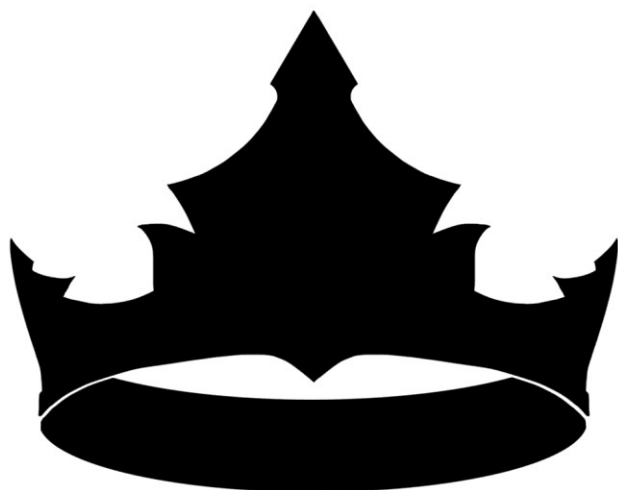


# REVENANT PRINCE

T. A. HERNANDEZ



*This book contains varying degrees of the following:  
Mild language, violence, depictions of death, references to self-harm and  
suicidal ideation, exploration of trauma and mental illness, discrimination,  
and imprisonment. Please read safely and responsibly.*

## REVENANT PRINCE

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PART I

THE DRAGON  
& HER PRINCE







# SAVIR

“WHO ARE YOU?”

It wasn't the first time Valkyra had asked the question, and Savir had an easy response ready. He kicked at a rock in his path and answered with the flat tone of memorized recital. “My name is Prince Savir Akraja Jai Sharma.”

The name itself still didn't seem to fit, but the royal title, at least, was comfortable. Perhaps that made him conceited. He couldn't remember anything about himself, and yet he dared to call himself a prince? But in all his desperate graspings at the memories he'd lost, that title was the only thing that made sense. He couldn't explain why, but the surety it brought was like a tether connecting him to his past. He clung to it, hoping if he held on long enough, it would lead him to the rest of his history.

Perched on his shoulder, Valkyra gave a low hum and brushed her long, silky tail over his back. The sunlight filtering through the trees above dappled their path and danced across Savir's vision as he walked. Despite the abundant shade, the air was warm and muggy—a typical autumn day in Kavora.

He snatched at the thought, trying to pull up the recollection of some other autumn from his earlier life. After a few seconds, he gave up. There was never anything personal associated with the knowledge his mind carried, a fact that only left him discouraged if he dwelled on it too long.

“What else?” Valkyra asked, drawing his attention back to her original question.

He sighed. She wanted more than his name. After all, a name was only a small part of a person's identity, and if Savir wanted to remember who he was, he needed to know his own story. She'd been telling it to him in pieces for the last two weeks, and she would often ask him to repeat it back. They both hoped that in doing so, the memories he'd lost would return.

Ideally *before* they reached Valmandi.

"I'm the rightful heir to the Kavoran Empire," he replied, "believed to be missing or dead for seventeen years. After my father died, assassins were sent to kill me and my mother. She discovered this plot and arranged for me to be taken away from the palace. I was raised in secrecy and safety in the Vihaara Forest by her trusted maidservant—that's you—until I came of age and could take my place on the throne."

Valkyra nodded her approval. "Good. And then what?"

"We were attacked on our way to Valmandi. You were killed, I was injured. I lost my memories, and you..." He gave her a sidelong glance, conjuring up the very earliest memory he had—her spirit hovering in front of him the morning he'd regained consciousness. She'd appeared as a woman then, her features hard and square, but beautiful. The Bond they'd formed had allowed her to take on a physical form, but not a human one. Now, she was a small, feathered dragon, her fur pure white and her eyes a gleaming silver.

"You became a Spirit Tarja," he said. "But I'm not supposed to tell anyone that." According to Valkyra, very few people had known she was a Tarja when she was still alive, and she'd been no one of great consequence. Better to let everyone assume she was nothing more than a well-trained pet. That way, she could continue to watch over and counsel him discreetly—something that would be even more critical now that he'd lost his memories.

He tested his newfound magic, shooting tiny sparks of lightning from his fingertips. Bonding with Valkyra meant his life would be shortened by half, and she had presented the alternative choice that he go to Valmandi on his own and leave her spirit to fade away. In the end, it hadn't been much of a choice at all. Savir needed her. Besides, the ability to use magic like any natural born Tarja was turning out to be a gratifying tradeoff.

A stray tendril of lightning crackled more violently than he'd intended and stung the end of his nose. He let out a yelp and quickly closed off his connection to his altma. It slid back down to some quiet place in his core, latent for now but still within reach.

Valkyra cleared her throat in a way that sounded very much like a growl. "Are you *quite* finished with your games, Your Highness?"

Savir stuffed his hands into his pockets. "Sorry."

Her claws dug into his shoulder ever so slightly, but she didn't launch into one of her usual lectures. Instead, she simply resumed testing him. "What's our plan when we reach Valmandi?"

"We're going to meet King Bhajan and Queen Indira," he recited flatly. "My mother's parents. We need them to back my claim to the throne before we bring

it to Empress Dashiva's attention." That was the part he dreaded most. There were so many ways for things to go wrong, even if he hadn't forgotten his entire past. "How am I supposed to convince them I'm the prince, anyway? We should at least wait until my memories return."

"We're *not* waiting," Valkyra hissed.

He stopped in his tracks. "Why not?"

"Because we've waited too long for this already. I gave up *everything* to make you a man I'd be proud to see on the throne. We've been hiding in the shadows like peasants all this time when we should be living safely and comfortably in the palace."

He swallowed some of his ire at that reminder. If they'd been safe in the palace, they wouldn't have been attacked out here in the forest. Valkyra would be alive, and he'd still have his memories.

She brushed a soft, feathered wing across his cheek. "That throne is rightfully yours, Savir. You deserve better than *this*." She swept her foreleg out to gesture at the trees around them, the mud on his boots, the flat coin purse and empty sheath at his belt. "More importantly, the people of this country deserve better. Your rule is what will solidify the bond between Jakhat and Valmandi to truly unite the empire. Your mother knew that. It's why she sent you away, so you could be safe until your time came. That time is now."

He shook his head. "Maybe so. But they're going to have questions about where I've been the last seventeen years, and I can't remember anything before the last two weeks."

"What does that matter? You can make it all up, spin your own story however you'd like. You were barely more than an infant when we left the palace, and once we were gone, no one else was around to watch you grow or make those memories with you. They're not going to know any better."

"But *I* will. I can't just lie about this—not when taking the throne could impact the entire empire." He crossed his arms tight, fingers pressed hard into the flesh of his arms. "How can I even be sure *you're* not lying to me?"

The question had been swimming through his thoughts for days, a constant, lurking shadow he hadn't dared give voice to until now. Valkyra's silver eyes narrowed, but she didn't flinch or immediately try to reassure him. She said nothing at all, and Savir's heartbeat seemed to echo in the silence between them, louder even than the birdsong coming from the trees.

When he couldn't stand it any longer—the quiet or her stare—he lowered his gaze. "It's just, I don't—"

"Shh," she cut him off, eyes darting away from his face to something farther down the road. "Someone's coming."

He heard them before he saw them, a trio of voices laughing and exchanging vulgar banter. Three men came around a bend and over a small rise, and Savir began walking toward them, sticking to one side of the path to let them pass on the other. The one who spotted him first nudged his two companions, and all their laughter ceased as they began whispering to each other instead.

“Careful,” Valkyra murmured in his ear, but Savir didn’t need the warning. His last encounter with a stranger on the road had left her dead and him with an injury that cost him his memories, and these men didn’t have a particularly friendly look about them. They spread themselves out across the entire width of the path like wolves blocking their prey’s escape. One was already reaching for the hatchet hanging from his belt—the kind meant for chopping wood, but it was still sharp enough to kill a man.

Savir swept his cloak back to reveal the flintlock pistol at his hip, which hung opposite an empty scabbard. The blade itself had been lost at some point during his previous fight, and neither he nor Valkyra had been able to find it. But the pistol was already loaded, and his fingers curled around its stock with the ease of something done thousands of times before.

“Let me pass,” he called out to the three men. “I don’t have anything valuable on me, and I don’t want any trouble.”

“People always say that,” said the man with the hatchet, swinging the weapon up to rest on his shoulder. “But everyone’s got *something* of value, in the end. That pistol of yours looks handy. And I bet that dragon would fetch a few hundred jitaara at least. Give them up, and you can be on your way. We don’t want trouble, either.”

Savir raised his pistol halfway and pulled back the hammer in warning. His companions drew their own weapons—a curved dagger and a blunderbuss with a flared barrel.

“Come on, boy,” said the first man. “You’ve only got one shot in that pistol, and there are three of us. Make the smart choice.”

They were right, and the introduction of the bandit’s firearm would have complicated matters under normal circumstances. But there was one small detail they weren’t accounting for, and that meant the odds were still very much in Savir’s favor.

“Take your time,” Valkyra whispered. “Focus your energy. Strike only when you’re ready.”

Savir made a show of considering the bandits’ offer. With a resigned sigh, he finally muttered, “All right,” and bent to set the pistol on the ground.

Altma buzzed against his skin like a hundred droning bees, stronger than any of the magic he’d dared conjure before now. He couldn’t contain it, didn’t know



how to control it, so before it could escape him entirely, he did the only thing he could. Stretching his hands out, he let the energy burst from his fingertips.

Blue lightning crackled between him and the three bandits. Valkyra leapt from his shoulder as a shot rang out. Savir toppled back, uncertain whether the force he felt was from the bandit's bullet or from the recoil of his own magic. His vision swam with jagged phantoms of blinding blue, but there was no pain, and his searching hands found no wet blood on his clothes or body.

"Get up!" Valkyra yelled, wings fanning his face as she fluttered in front of him. "You missed one."

He rose shakily and looked up just in time to see the blurry image of a man charging toward him, weapon raised above his head. Savir's body moved of its own volition. Instinct allowed him to narrowly dodge the blade's deadly arc. Another attack followed, and he rolled to one side, toward the gleam of what he thought was his pistol still on the ground. He swept it up and took aim, pulling the trigger before the man could get close enough to strike.

The body toppled forward with a groan and a thud and then went very still. Savir looked back to where the other two men lay, equally motionless.

Dead.

He should have been shocked. He should have been horrified. After all, he'd never killed anyone before.

Had he?

As his heart settled back into a normal rhythm and the rest of his vision cleared, all Savir felt was a reassuring sense of calm. He was alive, and they were not. They'd attacked him, and he had defended himself. It was that simple.

Valkyra settled onto his shoulder once more, perched upright as she pressed her forelegs to her chest. Her claws sunk in deep and withdrew something, which she held out to him. "A souvenir," she said with a hint of amusement.

The small, round ball dropped onto his palm, its metal surface smooth and unbloodied. Though she had a physical form, Valkyra wasn't alive in the same sense he was, so the shot she'd taken for him had caused no real damage. Still, the fact that she'd automatically jumped in to save him was touching, and he suddenly felt even more foolish for having questioned her motives before. She'd been nothing but helpful and supportive from the moment he regained consciousness and had given him every reason to trust her. If not for her, he might still be wandering around trying to figure out who or where he was.

He exchanged the undamaged shot for a cartridge in his pouch and reloaded his pistol, hoping he wouldn't have cause to use it again. Two separate run-ins with brigands such as these was more than enough for a single journey, and all he wanted now was to make it to Valmandi in one piece.

“Let’s go,” Valkyra said. “It will be getting dark soon, and if anyone comes looking for them, we’ll want to be somewhere else.”

Savir set off down the path once more. A few minutes lapsed in silence before he cleared his throat and spoke to her again. “Thank you for protecting me back there.”

“I’ll always protect you, dear.”

His face burned with shame. “I’m sorry about earlier, for accusing you of lying to me. It’s just that...well, this is all *so much*.”

“I know,” she said softly. “And it was a fair question. Of course, I want you to trust me as you once did, but trust takes time, and it’s built on all our past experiences. Without your past, you can’t be sure of anything. I’m so sorry it came to that. I wish I could have done more to protect you back then.”

She’d already given up her life for him; what more could anyone have done? He brushed his hair out of his face with one hand. “What if I never remember?”

“I believe you will, in time. And if not, that will be a great tragedy, but one we’ll get through together. The same as we’ve always done.”

A bitterness rose in the back of his throat. He simultaneously recoiled from and took comfort in her certainty, in the calm sense of closeness she brought to every conversation. She knew him when he didn’t even know himself, and there was something so unfair about that he wanted to scream. He squeezed his hands into fists, nails digging into the flesh of his palms, and clamped down on his frustration before it could break free.

“What is it about these lost memories that’s really bothering you?” she asked. The question would have seemed patronizing if not for the sincerity in her voice.

“Everything,” he replied. “Who am I without them? What if I’m not the same person I used to be? What if I can’t be a good ruler?”

“Hm,” Valkyra murmured. “Close your eyes.”

“Why?”

“Try something with me. Please.”

He hesitated a moment but stopped walking and did as she’d requested. The forest’s yellow-green light faintly permeated his vision.

“I want you to imagine what makes a good ruler, a good man. The kind of man you want to be.”

The man who came to mind was both vague and distinct all at once—a figure shrouded in shadow, but he got the sense this was a specific person. He couldn’t remember any such person, of course, and there were no clear physical features, but there was an awareness of who this man was at his core. Kind, gentle, brave, selfless. Strong, not necessarily in body, but in spirit. Happy, hopeful, loyal. A good man.

For a few moments, it seemed the beginning of a song began to play in Savir's mind, until Valkyra spoke again.

"You may not remember who you were before, but that doesn't mean you can't still be a good man. A good *ruler*. And it starts by taking on the responsibility you were born to. You know that, don't you?"

Savir opened his eyes and nodded. He *did* know, and though he couldn't control if or when his memories returned, he could control what he did next. The only choice that made sense was to keep moving forward.

And so, with Valkyra's comforting weight on his shoulder, he put one foot in front of the other and continued down the road toward Valmandi.



# ALEIDA

THE TREMORS WERE GETTING WORSE.

Or at least, that was how it seemed whenever Aleida did anything with her hands. Water now seeped through her tunic where she'd spilled on herself while trying to take a drink. She scowled as she struggled to fit the stopper back into her canteen, but her fingers wouldn't cooperate. It didn't matter how careful she was, how still she held the rest of her body. Her hands hadn't stopped shaking since Valkyra had severed their Bond and left her for dead.

She'd never be able to draw or paint again.

The ache wrought by that knowledge felt dull next to the gaping chasm of grief over losing Tyrus, but after everything else she'd suffered, it seemed a cruel final blow—one inflicted by a merciless god who must find amusement in her misery.

Or perhaps this was punishment for everything she'd done in pursuit of her goals, dozens upon dozens of sins, wrongdoings, and questionable choices. Not least of which was abandoning her brother to suffer and die alone while she chased an impossible cure for his illness. If her pain was nothing more than Artex's justice, maybe she deserved it.

Or maybe there was no Artex at all.

That almost would have been more comforting, but after so many years of clinging to the faith she'd grown up with, casting those beliefs aside now would have been like ripping out her own heart.

If only she could do that, too. Get rid of her heart and all the anguish it carried.

"Are you coming?" Mitul's voice drifted from somewhere ahead.

She'd lost him through the trees and quickened her pace, wincing at the twist

of a cramp in her gut and the throbbing in her skull. She suspected the physical pain was a lingering symptom from the trauma of her Bond being severed. With the dogged pace Mitul was setting and no time to rest or heal, that pain had only worsened. Perhaps that was why her tremors were worsening, too.

She caught sight of the older man on the narrow path. Ahead of him, the Adrati river cut through the trees, sunlight gleaming off its surface. They would have to cross it, but it wasn't particularly fast or wide at this point, and Aleida was a good swimmer. She couldn't say whether the same was true for Mitul.

He pulled his graying hair into a ponytail at the base of his skull and turned. Dark eyes met hers from beneath furrowed brows, and his jaw was set with the same tightness it had held since Amar went missing. She knew his concern was for his friend rather than for her, but his expression softened a little as she stopped beside him. "Do we need to rest? You don't look so good."

As much as she would have liked to take him up on the offer, she forced herself to shake her head. "I'm fine. Let's keep going."

"First we need to decide which way." He pointed to the river. "We could follow the Adrati south to Valmandi from here, or cross it and head west to Jakhat."

She frowned. Was he thinking of changing their plans? "I thought we'd decided on Jakhat."

"Did we?" he said a bit tersely. "Is that where Valkyra would take Amar? You didn't seem too certain before."

Aleida's shoulders tensed. "I never claimed to be certain. You asked what I thought she would do, and I told you. It's not like I can read her mind, but it's the best guess I have."

"A guess," he muttered. "Based on what, exactly?"

"For starters, I know her better than you or any of your friends." The fact that she hadn't known Valkyra very well at all in the end still gnawed at her, but the statement remained true all the same. "You said that yourself."

"I did. I just want to be sure. Or at least, as sure as we can be."

"She probably wants power," Aleida said. "Or revenge. In either case, what better place to go than Jakhat? Those who wronged her are there, and she may still have connections to people who can help her regain power." Her stomach churned at the very idea. Nandini Kumar—the woman Valkyra had been before her death—was partially responsible for the invasion of Vis, and the last thing Aleida wanted was for her to rise to any position of authority again. The continued existence of her spirit in this world was injustice enough.

"Jakhat," Mitul mused, staring out across the river. "I suppose it does make more sense than anything else. Come on, then." He shifted the straps of the bags

on his shoulder—his own satchel along with Amar’s pack. The immortal man’s sword stuck out from the top, embellished hilt glinting in the sun. Its sheath and belt had gone with Amar himself.

The river was slow and only chest-high in the middle, which made the crossing easy enough. Once on the other side, they stopped briefly to refill their canteens, then continued at the same unrelenting pace.

Aleida was stumbling over her own feet by the time they made camp. A few hours of daylight remained, but Mitul laid down his bags at the base of a nearby tree and began to arrange a circle of rocks for a fire. She suspected he’d only chosen to stop because he’d noticed her energy flagging, but he had the decency not to say anything, and she was too exhausted to insist they continue. Instead, she tossed her own pack down and went to help him.

They worked in silence until they had a decent blaze going, and Mitul mixed rice, herbs, and dried fish in a shallow pan for their supper. They also ate the last of some berries Aleida had foraged the day before. As the fire burned low, he took out his saraj and began to play a somber tune, something he’d done nearly every night during their travels together. Though his songs were all melancholy, the music seemed to soothe him. His body would relax, and some of the tight lines in his face smoothed away.

It was like her art, a safe and comforting release for the turmoil within her. She wished she had that now—she certainly needed it—but she couldn’t bring herself to even make an attempt. Not when she’d lost so much control of her hands.

She glanced down at them, shaking in her lap even as she clasped them together. Rage flared within her like embers in a gust of wind.

It was Valkyra’s fault—all of it. Everything Aleida had lost and suffered could be tied back to *her*. If not for the fact that the deceitful Spirit Tarja was dead already, she would have sworn to kill her. Since that wasn’t an option, she would settle for wiping her from existence entirely.

The quiet whisperings of conscience brushed against her brooding thoughts. Vengeance was not Artex’s way. Artex was a god of love and creation, not malice and destruction.

But she was no longer Artex’s disciple. If he was real, he had abandoned her when she needed him most, and she hated him almost as much as she hated Valkyra. She was finished with gods and faith. Vengeance and fury would be her faith now, and retribution her only prayer.

Beneath that fury was something else, cold and dark and full of teeth. As a Tarja, she’d learned to be mindful of her emotions. Doing so helped to create the harmony between mind, body, and spirit that was necessary to channel *altma*.

But she was no longer a Tarja, and if she went anywhere near that cold, dark feeling, it would swallow her whole. Anger was easier, an old friend that had been blazing within her for years. It burned, but it also strengthened her, and she needed that more than ever now. It was the only thing carrying her forward.

A sudden shriek from the trees broke through her musings, and a discordant note sounded as Mitul startled. A dusky brown shape flew toward them, large black eyes locking on to Aleida. Feros landed atop her knee, his talons pricking her skin. She dislodged him unceremoniously, which earned her a sharp nip from his beak and a few scratches on her arms. Damned savage bird. What was he even doing here? Tyrus couldn't send her any more letters.

"Is that a strix?" Mitul asked, watching the creature with a mixture of fascination and caution. "I've never seen a tame one before."

Aleida scoffed at the idea of Feros being considered *tame*, but she supposed that for Tyrus, he had been. She'd never been quite as enamored with the beast. Quite the opposite, actually. They tolerated each other for the sake of a mutually beneficial arrangement where Feros carried messages and Aleida occasionally provided him with a free meal. With Tyrus and the rest of her family gone, however, she had no more use for the strix. In fact, his presence was only an unwanted reminder of her grief.

He was scratching at the pan they'd used to cook in, and Mitul bent closer to get a better look. "He's handsome, in an eerie sort of way."

"He's a menace, is what he is," she muttered, holding out her arm. "Come here, you brute."

Feros' head swiveled around to look at her, his eyes as dark and round as two starless holes in the night. He squawked once, then fluttered over to perch on her arm. Aleida fumbled at the lid of the tube between his wings, but her shaking fingers couldn't open it.

After a few seconds, Mitul stood and took a tentative step toward her. "Will he mind if I help?"

She shrugged. "You can try."

Feros shrieked at Mitul and fanned his wings out wide, but he settled at Aleida's sharp hiss and allowed the man to relieve him of his parcel. The bundle of papers rolled inside was thick, and Mitul handed them over to her without looking at them.

"Go on, then," she said to the strix, raising her arm a little to encourage his departure. "Get out of here."

He leapt into the air but didn't go far, settling on the branch of a nearby tree to watch them. Mitul went back to his saraj and resumed playing, and Aleida stared at the papers in her hand. With shaking fingers, she pulled away the string

binding them and unrolled them in her lap.

The top page was a letter scrawled in Hasan's slanted handwriting. She glanced over it, unable to read the words, and set it aside. Beneath that were pages and pages of drawings she'd sent to Tyrus over the last two years, their own unique way of keeping in touch after she'd set out on her quest.

A hot lump burned in her throat as she flipped through each one. He'd saved everything she'd ever sent him. She had her own bundle of pages like this, letters and drawings from him to her. They'd all been ruined to some degree during the battle at sea between her hired pirate crew and the ship carrying Amar and his friends, but she'd kept them anyway, believing they were all she had left of her brother.

Now, she had these, and she wasn't sure whether she wanted to hug Hasan or curse him for sending them. These pages showed all the love and joy she and Tyrus had shared, but the sheer number of them revealed all the time she'd wasted, days and weeks and months that she'd left her brother alone. Her vision blurred, and despite her best efforts, a few tears splashed onto the top page.

"Bad news?" Mitul asked.

Aleida ignored the question and hurried to roll up the papers again. She could look through them later—somewhere private where she wouldn't risk having a full breakdown in front of Mitul or anyone else.

It was only after she'd stuffed the roll inside her pack that she realized she'd forgotten to bundle up Hasan's letter with the rest. She picked it up and glanced across the low flames at Mitul. Before she could think too much about it, she asked, "Do you know how to read?"

He looked up at her but kept playing. "Well enough. Why?"

"Could you teach me?"

His fingers stopped moving. He set down the saraj and put a few more branches on the fire before answering. "We need to get to Jakhat as soon as possible. I don't want to lose any time or get sidetracked on things that aren't important."

"You can teach me while we walk. Or at night, when we stop to rest."

"To *rest*. And to sleep. Not to further strain ourselves with mental exercises."

Aleida folded up the letter and stuffed it into her pack. It was a stupid idea anyway, and she was already relying on his help more than she would have liked. "Fine. Forget I asked."

He didn't say anything for a few seconds, and the only sound between them was the quiet crackle of fire snapping at the branches. She tried to put the idea out of her mind. It wouldn't change anything anyway—not now. It was too late for that.



“I’m sorry,” Mitul said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. “I shouldn’t have been so dismissive. It’s clearly important to you, even if I don’t understand why.”

She clenched her jaw, unsure how to explain or if she even wanted to. Her illiteracy was part of what had allowed Valkyra to manipulate her. That wasn’t the only tactic she’d used, and even if Aleida had been able to read, the dragon likely would have found some other way to control the situation. Still, that one personal shortcoming nagged at her, like a splinter burrowed beneath her skin. If only she’d learned to read as a child. If only she’d paid more attention to Hasan’s lessons.

If only.

It was too late to change things now, but she didn’t want to carry that weakness the rest of her life, haunted by the reminder of what it had cost her.

“You saw the letter,” she said at last, referring not to Hasan’s newest one, but the one that had come before. They’d all seen it, lying beside her on the forest floor when they found her. It was how they’d known her name before she’d been able to tell them.

Mitul’s gaze was made more intense in the flickering firelight. “I did.”

“She lied to me about what it said. I couldn’t read, so she made something up, made me think Tyrus was still alive.”

“Tyrus is your brother?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “I’m very sorry for your loss. I should have said that sooner. We don’t know each other very well, but no one should have to go through what you did.”

Aleida forced down the knot in her throat. The cold dark within her yawned wider, threatening to close its jaws around her. She couldn’t talk about this, certainly not with a man who was scarcely more than a stranger. Instead, she let her rage fill her up until there was nothing else. “You have no idea what I’ve been through,” she hissed. “You know nothing about me.”

If he was at all taken aback by her tone, he didn’t show it. “Don’t I?” He clasped one hand over his wrist, thumb running across the thin band of silver and turquoise he wore there. “You were willing to do anything to save your brother. I know something about what that’s like.”

It took her a few seconds to realize who he must be talking about. “Amar’s not your brother.”

“You don’t have to be blood to be family.”

She grunted and went back to staring at the fire. “Then be glad yours is still alive.”

“Yes, thank the skies. I’m truly sorry yours isn’t.”

The cold bit deep into her chest. She bowed her head, vision blurred, shoulders trembling. Mitul walked around the fire to sit near her. He said nothing, but having him there was a small comfort. She let a few tears fall, then sniffed and dried her face on her shirt.

“I don’t read very well,” Mitul said quietly. “But I’m happy to teach you what I can, if it will help.”

She managed a small, thin smile. “Thank you. I think it will.”



## KESARI

KESARI SHIELDED HER EYES WITH ONE HAND AND STARED OUT ACROSS THE sand to the rock formations jutting upward, their rough surfaces as bright and orange as Lucian's flames in the waning afternoon sun. She could just make out the blocky shapes of tents at the edges of the oasis settlement. More than three weeks had passed since they'd parted ways with Mitul and Aleida, but finally, Hayathu was within sight. The sturdy pair of horses they'd bought early on in their journey had made travel both faster and easier than before, but Kesari was looking forward to a proper meal and a good night's rest once they reached civilization.

Saya looked less enthusiastic. She reined her horse to a stop and took a long drink, eyebrows pinched in the middle. Kesari drank from her own canteen and gave the young woman a sidelong glance. "We're almost there," she said in her best Sularan, which she'd been practicing as they traveled.

Saya inhaled a deep breath and nodded. "Almost."

Kesari nudged her horse forward, but when her friend didn't follow, she stopped again and twisted in the saddle to look back.

"I think she's frozen," Lucian murmured quietly in her ear.

"Shh. Give her a minute."

They waited in silence, but Saya did indeed appear frozen. She stared ahead, unblinking, one hand resting on the saddlebag that held the handwritten book she'd taken from Shavhalla. It would be her haseph offering to her tribe, marking the completion of the pilgrimage she'd been on for more than two years.

If accepted, that was. As Saya had explained, there was a chance the tribal leaders—including her own mother—would reject her offering. The thought made Kesari's insides twist, even though the outcome would have no direct

bearing on her. She could only imagine how Saya herself must feel. It was no wonder she needed to pause a moment before completing this last stretch of their journey.

So they waited. Lucian entertained himself by humming a jaunty little tune that sounded like one of the shanties they'd heard aboard the *Vindicator*. Kesari simply watched Saya, and when the waiting became too much, she blurted out the words she hoped would be most helpful. "I'm here with you."

Saya gave her a slightly confused look, and Kesari thought she must have misspoken. Her Sularan was getting better, though it was still more difficult to speak than it was to understand. She switched to Kavoran to better explain herself. "I know how important this is, and maybe you're scared. But you're not alone. However this turns out, we'll be right there with you." She shrugged. "Or maybe you're not scared. I've never seen you afraid of anything. But still, I'm here."

"You are, and I'm very glad for that. Thank you." She clicked her tongue at her horse and pressed her heels into his sides. Kesari's mount fell into stride beside hers, and they headed toward Hayathu at a steady walk. "And for the record," Saya added, "you *have* seen me afraid."

"When you were seasick on the *Vindicator*?" Lucian suggested. "Or when we were attacked by those spooky statues in Shavhalla?"

She laughed a little at his teasing, but when she spoke, her voice was somber. "A little, yes. But also when Valkyra and Jameson had you trapped in those roots, Kes. I thought she was going to kill you."

Kesari swallowed against a rush of her own fear at the memory, but with it came the bitter taste of shame and guilt. She'd been so helpless. She could have used her magic to stop them—she'd certainly tried. But fear had overwhelmed her, and when the others had needed her most, she'd failed them all.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what? It's not your fault."

"I should have done something more. Fought back or held the barrier longer. We had her trapped, but then I—"

"Then Aleida ruined everything," Saya cut in with a sharpness not directed at Kesari. "You're not the one to blame for any of it. You did your part." She sucked in a breath. "Skies, maybe Aleida was right. If we'd killed Jameson, we could have been rid of Valkyra, too."

Kesari shook her head vehemently, though she could understand Saya's point. Things might have gone very differently if they hadn't concerned themselves with saving the poor wizard. Still, after mulling it over these past few weeks, she was glad they'd chosen not to go down that route. Despite the

unfortunate outcome, she couldn't justify giving up on a man who'd helped them so much. At least they'd *tried* to save him.

And lost Amar in the process.

*Your fault*, whispered that self-disparaging voice in the back of her mind. She pushed it away, focusing on Saya's words instead. *You did your part*. And she had, as best as she could. It hadn't been enough, but next time, her best would be even better. *She* would be better. Stronger. Braver. More capable.

Except...what if that still wasn't enough?

"I guess it doesn't matter," Saya said. "It's done. All we can do now is deal with the consequences."

They rode along as evening turned to dusk, and small lights began to appear all around them. Most were blue, the faint glow of the mesala flowers native to the desert. Directly ahead, a few orange campfires flickered and grew. One seemed closer than the others, off to their west a little and well outside the settlement. Saya tugged her horse's reins in that direction, veering off the straight line they'd been making toward Hayathu. "Come on. I think I know who that is."

Not long after, they came upon a small encampment consisting of a single ghayat-hide tent, a bird roasting over a campfire, a dun colored horse, and a man sitting cross-legged atop a woven blanket. He turned to look at them as they approached. His features were even sharper than usual in the firelight, and his teeth gleamed like a fox's when he smiled.

"Do my eyes deceive me, or is that Saya hàs Seda approaching my camp?" Zefar asked in Sularan, and Kesari was pleased to realize she could understand everything he'd said. Her friend's full name might have confused her until recently, but she'd since learned about Sularan naming conventions and the custom of passing down their lineage through the mother's given name. 'Hàs Seda' simply meant, 'born of Seda.'

"It's me," Saya replied, stopping her horse at the edge of his small encampment.

The mercenary stood up to greet them. "And have you finally returned home, or are you only here for another visit?"

"Is that what you'd prefer?"

He shrugged. "I can't say I didn't enjoy the commotion you stirred up last time."

She swung herself down from the saddle and strode over to him. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, then. My haseph is finished. I'm back."

He beamed wider, then did something Kesari never would have expected. He put both hands on Saya's shoulders and pulled her into a tight hug. "Welcome back." He murmured something else to her, but the words were too quiet to

make out.

They broke apart as Kesari slid from her horse, and Zefar nodded to her and Lucian. "And you brought friends again."

"You remember Kesari and Lucian?"

"Of course. The Tarja girl and her fiery companion—how could I forget?" He motioned to the roasting bird. "Supper's almost ready, if you care to join me. There isn't much, but I'm a decent enough cook. Or were you planning to continue on to Hayathu?"

"We'll stay," Saya said quickly. When Zefar raised an eyebrow at her, she rolled her eyes. "I've been gone for two years. What's the rush now?"

He gave her a sly grin and a quick wink. "Stay until morning if you'd like."

They attended to their horses, tethering them near Zefar's to allow them to graze on the patches of wild grass in the area. Zefar checked the roasting bird and, once satisfied it was finished, divided it between himself, Kesari, and Saya. There was also a starchy vegetable Kesari had never tried before but thoroughly enjoyed.

While they ate, he caught Saya up on the latest happenings in Hayathu, including the many antics of her younger brothers. Kesari and Lucian exchanged a few amused smiles as they listened, both fondly remembering their interactions with the boys on their last visit.

"Ah, and I almost forgot," Zefar said. "Hazim returned from his haseph last week."

Saya leaned back and stretched her long legs in front of the fire. "Did he? It will be good to see him again."

"Your brother?" Kesari asked, trying to remember which one he was. There were several, and they all looked alike. As hard as she'd tried, she hadn't ever managed to figure out exactly who was who.

"The oldest," Saya said. "You never met him. He was away the last time we came through. What was his offering?"

"No idea," Zefar replied. "I didn't attend his ceremony."

She let out a sigh. "Of course you didn't."

He crossed his arms, his face suddenly tense. "What did you expect? He doesn't want anything to do with me, as he's made very clear several times."

"That's just his pride. You have to keep trying."

"I *have* tried—you know that. With all of them."

"They're only children. They don't know any better."

"Hazim's finished his haseph. He's a man now. He knows exactly who he wants to associate with, and I'm not on that list."

"He's still your nephew. My father would have wanted—"

“Your father’s dead,” Zefar snapped. “I’m tired of being rejected by all his brats simply because tradition says I’m not worthy.”

“Not all of them,” Saya said quietly.

For a moment, a wounded look passed over the man’s face. Then his jaw tightened, and he stood abruptly. “Not all. Not yet anyway. But you’ll be taking your place among the tribe soon, and what then?”

“I’m not going to—”

He made half an attempt at a smile. “Save us both the trouble and spare me the promises, all right? You’re going to be the masahi someday, and I’m just your disgraced outcast uncle. Even if you won’t admit it now, you’re better off denying me. I’d be selfish to want anything different.” He turned and started to walk away, out into the chill vastness of the desert.

“Zefar, stop,” Saya called after him. “Don’t walk away. Where are you going?”

He raised a hand to them over his shoulder and kept walking. “A man’s got to piss somewhere, and I’d prefer it not be in front of guests.”

Saya muttered something under her breath and continued to stare after him. Eventually, Kesari tried to fill the awkward silence with an obvious question. “So...he’s your uncle?”

“Yes, you failed to mention that before,” Lucian chimed in.

Saya rubbed at her temples with her fingertips. “He’s an outcast. I’m not really supposed to consider him family anymore. And I didn’t think Amar would appreciate that little connection, seeing how Zefar once killed him.”

“A fair point,” Lucian conceded.

“I’m sorry about your father,” Kesari said. “I had no idea.”

“It’s all right.” Her voice made clear it was very much *not* all right, but Kesari could understand that. More than two years had passed since Rajiv’s death, and though the pain was now easier to bear, she doubted she’d ever get past it completely.

“He was sick,” Saya added. “Not physically, but in his mind, his spirit. At least, that’s how my people see these sorts of things. I think Atreans call it melancholy.”

Kesari nodded. She’d heard the term before, though she didn’t know much about it.

“He fought it for a long time, for me and my mother and brothers. We thought he’d recovered, or at least learned to cope with it. But then he jumped off the cliffs there.” She pointed to the sharp, dropping silhouettes near Hayathu, no more than jagged shadows against the star-filled sky. “It nearly broke our family.”

“That’s awful. I can’t even imagine. I’m so sorry, Saya.”

She ran a hand along the sash draped over her shoulder and tied around her waist. Its color was the exact same shade of red as the haseph markings painted on her face. “This was his. He wore it on his haseph. So did Zefar, and I’ll give it to one of my brothers next. It’s not enough, but at least it’s a reminder of him to carry with us.”

“I’m sure that will mean a lot to them.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they’ll think it’s tainted, since it once belonged to an outcast.” She glanced in the direction Zefar had walked and shook her head. “He and my mother never got along, and after my father, it only got worse. I think they both blamed each other on some level. But I want my brothers to know Zefar the way I do. Especially the youngest ones. They were too little to remember our father very well, but Zefar is...not like him at all, actually, but he made me feel like I still had some piece of him here with me.”

Kesari glanced at Lucian, who in some ways had fulfilled the same role for her after Rajiv’s death. At times, that had been more painful than helpful, but in the end, it had aided her healing. It still did. Perhaps that was part of why Saya held such affection and respect for Zefar, despite his obvious faults and bad manners.

They watched the fire burn low, lost in their own thoughts, and Kesari’s eyes began to droop. She stifled a yawn.

“You should get some rest,” Saya said. “We can leave first thing in the morning. It won’t take long to reach Hayathu from here.”

Kesari stood and dusted the sand off her pants. She *was* tired. After retrieving her pack and blanket, she pulled on Rajiv’s coat for a little extra protection against the cold and laid down. “Goodnight, Saya,” she said, but the warrior did not reply. Zefar hadn’t returned, and her golden eyes still watched the distant sand and rock.

She would be all right; of that, Kesari was certain. For as long as she’d known her, Saya had been as strong and solid as the desert cliffs all around them. If anyone could handle whatever came tomorrow, it was her.

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