the Princess.'

Daisy stopped, and Malignis bumped into her making her take another step. She looked at the ground as she said, 'I'm just... I'm sixteen. I was locked away for four years. For my own protection. I'm not someone to die for, Kort.'

Kort put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. 'I'm sorry. It's a complicated issue and I simplified it too much.' His hand pushed her forwards gently but firmly, and she started walking again. 'I'm no scholar. And I was locked up with you for all those years, so maybe I have things wrong.'

'You're many things, but wrong is rarely one of them.'

'There's a first time for everything, Princess.'

## Chapter 2

### *Daisy*

Daisy ran the brush through her hair as she sat in front of the mirror.

It wasn't that she enjoyed brushing her hair. In fact she didn't like how impractical it was, but this had been her routine for the past few years, and it calmed her after such a fraught morning.

Daisy felt oddly alone without the soft panting behind her. From Malignis, not Kort. She giggled to herself at the thought. Kort had excused himself after making sure she was safely back in her room, and taken Malignis with him.

Her thoughts kept being pulled back to what Kort had said. She was an idea in the people's minds. But she had nothing to do with the war! His talk of mothers losing their children in her name made her shiver. The only effect the war had on her was that she'd been locked away for her own safety. She was bored, but she hadn't had to deal with death.

Talking of being locked up, her first taste of freedom had been amazing! Okay, Kort had been constantly next to her, but she'd been outside the palace, and that was enough. It had also been absolutely terrifying. She shuddered as she thought back to the group of kids playing their magic game, and the sparse crowd that had felt like a crushing press. And the monotonous drone of her public speaking. It *had* been an amazing day, but she could only focus on the atrocities of her shyness. Ugh.

She slapped her forehead at the memories and tried to forget them. She looked around the room reflected in her mirror. Maybe it wasn't too bad after all. A room larger than some houses, a comfortable bed, people to help her anytime day or night. Like the rest of the palace, her room was made from a smooth white stone, chosen for its colour to differentiate it from the grey of the rest of the city. She supposed at one point the stone had probably been bricks, they couldn't have carved it from a single block of giant white stone – assuming the idea of the Legendaries punching the ground wasn't accurate – but thanks to the earth casters everything had been shifted around so much that it was all seamless and smooth now.

Reds and browns dotted the room. Her bed was a brown stone, to honour the earth casters, and her curtains were a deep, luscious red to honour the fire casters. And they seemed to be moving.

She turned around to look at the curtains. Hmm, nothing. She turned back to the mirror and continued brushing her hair. Maybe a window was open?

She heard a scuffing of boot on stone, and caught a flash of movement as the curtain moved again in the mirror.

A bolt of silvery arcane magic smashed against the wall behind her mirror and fizzled into nothing.

She flinched and let out a small scream. 'Damn it, Kort! Stop mess-' As her brain processed what had happened, she realised that Kort wouldn't have used his arcane magic – he always used fire – and he wouldn't have missed.

When were these dark-damned assassins going to give up!

Daisy threw herself to the side, dragging her hand across the table and managing to grab something, just as the mirror in front of her shattered from another arcane bolt streaked through the space she had just occupied.

She landed hard on her shoulder, but rolled and scrambled to her feet. She spared a second to see what she'd picked up. Her hair clip. She grunted in annoyance and looked up at her assailant.

Covered head to toe in black cloth, a dagger in one hand, his appearance gave away nothing. His left hand glowed with silvery arcane light, and another bolt formed and fired itself at her. She flung herself to the side once again, and tried to come up sprinting towards the man, but her first step got tangled in her dress. She wasn't used to wearing a damn, cursed dress.

She pitched forwards and hit her face against the floor as the intruder closed towards the distance between them. Daisy got to her feet far more slowly than she'd have liked. Another bolt flew at her, and she felt it tug at her as she barely dodged it. It had ripped through her long skirt leaving a clear hole. Her first thought made her smile, she wouldn't have to wear this one again. Her second thought was the realisation that if his magic punched through the dress, then it was really going to hurt if it hit her body.

No more than a few steps away, Daisy didn't want to have to deal with his dagger. Her first step faked left, and the man followed it, leaving him off balance when she then darted right. She flicked her hand out, throwing the hair clip at the man's face. He put his dagger hand up to block it, and she moved in, throwing herself into a full body tackle.



The man let out a grunt as they hit the floor. It had been a perfect take down. She sat on top of him. The assassin was lying beneath her, face down, and best of all, the dagger was hers. Kort would be proud.

She leaned forwards, keeping her weight on him so he couldn't buck her off, and put the knife to his neck in case he got any ideas.

'Who sent you?'

Before the man could answer, the door to her room opened and Malignis burst in, rushing to Daisy and the assailant. Kort was close behind but at a much more relaxed pace.

Malignis barked, excited by everything, and jumped around, his tail wagging uncontrollably.

'Good job,' Kort said. 'You can take the dagger away from his throat now and let him up.'

Daisy rolled off and let the man stand.

'Well done. Back to training,' Kort said with a smile. The man bowed, then turned and bowed even deeper to Daisy, and ran out of the room.

Daisy breathed hard after the burst of exertion and adrenaline. 'Damn it! You said no classes for the day. I worked instead! The speech!' She held Malignis at arms length as he tried to lick her in his excitement. She didn't want the burns.

Kort held out a hand to help her up after shooing away the bouncing Malignis. 'I thought you'd enjoy the distraction after this morning. Also, I lied.'

Daisy stayed sitting, and glared at him. 'Lying is rude. Especially to me.'

Kort rubbed the stubble on his chin and pondered this for a moment. 'I suppose you're right. Still, whatever it takes to get the drop on you is a moral sacrifice I'll have to make.'

'I thought it was suspicious when you *and* Malignis left me alone. Ugh! How didn't I realise?!

Kort chuckled. 'You did well regardless. I'll get you *another* mirror.'

'We do seem to go through them rather fast, don't we? Perhaps, if you stopped sending people to mock-assassinate me, we'd save some mirrors. Come on, Kort, think of the mirrors!'

'Lessons, Princess. Let's go.'

Daisy took his hand and stood. 'If it's more weapons training, then I should change.' Her eyes widened as she remembered the hole in her dress. She held it up to show Kort. 'And look! I *have* to change because of this, right? Please can I change? Come on.'

Kort turned and started walking out of the room. 'It shows character. Nothing to be ashamed of. Besides, lots to do and see today. Very exciting.'

Daisy trudged along behind him and groaned. 'I don't think we have the same definition of exciting. Last time you said that it meant a logistics lesson.'

Kort turned on her and pointed a finger. 'I sat in on that, and it was absolutely fascinating. You should appreciate these things more.'

Daisy shrugged. Kort opened his mouth to argue, but must have realised how pointless it would have been. He turned and carried on walking.

Daisy dragged her feet as Kort led the way. She thought about asking what the lessons were today, but she was too tired after so much walking this morning, and then the tussle with her masked assailant. And it wasn't like she ever had a choice in what she did. So she let her mind wander. She didn't pay attention to the moving platforms, although she still darted in front of Kort to get her hand on the converter before him, out of habit. She didn't care when Kort told the earth caster where they wanted to go, and after a few seconds of ground shaking vibrations the white stone wall in front of her crumbled apart to create a new door that led straight to their destination. She also didn't care when they walked through the ground floor of the palace – she didn't even notice the crowds around her this time.

She was too busy thinking of the same thing she always thought of. Which Companion would she bond with? She had given the elements a lot of thought. Her father had ended up with earth, and her mother arcane. Kort was fire, of course. So she wanted to be different. It was a toss up between air and light. It wasn't that she was against water, but she just couldn't see herself ever being around it that much – she looked like a drowned rat when wet and no one would make the mistake of calling her a strong swimmer, so the sea wasn't really her *thing*. Dark wasn't even part of the question, of course.

Daisy started paying attention again when she almost tripped over Malignis. A quick scratch behind his ears and the hondfir was content. Kort banged hard on the stone portal Daisy had ended up at.

It opened of its own accord, and Kort stepped aside, ushering Daisy inside. As she passed, he whispered, 'I won't be sitting in on this one though. Try to stay awake. He doesn't know you're coming.'

Daisy whispered back. 'So you're just dumping me with him?'

'I've got to prepare a gift for someone, so... yes.'

Daisy groaned, and slumped inside.

Kort pointed for Malignis to stand guard inside the room, and shouted, 'Scholar, lesson time!' before leaving and shutting the door.

The scholar's room was the same white as the rest of the palace, but was filled with work benches all around the outside, and several took up the centre of the room. Odd contraptions

that Daisy still hadn't received an answer about their use were scattered all over the tables, and maps littered the floor.

A small man with frazzled hair popped his head up from behind one of the centre benches. 'Ahh, Princess. Right on time!'

As far as Daisy could tell, the scholar thought she could do no wrong. At least that was the only way she could be right on time to an unplanned lesson, right?

A flash of white light sparked from somewhere Daisy couldn't see, and the scholar let out a shriek. 'Kort's good at being on time. What is he? Lord Protector or Lord Timekeeper?'

As the scholar chortled to himself, Daisy tried to stifle her own giggle, and ask the pertinent question. She was used to odd things happening in this room, but still. 'What was that flash?'

'Hmm? Oh, nothing, nothing. I was just looking at some old technology. An alternative that some of my colleagues came up with before we perfected converters.'

'Something that does what magical converters do?'

'Just so,' the scholar said, scooping maps off the floor in a futile attempt to tidy the room.

A spark of hope shot through Daisy. Maybe she didn't need magic at all. 'So it could let me use the lifting platforms and heavy doors?'

The scholar froze. 'Oh. Hmm. In theory it could, yes. But the technology was never taken far enough to be used practically.'

Daisy's heart sank a little bit. Oh well, she'd wanted a Companion, so she'd still have needed to find her magic anyway. 'What's on the agenda today?'

'Ooh. Hmm. Uhh.' The scholar pushed his spectacles up his nose and looked around the room. 'Luckily, as a man of the sciences, I'm always prepared to impart knowledge.'

'So, didn't know this was happening,' Daisy translated for Malignis who was lying down by the door, 'And are now making things up.'

'It's called an *ad hoc* lesson, my Princess. "Ad hoc". See, you're learning already!'

'Could I at least get a chair for this ad hoc lesson?'

The scholar snapped his fingers and a boulder rolled out from behind the central desks and stopped behind her. 'Where's your Companion, anyway?' Daisy asked.

The scholar looked befuddled by the question. 'Is he not here? Oh, I'm sure he's around. Not that he'd be any help for your lesson, he's dumb as a brick.'

'Well, he is made of stone,' Daisy pointed out.

'That's no excuse.'

The scholar finally felt that he had moved enough maps out of the way to allow him to concentrate, and was now standing in front of Daisy. He snapped his fingers again, and a chair rose out of the floor, lifting him up to be just a little bit higher than her.

‘So, young Princess. It’s almost time. I can feel it. Any day now, you’ll manifest, and the magic will find you. I’m positive.’

Daisy looked at him with a cocked eyebrow. ‘Still don’t know what you’re going to teach today, do you?’

The scholar chuckled and wipe his sweaty brow. ‘Let’s uhh... prepare you. It’s been a long time since we covered the basics.’

Daisy sighed and looked at Malignis. ‘At least you get to sleep.’

Malignis looked up and panted happily for a moment before resting his head again.

‘So, there are how many elements?’

‘Twenty,’ Daisy said.

‘That’s right. Wait, what? No, there’s—’

‘*Seven*. Every caster manifests with the base arcane magic. When you bond with a Companion, they share their element with you allowing you to wield their power as if it was your own.’

‘That’s better,’ the scholar said. ‘And—’

‘The stronger your innate arcane abilities, the stronger a Companion you could attract.’ Daisy recited the textbooks almost word for word. ‘Manifesting usually occurs between thirteen and seventeen years of age, but instances have been recorded as young as ten and as old as twenty. Times of stress can accelerate this process. The bond between a Companion and a caster must be a willing communion. It cannot be undone once made.’

‘Oh. Still remember all of that, I see,’ the scholar said, defeated.

‘It’s pretty much the only thing I’ve thought about the last four years.’

The scholar scratched his fuzzy hair.

‘Let’s recap lessons learned from the war, then.’

‘Really? The war with the nation of Praztar that literally just finished?’

The scholar cleared his throat nervously. ‘Yes, that one.’

Daisy groaned and rattled off the facts that, unless time was losing all meaning for her, she’d learned just a few months ago.

After several more pointless questions, the scholar seemed to give up.

‘I apologise, my Princess. This certainly isn’t our finest lesson, is it?’ The scholar waited a beat, but Daisy didn’t feel a response was needed. ‘I’ve had a lot on my mind. The King has asked for tests to be run on the new weapons, and whether they should be outlawed. He’s demanding a rush decision as the smiths want to begin production.’

Daisy leaned over to awkwardly pat the scholar on the arm. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. But it does sound very stressful.’

The scholar sighed and let his stone chair crumble back into the floor. Malignis woke up at the movement. Daisy hopped off her boulder.

‘I hear your speech went well?’ The scholar asked.

‘That’s kind of like saying the war went well. Technically, we won. But at what cost?’

The scholar slumped his shoulders. Mentioning the war usually had that effect, but as she had never seen the effects of it, Daisy kept forgetting to not bring it up. The Praztar navy had only made it close enough to Valorge once in the entire four years.

‘Actually,’ Daisy said, remembering her earlier conversation with Kort, ‘I have a question for you.’

‘Ooh. Yes, go ahead, my Princess.’

‘Kort. The Lord Protector. I mean, he’s good, right?’

The scholar considered it for a moment, never one to rush into... well, anything. ‘Exceptional natural strength, yes, and combined with his dedication to practice, has made him one of the best.’

‘So, why isn’t he in the games?’

‘Oh, well that’s an easy one. The games are just that, my Princess. *Games*. We allow some very good casters to fight in them, but we don’t show off those that are truly our best. Men like Kort can hold a battle line, and single handedly turn a fight in our armies’ favour. The envoys from Praztar and Lysannlig will be reporting back everything they see. We wouldn’t want them to know our real strengths. Knowledge is power.’

‘So, basically, Kort is too good to be in the games?’

‘Exactly.’

There was the dull thud of someone knocking at the door. A snap of the scholar’s fingers, and Kort appeared on the other side, eliciting excited bounces from Malignis.

‘Sorry to have dropped her on you with such little warning, scholar. I had to make sure everything else was ready.’

Daisy said her goodbyes and left. ‘I dread to ask, but what is “everything else”?’

‘How long has it been since you visited the palace forge?’

‘Actually, I’m not sure I’ve been since before the war. Wow, four years...’

Daisy fell in step beside Kort, who continued his trick of making it seem like she was leading when actually she had no idea where she was going. The palace forge? But why? Daisy hadn’t been allowed near it during her confinement as the forges been running overtime to help with general production, but she also never had an interest. She still didn’t. Maybe Kort was just trying to wear her down before surprising her with another mockassin. She was pretty sure it would work. She was *tired*. And still wearing a long – albeit now rather bedraggled – dress.

Kort ushered Daisy up to an idle earth caster and asked for the forge. The earth caster placed one hand on the wall and one hand on his Companion. After a few seconds and some rumbling, a door appeared, revealing a set of stairs leading down.

The bright white walls continued downwards for several minutes until they opened out into a large hall filled with burning furnaces, racks of tools, and angry looking men and women hitting metal rods against anvils. Sparks skittered across the floor with every hammer blow, but the white walls gave the forge a sterile, professional feeling - much different than the dark grey of the great forges in the heart of the city. At the far end of the forge hall, there was no wall to separate the room from the outside.

As Daisy had almost tripped down the stairs several times because of her formal shoes, she had to ask. ‘Why are the forges all the way down here?’

Kort was about to answer when a large man, rivalling Kort’s stature but beating his girth, waddled over from one of the anvils. ‘A fine question, my Princess!’

Kort whispered in Daisy’s ear. ‘Forgemaster Talos.’

‘Just because I can’t hear you doesn’t mean I can’t see you tell her my name!’ the forgemaster shouted. Daisy realised he was shouting because he was deaf. A lifetime of loud bangs next to your ear would do that, she supposed. ‘The palace forge is “all the way down here” because we need the river back there to quench our metals.’

‘Couldn’t you just use a water caster to do that?’ Daisy asked, remembering the casters in fountain square with nothing better to do.

‘She’s a smart one,’ the forgemaster said to Kort. ‘We can now, but during the war, there were none to spare. This whole place was built with contingency plans in mind. Over the other side of the river, do you recognise that?’

Daisy peered and could just make out... ‘Is that, the royal docks?’ A weird sense of finally being able to place where she was in relation to everything else, hit her.

‘That’s right. Something goes wrong above ground, we still have access to materials by water, going so far as to even having some of the royal ships willing to make the transport runs for us.’

‘Well, forgemaster Talos, I didn’t realise just how important the forges were to us.’

The forgemaster bellowed out a laugh that could be heard all through the hall despite the din of the anvils. ‘Quite the little diplomat, too.’ He lowered his voice and moved closer. ‘Anyway, I assume you’ve come for the... goods?’

Kort nodded.

‘This way.’ He hobbled over to a small archway, separate from the main hall. The first thing Daisy noticed, apart from the extreme heat of the furnace, was the Companion in the corner, carefully tending to some metal tubes. It was a geolith. One of the most powerful earth Companions. It walked hunched over on all fours, its front arms much longer than its back legs, and its lizard scales were gnarled and twisted giving it the look of a rocky mountain. It turned its short snout to see who had entered, but then went back to work. Daisy’s jaw hung open much like the kids’ in the back street had when they’d seen Malignis.

Forgemaster Talos explained. ‘This is our “royal forge”, my Princess. Sometimes people want things made and don’t want everyone to know that they’ve been made.’

‘It’s just some metal though, right?’

Kort placed a hand on her shoulder and squeezed. ‘This has been a special project, Princess. I called in some favours with Talos here. Think of it as a present.’

‘It’s not my birthday,’ Daisy pointed out.

‘Your birthday is coming up soon,’ Kort said, then shrugged. ‘Besides, I don’t need a reason to give my favourite Princess a gift.’

‘I’m your only Princess.’

Talos ushered them further into the room, and then spoke to the geolith. ‘Guard.’ The lumbering stone lizard turned awkwardly in a space almost too small for it. Daisy jumped out of the way, squeezing herself against one of the walls. Kort didn’t have to, as the geolith seemed to realise it couldn’t move the Lord Protector. Daisy felt a bit annoyed at that because her cheek was squashed against the wall. Malignis followed the geolith, sniffing furiously at its feet.

The room now guarded from outside eyes, Talos walked over to the bench and picked up one of the metal tubes that the geolith had been guarding. He turned around and held it out to Kort, who stood aside to let Daisy see.

It was a metal tube about the same length as some of the daggers that Kort had her practice with. The tube was set into a wooden block that curved down at the far end and had several

other bits of metal sticking out from it. Intricate carving was inlaid along the metal tube and the wooden block.

‘What is it?’ Daisy asked.

‘This is a weapon,’ Kort said.

‘Not sharp enough to stab. Too weird a shape to throw. Is it a special hammer?’

‘On its own, it doesn’t do much, true, but...’ Kort gestured to the table behind Talos, who turned and picked up a leather belt with seven tubes of powder and seven metal balls in evenly spaced pouches. ‘It can send these metal balls very far. Think of it as a compact bow. It’s a special present because the King and Queen are about to rule that no blacksmith may make them. They will become illegal to make or even own.’

‘So you’re giving me something illegal? That sounds bad.’

Kort shrugged. ‘You’ll see when you use it. Think of it as... a practical necessity until you find your magic. It’s called a boomstick.’

Daisy looked at the boomstick. The craftsmanship was excellent, and it looked very fancy, but a metal tube, fancy or not, is still just a metal tube. Not very dangerous. Then she realised what Kort was saying. That maybe she would never find her magic. He’d had this made because she might have to rely on this boomstick for the rest of her life. She took it from Talos. It was heavier than she expected.

Daisy swallowed. She didn’t like this gift at all. It was everything that she hoped wouldn’t happen to her. ‘How does it work?’

‘Point it at something you don’t want to be there anymore,’ Talos said, ‘Then pull this hooked bit of metal called a trigger. That’s it.’

‘And why is it going to be made illegal?’

‘That’s a complicated answer,’ Kort said. ‘But it’s too powerful and too easy. Their Majesties are scared of the technology escaping Valorge.’

‘How’s it different from you shooting off some fire... thingy at someone? Or someone throwing an earthball?’ Daisy asked.

‘Magic counters magic. Casters can dampen or deflect offensive spells, but not much counters those little metal spheres.’

Daisy picked one out of the belt and felt its weight. ‘Doesn’t seem too bad.’

Kort squeezed her shoulder. ‘Learn to use it, and you won’t need magic to defend yourself.’



Daisy felt a little tug from deep within. Something pulled on the void inside her. Would this boomstick stop her wanting to fit in? To make friends? She doubted it. But she fixed a smile to her face and thanked Kort and Talos.

‘Oh dear,’ Kort said. ‘That’s your official greeting smile. I’ve seen that one before. Don’t worry, you’ll love it. Just point and shoot, and you can’t go wrong. Only when you’re in danger, mind.’

She picked up the boomstick and pointed it at Talos, who carefully moved it aside with his finger. ‘Luckily, it’s not loaded. And here’s the duplicate.’ He handed a second identical boomstick and belt to Kort.

Daisy eyed him suspiciously. ‘Why do you get one too? Not that I mind. But I thought this was for my lack of magic. You have magic.’

Kort smiled. ‘If the Princess is suddenly feeling precious about her gift...’

‘No!’ Daisy realised she just shouted a bit too eagerly. She stopped and smoothed her dress. ‘No. I don’t care.’

A noise came from the geolith but Kort ignored it. ‘They’re illegal, remember. So if you get caught with one, this way, we can say I forced the gift upon you, and you only did it to humour me and my desire to shape you in my own image.’

‘I don’t think that’s how the law works,’ Daisy said.

A small voice from outside the room was trying to be heard over the forges and past the geolith. ‘Excuse me! Lord Protector!’

Daisy and Kort turned to face the door as Talos pushed past them, moving his geolith aside. He motioned for Daisy and Kort to leave the secret room. Outside was a small boy dressed in the royal messenger livery, blue, white, and brown.

‘The King and Queen seek an audience with the royal Princess at once. They await you at the overlook.’

Daisy thanked the messenger and sent him on his way as Kort and Talos said their goodbyes.

The overlook? That was odd. They’d never asked to meet there before. It was the other side of the palace, just above the royal docks. She could almost see it from the forge hall.

‘Excuse me for a moment,’ Daisy said, brandishing the weapon. ‘I just need to find somewhere to hide this.’

## Chapter 3

### *Daisy*

Daisy pushed on the grand throne room doors and felt the void inside her fill, just for a moment, just the tiniest amount, as Kort's magic passed through her. The doors opened, scraping along the floor of the throne room. A nearby earth caster heard the noise and ran over to apologise, promising to fix the floor and hinges before Daisy returned.

The throne room was a grand affair, being one of the few places in the palace that had more than just smooth white rock to define it. Silvers and golds accented every edge, and murals were set into the walls of the circular room, each one dedicated to the legendary Companions of each element. Daisy had no time to admire what were undoubtedly some of the finest artworks in all of Valora, and headed to the far side of the room that looked out into the crevasse that Valorge was nestled inside. Her footsteps sounded faint and dainty next to the heavy stomps of Kort – always right behind her – as she leaned out over the edge of the balcony. Below, she could see the overlook, and her father standing there, looking into the valley, hands clasped behind his back.

Her mother was making her way up the winding stairs to greet Daisy when a flock of Sparrots flew past her, twirling and tumbling as they went. Air Companions. Maybe soon Daisy would bond with one of them? She'd heard that the very strongest air casters could make themselves fly. She took a deep breath of the air, humid as it always was in the throne room, and saw the flock of Sparrots fly into the side of the cliff face across from her, burying themselves in one of the moss covered, rocky outcroppings.

She started down the stairs, and ran into her mother. Her mother had always been a whirlwind of business. A quick hug, a smile, a destroying of blood vessels in Daisy's cheek when she pinched it affectionately, and then she was off again. She insisted that she should never look rushed in front of the public, but that meant she ran everywhere when prying eyes weren't looking.

'Kort,' the Queen said, 'This is a private matter. Busy yourself elsewhere.'

Kort stopped on the stairs, bowed to the Queen, and motioned for Malignis to stay with Daisy. The Queen frowned and looked like she was about to say something more, but turned and left.

Daisy watched Kort go, and took a moment to stare at Malignis. He panted at her. She was rarely alone with the hondfir, either Kort or some other tutor always there to play chaperone. She looked around. At this point on the stairs, the earth casters fixing the doors couldn't see her, and the King was round the corner. It was just her and the cliffs. She dropped to her knees and hugged Malignis, whose tail wagged furiously. She knew she couldn't handle him for long like Kort could – already she could feel his fur heat up, and his breath was dangerously close to burning her. He could barely contain himself, hopping back and forth as Daisy ruffled his very pettable back. She lasted as long as she could, and when she finally pulled her hands away from his thick coat, her hands were an angry red.

'Okay, now behave. We're royalty, after all,' Daisy told Malignis, and finished her petting session by poking his wet nose. Apart from an overly excited tail, there was no evidence of what she'd just done. The perfect crime. She smiled to herself as she stepped on to the landing with her father.

He didn't turn, didn't acknowledge her. She cleared her throat. Still nothing. He turned his head side to side and seemed to be muttering to himself.

'Father?' As there was no one around, there was no need to use his official title.

He stiffened and turned. 'Daisy. I hadn't heard you. Too many thoughts.' He stepped to the centre of the platform and motioned her forward.

He bent to his knee and embraced her. She hugged him back. It was rare for them to meet with no one else around. The hug went on for longer than usual, and her father squeezed so hard she started coughing.

Once he finally let go, Daisy asked, 'What's wrong? Why have you asked to meet me alone?'

The king seemed to notice Malignis for the first time and frowned. 'Go away. Shoo.'

Malignis looked blankly at the king before looking at Daisy. Daisy just smiled. 'I think he wants to stay.'

'Command him to leave.'

'You know I can't. He does what he wants. Unless Kort tells him otherwise.'

'Kort, yes. Kort isn't here?'

Daisy shrugged. 'Mother told him to wait outside. He's probably standing by the door, I guess.'

The King nodded. 'We have an important matter to discuss. But first, tell me how the speech went at the showgrounds today.'

Daisy frowned. 'Well, there have been mixed reports. Depending on who you ask.'

The King raised an eyebrow at her.

'I would say that it was close to political suicide, and almost reignited the war, but Kort would say it was a mastercrafted oratory success.'

The King smiled. 'You're a capable young woman. I've no doubt that Kort has the right of it. Well, he may have embellished a bit. He does look after you with the vigour of a first time father.'

Daisy made a face and was about to point out that *he* was her first time father, but he waved it away. 'You know what I mean. I see you for the woman you are. He still sees you as the twelve year old girl he met four years ago.'

'Oh yes, because of my vast life experience that happened in that time.' Daisy couldn't be certain, but she'd be willing to bet that if anyone else spoke to her father with so much sarcasm that he'd have them flogged.

'It worked didn't it? You were never harmed.'

'Neither was anyone else in Valorge.'

A bang echoed from below, where the royal docks were. The King walked over to the edge and looked down to see what happened as he said, 'But we didn't know how close the Priztor would come to striking at our capital. And it turns out that keeping you safe served a dual purpose.' He turned back from the edge of the platform and walked until he was standing at the top of the stairs leading down to the docks. 'In fact, that's why I've called you here today.'

Daisy was about to say something when she heard Malignis growl. Malignis never growled. What did that mean? She turned to look at him and his hackles were raised, his teeth bared.

The King snapped his fingers. 'Focus. We need to talk about your duty to this kingdom and its people. How best you can serve.'

Daisy took a step forwards, but Malignis was still growling and kept pace with her. He normally just lay around in her general vicinity. What was up with him? Nowhere was safer than the heart of the palace and right next to the King.

'Yes, of course, Father. I've got some ideas myself--' she turned to Malignis. Annoying hondfir. 'What is it?!'

Malignis barked and ran forwards towards the king. Daisy whipped her head up to look at her father, seeing black-clad figures appear at the top of the stairs behind him. The trainees never did their training assassinations on the King. What was this? A second row appeared behind the first. Twelve shadowy figures.

A look of confusion crossed the King's face and he turned. Daisy knew he was a competent earth caster, and he reacted without hesitation, a chunk of rock ripping from the cliff wall and hitting one of them in the side of the head. At the same time, Malignis jumped, sending two of them flying back down the stairs.

Then the figures burst into action. The King was flung to the side as they raced forward. Daisy realised that they were focusing on her. She turned and ran, but didn't even reach the stairs before one of them grabbed her. She shrank away from the touch, and managed to slip out of it, but the man's hand must have found her dress instead, and she fell to the floor. She twisted around to kick at her attacker and screamed.

Another chunk of mountain hit the shadowy figure in the side of the head, her father doing what he could, while at the same time Daisy felt bone crunch beneath her heel strike. The man lay down and didn't get back up. Behind him, she could see one of the men punch her father in the face. The King's head snapped back, and he dropped to the ground. Daisy screamed for help in a wordless cry. The same man that had hit her father stalked across the platform to her, and shouted something at the rest of the assassins. Most of them turned and ran down the steps, but two stayed. The killer in charge reached Daisy before she could even get back to her feet, let alone start running for Kort.

He grabbed Daisy by the arm, pulled her to her feet, and tugged off the mask covering his face. 'My name is Ojik. You are coming with us. Be silent, don't struggle, and we won't hurt you. Understand?'

Ojik? Not that Daisy had much attention to spare for such minutiae, but Ojik's voice wasn't as deep as the rest of the grunts and shouts the other assassins had let loose. Ojik's accent was harsh, and her words clipped, clearly marking her as a Priztor.

In response to these instructions, Daisy did the only logical thing. She screamed.

The back of Ojik's hand hit Daisy so hard her vision faded to black, and then exploded in sparks of white hot pain.

A new voice now, one of the other masked-figures. 'The others are dead, and it's coming.'

Daisy, still half blind, was thrown into the arms of the other assassins. 'Get her to the boat and lock her up. I'll handle the hondfir.'

As her captors dragged her away, she saw Ojik pull her back, releasing shoulder length black hair.

Malignis charged, releasing a sharp, flame infused bark.

\* \*

Kort's head whipped round as he heard Malignis call to him. He hadn't gone far, as he hadn't known if Daisy would need to talk to him about whatever she was talking to the King about. An ear to listen, unconnected to a mouth that would talk, was one of his regular tasks as Lord Protector.

He turned to one of the casters fixing the door. 'Go and get the guard.'

The caster looked confused for a second, but knew that he couldn't question the Lord Protector. 'Yes, sir.'

The bark came again. Kort's heart beat fast. Why was he doing that? He only barked when... Kort walked as fast as he could to the edge of the throne room, not wanting to break decorum for anyone watching, and warring with the Queen's orders to leave them alone.

His eyes widened and his grip tightened on the stone railing. The king on the floor, unmoving. The princess being dragged to the docks. Three figures all in black. He turned and sprinted down the curving steps, taking them five at a time.

His mind raced. An assassination attempt?

Malignis and the lone black figure came into view round the cliff face, and Kort sprinted towards the attacker, knowing there was no time for hesitation. As if sensing him, Malignis jumped to the side allowing Kort a clear path.

Faster than an eye could blink, Kort had made his opening strike. He unsheathed his saber, calling upon his fire to wrap around the blade. A normal man may have been able to escape a saber drawn that fast, but no man could escape the extra range his fire magic gave him. As it flicked out of his scabbard, close enough to lop off a chunk of the attackers hair, the fire lashed out even further, flashing bright and extending several feet over the viewing platform's balcony.

The attacker fell back, hand to newly burnt face. Kort allowed Malignis to run in, ready to savage what should now be a scorched body. A quick glance at his flank showed that Malignis was bleeding. Kort's heart skipped a beat at seeing his best friend hurt, but he pushed that aside and headed for the downed King.

Kort heard Malignis squeal and spun to see the black-clad attacker on their knees. Kort could now see their face properly. Their pristine, unmarked, unburned, face. Impossible, unless they were protected by...

'Lord Protector, Kortanus Volcos. I knew you'd show despite our best efforts.'

Her accent was thick but understandable, her words harsh and clipped. Kort had already assumed they were Priztor, but hearing the woman speak confirmed it.

'I'd love to chat,' Kort said, 'but I need to kill you, make sure the King is okay, and then save the Princess. So shall we?'

Malgnis had regained his footing and was circling round to the back of the attacker.

'My name is Ojik Vaster Kan. I give you this one chance to allow us to leave. If so, you will not be harmed.'

Kort scoffed. The woman was unarmed. No matter her skill or Companion, Kort had the edge.

He charged forwards, holding his saber to the side. A bold charge that would end this quickly.

Ojik flicked her hand out, and several bolts flew at Kort. He raised his free hand and knocked them aside with his own magic. Ojik tried to jump to roll away, but it was too late, he'd got her. He swung his saber in a wide arc, again willing flames to erupt from the steel, and he felt the blow connect with her midsection.

Ojik flew across the platform and slammed into the cliff face, slumping to the ground. That was strange. She should have been cut in half by his saber. Ojik seemed dazed, and Malgnis was already charging in to finish her off.

Just before Malgnis pounced, Ojik's clothes changed colour. They had been black, but suddenly became red. It was like the colour was leeching from her clothes and pooling on the floor next to her.

Malgnis jumped, his razor-sharp, fire-hot mouth aimed at Ojik's throat, when the pool of blackness swirled and formed itself into a giant hand, grabbing Malgnis' head and throwing him aside.

A dark caster, not uncommon for a Priztar, but with a Companion that could change shape and survive a hit from his own sword? It was obvious both she and her Companion were powerful, but he didn't have time to think about it now, he needed to finish this.

Ojik got to her feet and part of her Companion broke off and fixed itself to her hand, forming a short sword. 'Looks like it's two on one.'

Kort looked to Malgnis who hadn't recovered from being thrown. He had a sudden strong urge to let Ojik escape and tend to Malgnis, but he knew he couldn't do that.

Kort crossed his saber in front of himself in a protective stance and advanced slowly. He focused his magic into his left hand and unleashed a powerful gout of flame at Ojik. She rolled to the side, flame barely licking at her heels. Kort had to admire her skill and precision. No movement was wasted. Each time she had dodged just enough to avoid the attack. Her physical

prowess was astonishing. But Kort had always been about brute strength. Anyone else would have thrown a fireball and would have missed her, and that would have been the end of it. But Kort's fireball had been strong enough to miss her, burn into the rock behind her, and then explode, showering the entire platform with chunks of cliff face.

Ojik ducked as she realised her mistake. Kort had been ready for it, and charged forwards shoulder first, hoping to crush Ojik against the wall at her back.

A step away, and he felt his knee almost rip itself from its own socket. He fell to the floor hard, but still had the sense to lash out with his saber. Unfortunately, Ojik had danced out of reach. Kort looked back to see a pool of blackness crawling up his leg. He raised his sword, but thought better of attacking his own ankle. He welled fire up inside him, and focused it into his foot. An easy enough task, as fire kicks were effective against most opponents. The dark creature hissed as it pooled back onto the floor.

Kort felt a blow against his chest, and he skidded backwards along the floor. His chest plate suddenly felt icy cold and took his breath away. He hadn't seen the dark bolt Ojik had thrown, but his armour had saved him.

Kort got to his feet as Ojik ran towards him, planning to follow up her bolt with a quick evisceration. She was fast enough to already be on top of him, sword coming in fast. Kort barely got his saber up in time to block before her second strike came in hard and slashed his left arm.

Kort clenched his teeth against the cold that seeped into his body and left his arm limp. He needed to get her away from him. Her combination of speed and dark infusion meant that every tiny cut would leave a limb disabled. Death by a thousand cuts – but she only needed two cuts to disable him.

Ojik was spinning around Kort's guard when he decided to dash forward, aiming to smash her face with his forehead. He missed, but his shoulder pushed her away just enough that he could get his saber between them again.

Ojik took a few steps back, edging away from the cliff face and back towards the steps down. 'This has been fun, but it's time for me to leave.'

'Why would I let you leave? I'm winning,' Kort said, ignoring his limp left arm.

Ojik pointed behind him, and Kort turned, careful to keep her in view.

Malignis looked like he was covered in a deep shadow despite lying in sunlight. Kort could see him shivering. Could see that his mouth and eyes no longer had the glow of fire that always lay in them.



'No!' Kort shouted and ran to Malignis. He dropped his saber and skidded along the floor. He put his hand to Malignis' ribs, and for the first time in his life, since the very first moment he'd met Malignis in the forests of emberidge, Malignis was cold to the touch.

The shadow fell away from the bright red fur, and formed a small, scuttling, bug-like creature that scurried over to Ojik, forming back into her clothes. Ojik turned and walked away.

Malignis was covered in cuts, his fur matted with blood. Most of it wasn't his, and Kort gritted his teeth in a twisted smile that he'd put up such a fight. He'd done his best. But Kort didn't know how to make him warm again.

He heard footsteps coming down the stairs and saw the palace guard arriving. 'To the docks! They've got the Princess!'

Kort wanted to help the Princess, but couldn't leave Malignis like this. He scanned the arms of the guards that passed. One of them would be the physiker.

'You!' Kort shouted, finally seeing the white arm guard instead of the standard silver. 'Help me.'

He stepped aside pointing to Malignis. The Physiker silently assessed the hondfir, running hands all over the body. Kort knelt by Malignis' head and scratched between his ears.

'How long has he been like this?' The guard asked.

'Only a few moments. Half a minute at the most.'

'This is... I've only seen this before on a Companion that has been left out for days. A dark creature, yes?'

'Yes,' Kort said, dread growing in his heart. He looked at Malignis' face. His eyes were closed, and his mouth shut. Kort couldn't see his chest rising and falling anymore. 'What do we do?'

'Sir, I'm sorry.'

Kort looked at the man sharply. 'Do something,' he said in a low voice.

The guard bent down and listened to Malignis' chest for a few seconds. 'There's nothing left, sir. He's gone.'

'No. He's still there.'

The guard didn't look up to meet Kort's eye.

'Save him!' Kort screamed, hands grabbing the guard by his armour and shaking him. Seeing the guard didn't believe him, he threw the man to the ground and held his hand out to the cliff face. 'If he was beyond help, then how could I do this?'

Kort reached into himself and called up the fire that Malignis had granted him when they first bonded. A fire that had kept him warm during freezing nights on battlefields, and had reminded

him that he always had someone by his side. And he couldn't. He reached for it, and it didn't come.

Kort closed his eyes. Kort closed his eyes and cried for the first time since the night he was a little boy, alone and scared in the forest of emberidge, and a young hondfir had pressed his cold, wet nose against his cheek.