

SONG
OF
EARTH
AND
CLAWS

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CHAPTER 1

Fae cannot be ruled.

A map with clearly marked boundaries of the varying kingdoms seemed to contradict this saying, but Lannahi knew that the words held more truth. The shapes painted on the light marble floor were nothing more than a representation of the board, and the names and outlines of the countries, a record of the current state of the game. The kingdoms' subjects were players like any king and queen. Rulers were simply more determined to win.

Lannahi's lips curled into an ironic smile as she thought about her father's words. Once, she would have said that strength, craft, and courage were what distinguished monarchs from the crowd, but growing up in the royal court, she'd quickly understood that these qualities weren't a differentiator, but the bare minimum needed to survive the high-level games. General Kammau possessed the same

dominating strength as King Sarkal and Chancellor Llissal matched the king in cleverness, yet neither of them ever Challenged him. Asirri, Lannahi's mother, did challenge Sarkal to a duel, but despite it ending in a draw, she'd given up her crown, content with the titles of Knight and Royal Consort. Kammau, Llissal, and Asirri could reach for more power, but they did not want to. The rest of the citizens might not have been strong enough to confront the king directly nor had an army to face him in battle, but they could have left the kingdom to fight on the enemy's side—and yet they hadn't done that.

One needs to be determined to win, Sarkal liked to tell his children.

One needs to be lucky to win, Lannahi thought instead.

Her father didn't win seven cities by sheer determination. He was a powerful enchanter. If not for that, he never would have become king or would have lost his reign long ago.

Lannahi frowned. She wasn't so lucky. Her magical talent was laughable. If she didn't do something soon, she'd be forced to follow other people's orders for the rest of her life.

Her gaze moved over the map.

Plains and coasts were out of question. Most of the cities there were ruled by enchanters and water elementals. Too much risk.

She also dismissed the dry lands that belonged to the fire elementals. The chances of winning were much higher, but of living in peace afterward, almost none. The firebringers had difficulty in abiding by the Rules.

The terrains beyond the wide strip of steppes and deserts tempted not only with an easy victory but also with riches like cocoa and spices. On top of that, the unwarlike flowerspeakers... A dream kingdom to rule. If only encoun-

ters with the native insect species didn't threaten to leave one with memory loss or madness...

The northern part of the Continent... Lannahi shook her head. No, there was no point in pondering that. She was not an adventurer nor did she have the resources to build a city from scratch.

Lannahi sighed and shifted her gaze back to the southern part of the map. Since the plains and coasts were out of question, that left only the high mountains and the nests of air elementals or the deep winter forests and the cities belonging to the landshapers—the lands that bordered the edge of the civilized world.

Since living at heights didn't appeal to her...

Landshapers, she thought with bleak amusement. *That would be a sensation.*

No one challenged the landshapers. Not because it wasn't worthwhile as their land was rich with resources, but out of fear. Fear of repeating the past. It was the magic of the earth elementals that destroyed the part of the Continent now called the Shattered Lands. The fact that it happened hundreds of years ago didn't matter. The term "landunmakers" never went out of use. Nothing stirred the imagination like the vision of an abyss swallowing cities whole.

Lannahi felt uneasy thinking about the consequences of the landshapers' wrath, but she didn't think the grim visions would become reality. She was issuing a Challenge, not starting a war. They might not be thrilled, but it wasn't a reason to cause a disaster.

They knew the Rules.

Fae cannot be ruled, the thought echoed again in her head.

Lannahi tightened her fingers on the stone balustrade for a moment, then stepped back and moved toward the

stairs, remembering the kiss of the man who had betrayed her.

You will look beautiful in a diadem... and a leash.

When she came down from the gallery and stood at the edge of the map, in her heart, fear mixed with determination.

“Fae cannot be ruled” was the first part of the saying. The second was: “but you can convince them to play a game.”

And every game could be won.

* * *

Even though it was still some time before the evening meal, when Lannahi entered the dining room, a man and a woman were already sitting at the round oak table. They were endowed with similar features, both golden-haired, golden-eyed, and possessing a beauty that made them stand out from the human servants who bustled about the chamber lighting the lightcrystals and preparing the tableware.

“Hello, sister,” Letiri said.

Lannahi stopped but quickly hid her surprise and moved toward her brother and sister. “Hello,” she said cheerfully despite the knot tightening in her stomach.

Despite their similar physical features, her siblings were as different as night and day. Letiri liked wearing bright dresses with bold cuts, and Maal preferred subdued colors and tied-up elegance without loose ends. Her sister spoke with a cutting edge, sharp and quick like a dagger strike; her brother carefully weighed each word and rarely wasted a single breath. Letiri’s natural element was socializing, flitting from party to party; Maal’s main focus was on his duties. With a little effort, one could see the resemblance in their triangular faces, but those were just details.

When Lannahi looked into their vertical pupils, she saw

most of all the arrogant pride of the powerful fae.

Maal responded to her greeting with a nod, but her sister's smile widened and Lannahi knew her hesitation had been noticed.

"Better to be too early than too late," Letiri quoted. "Good that you remember."

There was no mockery in her sister's voice, but the attention with which she stared at Lannahi, waiting for her reaction, left no doubt that there was another layer behind her words. Like most sayings, the one Letiri quoted referred to combat and spoke of the advantage that could be gained by appearing on the battlefield earlier than the opponent. From a military point of view, this was a reasonable conclusion, but in social terms, it had a different meaning. Coming earlier was seen as an admission of weakness—only the people unsure of themselves and their power sought advantage in their surroundings. By mentioning this now, her sister had made it clear that she knew the reason why Lannahi had come early.

But what did Letiri mean by "good"?

"Good that you fight despite your limitations"?

Or "Good that you know your place"?

Lannahi didn't know. She wasn't close enough to either of her siblings to understand their intentions. Letiri was ten and Maal was nineteen years older than her. To them, she was just a child.

Maal had become the Prince of Silverleaves when she was six years old. Though he regularly came to the capital, his visits were always brief, and spending time with Lannahi wasn't among his priorities. She knew Letiri better because they'd lived under the same roof for fifteen years, but Lannahi didn't remember them with any particular sentiment. Her sister had only ever been interested in two things: power and sex. When she hadn't been preoccupied

with her studies under the tutelage of her parents and tutors, she'd spent her time with her friends and courtesans. The only advantage of being her sister had been that Lannahi turned to her for advice on matters she hadn't dared discuss with her parents. Then Letiri had become the Princess of Orchidgate, and like Maal, she seemed to think of Lannahi only when she visited their parents—once a month.

Their relationships had evolved a few years ago when Lannahi became old enough to take a lover. Maal, who never spared a thought for her before, had begun visiting the training ground to observe her exercises and give her advice, and Letiri had started talking to her intimately as she would to one of her friends. Lannahi had found their behavior puzzling—Maal's attention even intimidating. It'd been possible that the company of children bored them and, on the threshold of adulthood, Lannahi was now interesting to them, but... fae weren't selfless. For them, everything was a game. Given the status of Lannahi's father and the ambitions of her siblings, it hadn't been hard to guess what had been truly going on. Maal and Letiri watched her. Everyone watched her. Her parents, teachers, peers. Everyone wanted to know.

How powerful was she?

It had been obvious that her magical abilities hadn't been developing as quickly as her siblings', but until she'd been officially introduced to the court, she'd been treated—depending on the person—as a future ruler or as an opponent. To Maal and Letiri, Lannahi was a potential enemy—until five years ago when she'd been introduced to the court not as a princess but as a singer. In an instant, she turned from a figure to contend with to a pawn.

The change in Maal and Letiri's demeanor was subtle, but Lannahi, who watched them as closely as they watched

her, had noticed it quickly. Maal didn't avoid her as he had when he'd thought her childish, but no longer did he seek out her company. He stopped talking to her about magic and instead praised her performances, talked about the artists on his court, and, like Letiri, more often asked her about other courtiers. Her older sister still acted friendly toward her, but into her words crept condescension.

"You impressed Ambassador Saoul. If you had sung *Hyacinth Ballad*, he would have fallen at your feet."

"Wear a red dress next time. If you look like a delicate flower, someone will eventually stomp on you."

"Your performance was touching, Lannahi, but you should control your emotions. By showing them so openly, you reveal how much music means to you. You unwittingly display your greatest weakness."

Lannahi understood that her siblings started viewing her as a potential ally, but one that they did not need to demean themselves to pursue. Rather, it was she who would one day need to court their support. What she realized belatedly was that she was being tested. Maal and Letiri did not doubt that Lannahi would need their protection someday—the question was: would their help pay off?

Her power had little value in combat, but as a singer, she could potentially make a good spy. A good pawn.

Lannahi walked over to the table and placed her hand on the back of her chair. When she touched green velvet, her fingers tingled and her first instinct was to step back, but she was aware that her siblings were watching her every move and she pushed aside her surprise. Enchanting the chair so she couldn't move it was infantile and usually led to a food fight that ended with a mess, humiliation, and a burning desire for revenge. Lannahi doubted that her dignified brother and chic sister would enjoy such a childish game, but she had no doubt that if she accepted the challenge,

it would be her who would end up in a sorry state. The fact that her siblings decided to make such a direct move meant that they wanted to know how she would react.

No more acting. Tomorrow she would be officially introduced to the members of other courts. She was twenty-five now and could participate in the Royal Game. It was time to show that she was no longer a child.

Lannahi sent Letiri a pleasant smile. "I came early because I was thirsty. You too?"

Amusement flashed in her sister's eyes. Lying was a ploy for weaklings, and no civilized fae would jeopardize their reputation for a pathetic excuse. Letiri had no choice but to assume that Lannahi was telling the truth and would do so herself. By enchanting the chair, her siblings proved that coming to the meeting early really could give an advantage, but it also put them in an embarrassing position. Could it be they were afraid of a family meal?

"Maal and I wanted to talk," Letiri said smoothly.

With a note of worry in her voice asked, Lannahi asked, "Have I interrupted you?"

"It wasn't a private conversation." Letiri gestured at the servants that filled the room. "We are simply curious about tomorrow and amusing ourselves with speculation."

The knot in Lannahi's stomach tightened even more. The thought of what she needed to do the next day filled her with dread, but knowing that her siblings were discussing her future didn't appeal to her either. Could it be that they were debating which one of them will gain a new pawn?

Lannahi didn't want to appear intimidated, so she turned to the man with slicked-back hair and looked him directly in the eye. "Are you making a bet regarding tomorrow's tournaments?"

"We were debating which courts might invite you," Maal said in a composed tone, "and trying to anticipate

which invitations you will accept.”

“You don’t have to be shy with me, brother. If you invite me to Silverleaves, I will gladly perform at your court.”

The corners of his lips lifted slightly in appreciation of her sense of humor, but his eyes remained alert. “You can come whenever you wish, Lannahi,” he said in a silky voice. “My courtiers have long awaited to witness one of your performances.”

Lannahi inclined her head. “And you, sister? You too are too shy to invite me?”

Letiri grinned. “Lannahi,” her sister basically purred her name, “You know that you have an open invitation. But I must warn you that my court is not as conservative as father’s. I won’t take any responsibility if your stay there turns you into a debauchee.”

Lannahi answered again with a nod. When the servants brought pitchers of nectar into the dining room, she turned to the young human dressed in gray livery standing at a proper distance from the table. “Fill our goblets.”

The man bowed and hastened to complete the task. Following proper etiquette, he started with Maal and Letiri and finished with Lannahi. When he put down the crystal pitcher and made a motion as if to pull out the chair for her, Lannahi shook her head slightly and gestured at her goblet. Despite her siblings’ encouraging words, the tingling in her fingers didn’t stop, which meant they still hadn’t taken the enchantment off the chair. Making her stand while they sat was an insult, but Lannahi wasn’t in a position to rise to it. A stronger enchantress would simply have taken control of the chair, and if she wasn’t afraid of starting a chain of vengeance, she would have answered with a similar insult. Lannahi could only accept their superiority and pretend she wasn’t upset—a taste of what her life would be like under their rule.

The servant handed Lannahi the goblet filled with golden drink.

“Tell us about your plans,” Letiri said when the human returned to his previous place. “Do you want to travel, or would you rather stay in the kingdom?”

Instead of waiting for her siblings to reach for their goblets, Lannahi took a sip. It was a rude gesture, but they weren’t her sovereigns yet. By showing subservience now she might gain their protection but not their respect.

She swallowed, the enticing mixture of sweet and bitter with a hint of sour still on her tongue. “I would rather stay here.”

That wasn’t a lie. Lannahi wouldn’t mind staying at her father’s court and dedicating the rest of her life to music. Only, she knew she could not remain. Sarkal was aging. Even his reputation would wane with time and if he didn’t abdicate his throne to one of his children, he risked being Challenged. Even if the initial Challenger lost, more would come, and eventually, her father’s kingdom would plunge into constant battles for the throne. There was only one way for Lannahi to survive this—by surrendering to fae like her siblings.

Or, like Nihhal.

Lannahi suppressed a shudder.

“You don’t feel adventurous?” Letiri teased. “Such a shame. Rumors of your talent and beauty have long been spreading amongst the courts. Many princes will be disappointed.”

“They can come here,” Maal chimed in, looking at his goblet he moved so that its contents swirled. “Not all men are adventurous. Many will appreciate gentleness, loyalty...” He suddenly lifted his gaze to Lannahi’s goblet and then to her face. “...and good manners.”

And that was... what? A suggestion that by becoming

a mistress of an influential member of court she could become a valuable source of information or a snide reminder that if she didn't side with her siblings, her only solution would be to find another strong fae who could take care of her?

Lannahi realized that her fingers had tightened on the back of the chair and forced them to relax. She smiled sweetly and then uttered one of the vilest insults known to their kind.

“Boring.”



CHAPTER 2

Silence fell in the chamber. The servants who were tapping the lightcrystals, waking the light in them, froze as did those who had just entered the dining room, carrying the trays. Maal and Letiri stared at Lannahi in disbelief.

The word “boring” was as rude as “lie.” To tell someone that they were lying was the same as to call them a coward. To tell them they were boring... well, nobody wanted to be boring.

Maal’s eyes were cold, but his lips curved into a polite smile. “What exactly do you find boring?”

“Life without music,” Lannahi replied as if she didn’t know she was playing with fire. “It is the greatest adventure for me. I like to *talk*, but without music, I would *die* of boredom.”

I can spy for you, but only as an artist. You can threaten to kill me, but you won’t get more.

When Maal's surprise subsided and he realized that Lannahi's statement wasn't an attempt to change the subject, but a bold response in line with the context of the rest of their conversation, his gaze sharpened on her. He said, "Then let's hope we grow old listening to your lovely voice."

If you are useful, I won't be your enemy. Pray that I live long enough to protect you.

Lannahi lifted her goblet without tearing her gaze from him. "Let's hope, brother."

Her behavior was bold, but at the corners of Maal's mouth lurked a smile. His younger sister didn't have much power, but at least she wasn't a coward. He could respect her.

"What are you waiting for?" Letiri asked the servants who were listening to the conversation, unsure of the mood of their masters. When the humans returned to work, she raised her eyes to her younger sister. She seemed amused. "Have a seat, Lannahi. Join us."

And there it was: another invitation. Lannahi had a chance to abandon her insane plan. She could devote herself to music...

...and be a pawn for fae like Nihhal.

Lannahi smiled at her sister and took a step back, signaling the servant to pull out a chair for her. Before she had time to sit down, however, Sarkal stood in the doorway shoulder to shoulder with Asirri, punctual as usual.

The servants bowed, and Maal and Letiri began to rise from their seats. Lannahi hastily set her goblet on the table and straightened, but when she lifted her gaze, she realized she'd made a mistake.

Her movement drew the attention of the royal couple. Their eyes told her that they had guessed that moments earlier she had been drinking while standing, and the look they gave Maal and Letiri—that they hadn't missed the fact that

her siblings had only just gotten up from their chairs.

“Children,” Sarkal spoke up. “It’s nice to see you together. I hope you weren’t arguing.”

His tone was playful, but his attentive gaze left no doubt that his words weren’t exactly a joke, and Lannahi felt a tightness in her chest. It wasn’t a secret that Sarkal was partial to his youngest daughter, but as long as everyone saw her as a child, others, including her siblings, watched with an indulgent smile. Now, however, she was an adult in the eyes of the fae, and the king’s sentiment touched and disturbed her at the same time. Knowing that there was someone ready to defend her gave her comfort, but her father’s kindness was a double-edged sword. It pointed out his greatest weakness—her. If anyone wanted to hurt him, all they had to do was hurt her. Nihhal knew it well, and Lannahi was certain that her siblings understood this as well. Unlike Nihhal, Maal and Letiri didn’t wish Sarkal ill, but the knowledge that their younger sister might set them at odds with their father put her in a dangerous position. Lannahi possessed some power, but it was temporary. If Sarkal ceased to be a king, if something happened to him and Asirri, Lannahi would be completely defenseless. If she abused the power she now wielded, she’d become a desirable target. Fae had long memories, and forgiveness wasn’t a value they cultivated.

Even a tree returns a blow, there was an old saying.

Take vengeance so that your enemy won’t be able to, said another.

“Letiri and Maal invited me to their cities,” Lannahi said in a light tone, “and I’m wondering which court I should visit first.”

Maal and Letiri’s surprise lasted only a fraction of a second. “Mine,” they said at the same time.

Lannahi sent her father a meaningful look and a dis-

arming smile. "We haven't reached a consensus yet."

The corners of Sarkal's mouth lifted slightly in a reflex he couldn't suppress, but it wasn't until he surveyed the faces of his older children that the shadow of suspicion vanished from his eyes and a satisfied smile fully settled on his lips. "Tough choice, indeed."

"If you can't decide, consider the etiquette," Asirri suggested. "Maal is older."

Sarkal waited for his wife to take a seat first and pulled her chair up to the table, not allowing the servant to do so, which was entirely against the etiquette.

"As always, wisdom flows from your lips, wife," he said with a barely audible note of good-natured mockery in his voice.

Asirri replied in a similar tone. "As always, you are so kind, husband."

Just as Lannahi's siblings were different, her parents were similar. They liked experimenting with outfits and colors. Today, Sarkal was dressed in a purple shirt with fanciful embroidery on the sleeves and somber gray pants, while Asirri wore a dress which simplicity was balanced by a multilayered blue gradient. The only thing they rarely changed was their hairstyles. Even when she was younger, Asirri preferred to wear her long hair in an ornate braid chignon instead of letting it flow down her back as enchantresses tended to do, and Sarkal, contrary to his son, cut his hair almost to the skin. They were a hundred years old, but despite the wrinkles around their eyes and gray streaks through their hair, they were the first to roam the orchards and the last to leave the dance floor. They acted serious when necessary, which was often, but they joked whenever they could. They supported each other. They loved each other.

They complemented each other in a way that tugged at

the strings in the souls of those who looked at them.

Lannahi wished she didn't have to leave them so soon.

* * *

Even though the litter carried by the power of the enchantress walking beside it glided smoothly through the air, Lannahi felt her stomach turn. The thought of what she was about to do paralyzed her. She sat stiffly with her eyes fixed on the wall of the litter, barely registering the sounds coming from outside its walls. She was grateful for the curtains that blocked her from prying eyes, but that gratitude, like everything else, seemed a distant phenomenon. If anyone looked at her now, they would simply see a statue, but Lannahi couldn't care less.

Her plan had so many pitfalls. The idea was simple—challenge a Ruler of an insignificant city, defeat her in a duel, and let the world forget about it. But each of these elements was based as much on preparation as on hope. Lannahi had chosen her opponent carefully, but she didn't know her personally. She hoped the woman would be as reasonable as she was said to be, but how could Lannahi know how her opponent would behave in the face of danger? What if she didn't accept her offer and chose death instead? Such a victory might embroil her family in a bloody conflict. Or, what if out of anger or fear the woman broke the Rules? That Lannahi's actions could lead to war was terrifying, and the thought that she could be the cause of the destruction of the Continent made her sick. She balanced precariously on a thin rope. There was only one winning scenario that relied on her power of persuasion. If one thing went wrong, the whole plan would be worthless.

It wasn't a smart strategy, but it was the only one within her reach.

Lannahi felt the litter slow down and descend, and she

forced herself to pay attention. She focused on her hands and began to move her fingers, waking her body from the stiff numbness. It was time to act. She could let herself be carried away by fear or lean on her pride. She preferred pride.

The litter landed and after a moment, Souhi enchanted the door to open. Lannahi rose and gracefully stepped outside into the cold, gray day. She was in a square surrounded by colorful buildings, in the middle of which stood two stone pillars. The portal was usually guarded by a few soldiers, but during the time a Trail was open, their number was increased so that the entire square was occupied. When the Trail led to one of the Free Cities, the square was crowded with merchant wagons and bustling with activity. Today, it was quiet. Only a few could enter the Trail to Blacktower.

Seeing that her family had already disembarked from their gray-golden litters and were walking toward the pillars, Lannahi nodded to her assistant and joined them under the watchful eyes of the surrounding soldiers. Considering the importance of the event, their retinue seemed ridiculously small—no servants and no guards—but such were the rules. Only Rulers, their Knights, and Challengers were allowed to attend the Royal Sabbath. It sounded strict, but in practice, the word “Challenger” could be used by anyone and often served as a cover for social purposes. The irony was that Lannahi’s motivation was consistent with the official one, but no one would think so at the sight of her.

Suddenly, the fragment of the landscape framed by the pillars blurred as if someone had spilled water on a freshly painted picture, and three men in dark clothes appeared out of nowhere. Two of them were black-haired and black-eyed, but the one leading the small group was pale and possessed the pointy ears of a pathfinder, while the other had the swarthy complexion and the lizard tail of a firebringer. They

were accompanied by a short, slender air elemental with gray wings. Unlike enchanters who wore belt packs full of throwing knives, these fae carried swords at their waists. Their jackets were emblazoned with round obsidian brooches with symbols of their professions painted in silver—a four-pointed star that was the hallmark of Guides Guild for the pathfinder and a simplified elemental mandala worn by the Peacekeepers for the other men.

“Good fate,” Sarkal greeted them.

“Good fate,” the pathfinder replied politely but didn’t bow. Sarkal wasn’t his king.

“Five people,” Lannahi’s father said, watching the man running his gaze over the members of the small retinue. “My family.”

The Guide’s gaze rested on Lannahi. The man smiled but didn’t seem surprised and soon shifted his attention back to Sarkal. “Please follow the guard.”

Hearing these words, the winged Peacekeeper turned around, entered the vibrating space between the pillars, and vanished. This wasn’t the first time Lannahi had seen a portal, but she had never traveled through one, and despite the fear elicited by the specter of the duel hanging over her head, she felt a rush of excitement. People often said that walking the Trail was an otherworldly experience. It was usually meant as a jest, but the fact was that no one knew where *exactly* the Trails were located. Of all the types of magic, this one was the greatest mystery.

Sarkal and Asirri started after the wind-winged and their children followed in their footsteps. Even though Lannahi had heard descriptions of the Trails before, the sight of the black corridor resembling a tunnel lit by light-crystals unnerved her. She stopped reflexively.

“You’ll get used to it,” Maal murmured.

When he placed his hand on her back, urging her gently

forward, Lannahi experienced another shock. Enchanters tended to avoid physical proximity. They had the advantage in distance fighting, but if someone got close enough to gag their mouths, they would be powerless. Unaccustomed to familiar gestures from her brother, Lannahi felt Maal's touch like an invasion, and her heart squeezed in panic. She hurried after Letiri, running from discomfort, but a moment later, she felt silly. Maal wouldn't attack her in Sarkal's presence.

Pride, Lannahi thought, trying to calm down. *I choose pride, not fear.*

Lannahi discovered that it was hard not to think about fear on the Trail. The walls, ceiling, and floor were black and matte and didn't reflect light. Even though the lightcrystals marked the corridor's boundaries, she had the impression that the room was much larger, and the floor was about to stop being hard and turn into what it looked like—an abyss. She felt like she was walking in a void. There was nothing reassuring about it.

Fortunately, the journey did not last long. At some point, the guard leading them disappeared as did Sarkal and Asirri, and soon Lannahi was standing in the open air looking at the massive walls of the Black Arena. In Goldenshadows, the capital of Sarkal's kingdom, the sky was gray and the frigid air heralded the coming winter, but here shone the serene autumn sun. They'd covered a distance that typically required a multi-day journey in only a few minutes.

Sprouting in the middle of the plains at the heart of the Continent, Blacktower was the center of political life, and its dark stone tower, visible from many rainbows, was a symbol of the Royal Game. Because elemental magic could be unpredictable, its location was a deliberate choice. Away from volcanoes that could accidentally erupt and large bodies of water that could evaporate—those had been the basic

criteria when looking for a suitable site for its construction. There were also no farmlands around to be affected, and the air in summer was humid enough not to be conducive to fires. Like the Free Cities, it had no king or queen and couldn't be a subject of a Challenge. It was governed by pathfinders, fae with the ability to manipulate space, who after the Great Tremor had taken on the role of guardians of the new order established to prevent similar disasters in the future. Because they controlled the Trails, they retained a significant influence on trade, and people reckoned with them to no lesser degree than with the Rulers, but they didn't participate in the Game. As long as the existence of the Continent wasn't threatened, they remained neutral, and that was why it was in their city that the duels of the Rulers took place, important declarations were made, and disputes were settled. It was here where trade treaties were negotiated and those who violated the Black Tower Rules were punished. Here one sought powerful allies and found deadly enemies.

Here the fate of the world was decided.

And, today, Lannahi was going to interfere with it.

* * *

Since dueling was a widely accepted way of resolving disputes, every city was equipped with a battle arena, but the one in Blacktower, with its massive dark walls that could accommodate thousands of spectators, was particularly impressive. Despite the fact that she lived in a sixteen-spear-high palace, Lannahi felt intimidated, but she knew everything here was designed to be so. The size of the building, the purposeful exclusion of servants and guards, the overwhelming presence of powerful fae... All to discourage those who lacked the conviction of their decision. In the Royal Game, many lives were at stake, including your own.

Either you played seriously or not at all.

Sarkal bid farewell to the Guide, who emerged from the empty space between two of the hundreds of similar pillars surrounding the arena, and together with Asirri started confidently toward the nearest entrance. Lannahi tried to imagine what it would be like to have their confidence but to no avail so she resorted to her usual trick—she focused on appearance. Straight back, calm expression, elegant movements. Whether she won or lost, she would do it with style.

She knew that the Black Arena was built a rainbow away from the city walls to ensure security and discreetly searched for them, aware that it would be too dark to see them later. However, barely did their silhouette appear in her field of vision when she was distracted by the glances of the other fae that forced her to shift her attention to her parents. Whenever they inclined their head to one of the attendees, she did as well.

One of the four main doors was open wide. Outside, guards in black uniforms stood on either side, while inside, hostesses in black dresses handed out keys to the private lockers where one could store their personal items. Although the light deflected here in a normal manner, Lannahi couldn't help but think that the hallway and the corridors lit by lightcrystals resembled the Trail. Smooth black walls, floors, and ceiling. Black doors, handles, and girandoles. Apart from the colorful clothes of the newcomers and the white placards, everything was black.

When they located their assigned lockers and stored their coats, Sarkal guided his family back into the hall to a staircase that led to the top floor. The weather was usually treated as a random element of the game, so facilities of this kind were built like an amphitheater and consisted only of an auditorium and an arena, but the Black Arena was primarily a place to socialize. In addition to the amenities like

a canopy, lockers, and private rooms where one could talk out of range of prying ears, there was also a special area designed to allow the attendees to interact with one another freely. During the Royal Sabbath, it wasn't the arena but the Main Hall, which circled the stands and was separated from them by thick plates of glass, that was the most important part of the building. Its black walls were the backdrop, the black tables laden with refreshments were the scenography, the black floor was the battlefield. What was happening down in the arena was just entertainment.

At the beginning, Fate was kind to Lannahi. The first people they encountered were Igal, the king of a neighboring kingdom, and his ambassador Saoul. Both were Sarkal's friends and often visited his court. Conversation with them made Lannahi feel almost as if it was an ordinary day at the palace. It helped her to compose herself and when her father's other friends started to approach them, she endured their attention with an almost natural ease.

Her curiosity awoke. At moments when she wasn't the center of attention, she looked around the room, admiring the many varied costumes. Pale and vivid colors, modest and bold cuts, simple and complex patterns, materials thin and smooth, and rough and thick... Now Lannahi understood why Letiri ignored her mother's advice and instead of wearing a simple dress with slits at the hips and loose pants that showcased practical elegance, she dressed like she was attending a ball. With Letiri's wide dark green skirt and the corset emphasizing the curves of her body, Lannahi's gray dress, even brightened with the golden color of embroidery and pants, seemed to her extremely boring. The fact that the outfits of the rest of her family were in a similar style to her own didn't comfort her much.

Slowly, Fate began to turn. This section was mainly occupied by enchanters and rainmakers inhabiting the cen-

tral strip of the southern part of the Continent, but from time to time, representatives of different origins passed this way. The sight of a horned landshaper standing out in the crowd with his tall height and strong physique was like a bite of the frost. Clothing was the least of her worries. She wasn't here to look pretty.

Then Letiri spotted her friends and dragged Lannahi with her. This was the moment when the straight road became steep and winding.

Because Lannahi had spent many hours perusing the albums containing the portraits of notable fae, paying special attention to those with whom her father had a personal relationship with, she guessed the identities of the two rainmakers Letiri wanted to talk to even before her sister spoke their names. A muscular man with a dark beard and mohawk was Llazaros, son of Queen Kaallis and prince of one of the three cities that belonged to her. The slimmer one, with a pointed chin and a storm of curls, was his Chancellor, Sammais. The long fabric of their blue-gray uniforms hid the subtle scaly patterns on their skin, which only became distinct when exposed to water, so they didn't stand out from the crowd of enchanters in any spectacular way.

Aside from the different color of their eyes and hair, only Llazaros's sword and jewelry—golden rings on his fingers and a round earring in his right ear—were conspicuous but compared to the horns of the landshapers or the tails of the firebringers, the difference was almost nonexistent.

Letiri greeted the men with a grin. "Llazaros," she said in a bright voice, inclining her head. "Sammais."

"Letiri." The prince reciprocated the nod and ran his gaze over her body. "You look flowering, little orchid." When her sister answered the compliment with another smile, he glanced at Lannahi. "And this is...?"

Letiri feigned surprise. “Don’t you see the resemblance between us, Prince?”

A small smile tugged at the man’s lips. “Allow me not to answer this question, please.”

“You believe that women do not like to be compared to one another?”

“I’m leaning toward this suspicion.” He regarded Letiri. “And I wouldn’t want to be the cause of anger... or jealousy. It would be a shame to waste time on such a lovely day.”

Letiri’s face shifted to a nonchalant expression. “Don’t worry,” she said, lowering her voice. “My sister and I have *completely* different tastes. If I hadn’t brought her to meet you, she wouldn’t have given you a passing glance.”

Had Lannahi not known her sister, her boldness would have taken her breath away. Playing with someone’s ego rarely turned out well and almost never with a fae who held so much power. Lannahi would never speak to anyone so bluntly. However, she’d been watching her sister long enough to know that Letiri never did anything thoughtlessly, and she wasn’t particularly surprised when Llazaros laughed instead of getting offended.

“Brutal as always,” Llazaros commented, sending Letiri a meaningful gaze. “And, as always, I feel intrigued.”

Letiri smiled. “Lannahi, this is Llazaros, Prince of Roughwaters, and Sammais, his Chancellor. Llazaros, Sammais, this is Lannahi, a singer at my father’s court.” She let go of Lannahi’s arm and stepped aside as if to give her space to make a formal curtsy.

Lannahi did not move. Letiri’s suggestion was a good one, but in this case, Lannahi wasn’t going to listen to her sister. She curtsied only to her parents and her audience after a performance.

She met the eyes of each man and nodded slightly. “Good fate.”

The corner of Llazaros's mouth twitched. "Good fate, indeed." He looked at Letiri. "Besides the differences in your tastes, is there anything else you'd like to tell me about?"

Lannahi felt a sting of shame. Did the man think Letiri had introduced her to him for a specific reason?

A mischievous smile danced on her sister's lips. "Let me warn you before you get disappointed," she told the prince. "If you would like to listen to Lannahi's songs, you will have to go to Goldenshadows. Long journeys do not appeal to my sister."

Lannahi almost flinched from embarrassment, but her heart ignited with anger. How did Letiri dare? And that after hearing what Lannahi told her and Maal yesterday?

Amusement flashed in Llazaros' eyes, but when he turned to Lannahi, his tone was polite. "Wouldn't you like to see the ocean, Lannahi? In my opinion, it's a nicer view than meadows and orchards."

If Lannahi had intended to buy her way into the man's court, she would have seized the opportunity and enthusiastically asserted that she dreamed of seeing the ocean. Since she had no intention of doing so, she said, "*I* like meadows and orchards."

Broad smiles that appeared on the men's faces seemed sincere, but Llazaros's next question made her uncomfortable.

"You don't like getting wet?" he asked, lowering his voice suggestively.

Flirtation wasn't something foreign to Lannahi, but looking into Llazaros's eyes she didn't feel like she was being seduced. She felt like a toy. However, no matter how upset she felt, she couldn't turn around and walk away. Insulting Letiri and Llazaros would not benefit her and, instead, certainly do harm. They were stronger than her, after all.

Feigning seriousness in such a way that it was clear she was pretending, she furrowed her eyebrows slightly and answered with a question, "Where did this conclusion come from?"

Llazaros regarded her for a moment, amused, and then he suddenly turned to Sammais. "And what should I say to that?"

His friend didn't even spare him a glance. "That it wasn't a conclusion," he said, looking Lannahi in the eye, "but an inappropriate joke from an asshole whose ego is bigger than his brain."

Lannahi suppressed her surprise but not the smile that pulled at her lips.

Llazaros glanced at Lannahi's face and again at Sammais. "I hate when you are right."

Sammais smiled, but there was a challenging glint in his gaze. "Since I am right, then be kind to articulate a *proper* invitation."

Llazaros raised an eyebrow as if he was going to argue but eventually sighed and said, "If you change your mind, I will be glad to welcome you at my court, Lannahi. Assuming, of course, that you aren't already repulsed by my behavior."

"I appreciate the gesture," she replied with a light smile.

When it became clear that she didn't intend to address Llazaros's last remark, he turned to Letiri, amused. "And you, my orchid? Will you appreciate my gesture when I invite you too?"

Letiri smiled sweetly. "I'm not yours," she said also ignoring his last words.

Sammais snorted with laughter. "I think it will be you who will be traveling, my prince."

Letiri's smile grew predatory. "We'll be waiting,"

she said but didn't wait for a reply. She took Lannahi's arm again and with the grace of a socialite started on her way back to their parents.

When they were far enough from the two men, she leaned over to her sister and spoke in a low voice, "You can have Llazaros if you want, but I think Sammais will be more to your liking."

Lannahi ignored a pang of anger. Also lowering her voice, she said, "I thought, sister, that you understood what I meant yesterday."

"I did," Letiri said without a hint of remorse. "And I didn't ask you for anything, did I? I only created opportunities. It's always good to have some."

"Nevertheless, I would be grateful if you wouldn't put me in a similar situation again."

"Are you sure? You did well. I think that before the end of the evening, we will get you at least five invitations."

Lannahi swallowed a sharp retort. "I'm sure."

The corners of Letiri's mouth lifted slightly. "Normally I would try to convince you, but I feel I won't succeed this evening."

Hearing a suggestion in her voice, Lannahi followed her gaze. Letiri was looking at a man in a crimson shirt and beige pants who was talking to their father. Lannahi didn't recognize him at first because the last time she saw him, he wasn't so tanned, but it was the tan that triggered a train of thought that made her heart squeeze in a choking spasm.

A familiar enchanter whose skin was sun-kissed as if he had only just returned from a trip to countries in the north?

Only one came to mind.

Nihhal.



CHAPTER 3

Lannahi had heard of Nihhal long before they first met. He was a son of Danihel, the prince ruling on behalf of her father in one of his seven cities. Like Orchidgate that had once belonged to Asirri, Grasswall had been annexed to Sarkal's kingdom peacefully, but unlike Lannahi's mother, who had defended her city in a duel and joined forces with Sarkal motivated mainly by love, Danihel had lost the fight and fell into slavery. It had happened during the war brought upon by King Vaskil, Asirri's cousin, whose plotting had ended with the death of Sarkal's brother. Tired of the long blood feud, Sarkal had allowed Danihel to keep the title of prince and rule Grasswall, leaving him a task to keep his subjects under control so that they would not rise in rebellion against their new king. If Danihel failed, Grasswall would meet a fate similar to that of the first two cities that Sarkal had conquered—ruin and death.

Fae despised slaves, and Lannahi had held a rather unflattering opinion of Danihel as a child, but with time, she began to respect him. Every day she didn't make any progress in magic, when she became less and less sure of her own position, the revulsion she'd felt at the thought of being at someone else's mercy mixed with fear. Death required courage, but didn't humiliation require more?

"A desire to live isn't something to be ashamed of," Asirri said one day when Lannahi was nineteen years old and everyone around her was convinced that she had reached the limit of her magical abilities. "Cowardice is. If you know that you have no chance of winning, but you plan revenge in your heart, then even though you are beaten and humiliated, you are still a warrior. If you allow someone to humiliate you because you hope they will eventually leave you alone, you are a coward. Only you get to decide whether your life is pathetic."

"And Danihel?" Lannahi asked. "Is he a warrior or a coward?"

Asirri regarded her daughter carefully. She answered after a pause, "Danihel was in the same situation as me. We were both caught up in a war we didn't want. If Vaskil hadn't broken the Rules and sent Irkal an enchanted dagger that pierced his heart, we wouldn't have had to fear for the lives of our subjects. Neither of us had an army that could match Sarkal's. What saved us was the courage to face him in a duel. Danihel lost his, but those who were with him that day know that he is a slave in name only."

"But there are many who still despise him," Lannahi said, thinking about rumors she'd heard.

A bleak smile appeared on her mother's lips. "These are those for whom their own pride is more important than loyalty to allies. Don't make enemies of them, but don't count on their friendship either."

Lannahi met Danihel's son soon after her debut at Sarkal's court. Nihhal, lean and charming, was the epitome of masculine grace and good manners. Since he was a renown duelist, his every visit in Goldenshadows stirred excitement among women seeking amorous adventures and men eager to prove themselves against his skills. Mindful of her position and her mother's teachings, Lannahi treated him politely but with reserve, ignoring subtle attempts at flirtation and dismissing the bolder ones, but it soon became clear to all that if Nihhal was interested in anything besides politics and dueling, it was Sarkal's youngest daughter. His interest made Lannahi self-conscious, but she watched Nihhal with curiosity. Her sexual needs were satisfied by the men from the pleasure house, and though the thought of sex with the handsome fae stirred her body, it was more excitement of novelty than a blast of passion. However, Lannahi wasn't looking for physical satisfaction. All her life, she'd witnessed the close relationship between Sarkal and Asirri whose love story was celebrated in songs and poems. Unwavering loyalty, boundless trust, readiness for sacrifice... This was what Lannahi wanted, this was the kind of love she desired. She knew, however, that most romances burned out quickly and couples who took marriage vows rarely chose to renew them. She pushed aside her dreams and looked at her situation with cold pragmatism.

Nihhal, seven years older than her, was a powerful enchanter, but unlike Maal and Letiri, he appeared disinterested in ruling. He traveled from court to court, sometimes as his father's ambassador, but more often—like many other young fae—for his own enjoyment. The conclusion that Lannahi was just another adventure for him wasn't groundless, and if Lannahi had only been thinking in the short term, she actually wouldn't have minded. But every decision had their consequences that could reach far into

the future. Lannahi couldn't afford to be careless.

She considered various scenarios but quickly concluded that she didn't know Nihhal well enough to predict his reaction. How was she supposed to know how he would react if something went wrong? Would he walk away in peace or nurse a grudge? Lannahi didn't know the answer, but one thing was certain. She would not benefit from offending a powerful enchanter.

Nihhal sensed her reluctance and with the grace of a confident man changed from a seducer to a friend. He no longer tried to flirt with her but talked to her as an equal, which earned him Lannahi's respect and affection. Because he traveled frequently, his visits to Sarkal's kingdom were always short and irregular—sometimes she didn't see him for a month, and sometimes three or four—but as time passed, Lannahi became more and more at ease in his company. Four years later, she caught herself anticipating his arrival.

Like before, Nihhal must have sensed a change in her feelings because his behavior gradually changed as well. He still didn't try to flirt with her, but when they danced, his hand rested on her back lower than before. At first, his touch resembled a brush of feathers, but it became firmer with each uncontrollable blush on Lannahi's face and lack of protest on her part.

Yet, one spring evening when they were walking in the garden surrounding the palace in the rays of the setting sun and Nihhal made a gesture as if he wanted to embrace her, Lannahi stepped back instinctively, excited and terrified at the same time.

Nihhal's patience must have run out because instead of ignoring her reaction and returning to a friendly conversation, he decided to confront her. "You don't like me, Lannahi?"

"It's not like that."

"I thought I read the signs correctly... I thought you wanted me. Was I wrong?"

Lannahi denied it, but when she wanted to elaborate, her explanation seemed childish and silly so she only blushed, ashamed of her sudden awkwardness. The last time she felt this way was before her first public performance.

Nihhal regarded her carefully. "Then why do you keep pushing me away?" he asked. After a moment, he added with a strange note in his voice, "Did your father tell you to do so?"

Lannahi felt confused by the last question to the point that she forgot her embarrassment. "Why would he do that?"

"Because I'm a son of the slave. Unworthy of his daughter."

Her surprise deepened. She recalled a conversation from years ago. "Your father is a slave in name only," she repeated her mother's words, but she felt uneasy.

A muscle on his face twitched. "Names are given for a reason."

The note of disdain in his voice was barely audible, but Lannahi flinched, wide-eyed.

"But there are many who still despise him."

"These are those for whom their own pride is more important than loyalty to allies. Don't make enemies of them, but don't count on their friendship either."

Nihhal must have realized his mistake because he immediately gentled his tone. "You didn't answer my question, Lannahi. Why are you pushing me away if you want me? *Tell me.*"

Lannahi didn't feel like continuing this conversation, but the words escaped her mouth anyway. "I don't want

a casual relationship.”

Nihhal was now as surprised as she had been before, but soon his lips curved into a smile. “So, you want a commitment. You don’t show romanticism offstage, but I should have guessed that a singer would dream of love.”

Heat crept up her cheeks. She knew she’d appear naïve to him, but his amusement hurt her anyway.

“I don’t expect a marriage vow,” she replied, her voice sounding defensive to her own ears. She didn’t quite understand why she was saying it, but she couldn’t help herself. “Only a promise of fidelity.”

Nihhal sighed and took a step toward her. “Lannahi, I could marry you here and now, but you know very well that no one would recognize the marriage.”

She was twenty-four years old. No one took seriously the vows made at such a young age.

Nihhal raised his hand and stroked her cheek. “I waited four years for you to look at me kindly. Is that not enough proof that you are someone special to me?”

Before she could respond, he slipped his fingers into her hair and leaned in, brushing his lips against hers.

Lannahi’s pulse accelerated. Nihhal was beautiful, and his touch made her skin tingle. She wanted him...

...and felt uneasy at the same time. She was used to evasions, euphemisms, and understatements, but she didn’t like that Nihhal was using them now. She may have been naïve hoping for undying love, but a promise of fidelity wasn’t something unusual. Not everyone liked to share... though Nihhal seemed not to mind. But why didn’t he want to admit it? Fae were wary of promises, but why did he try to delude her instead of saying outright that he couldn’t offer her more?

Lannahi felt disappointment, but it was its weight that surprised her. She usually controlled her true emotions and

avoided showing weakness in front of others, but now she felt exposed and vulnerable.

I fell in love with him, she thought.

"*You can trust me*, Lannahi," Nihhal murmured between kisses. "I think about you every day. *Relax* and I show you some of my thoughts."

Despite her disappointment, Lannahi parted her lips, and Nihhal slipped his tongue between them and kissed her, slowly but not without greed. He moved one hand to the nape of her neck and began stroking her back with the other. Lannahi's body relaxed, but in her head swirled a thought, *I fell in love, but he did not*.

Despite the warm air and the proximity of a masculine body, Lannahi felt a chill. By entering into a relationship with someone who didn't reciprocate her feelings, she risked being manipulated. Nihhal's sweet words were already stirring a conflict inside her. She wanted to dismiss the thought that another woman would soon be in his arms. She wanted to think that he chose her over others. She wanted to trust him.

She wanted to believe that he would never abuse his power over her.

Why are you pushing me away if you want me? Tell me.

You can trust me...

Relax...

Lannahi forced her languid body to obey and pushed Nihhal away. "You've enchanted me," she said, looking at him in disbelief.

Nihhal wanted to deny it. She saw it with horrifying clarity.

But a lie was a domain of cowards.

"You seemed tense," he said gently. "I just wanted you to relax."

Lannahi tightened her fingers on the fabric of her dress.

In Sarkal's kingdom enchanting people was forbidden unless used during combat. Nihhal broke the law.

"This is not an excuse," she said, trying to control her voice.

She was in a situation her mother had warned her about. She stood in the way of a powerful fae who used others for his own purposes.

"But it's true," he replied.

Although everything in her screamed for her to close her eyes and plug her ears, Lannahi looked at Nihhal, unsure of what to think of his calm tone. He didn't seem concerned that he might be dragged before the Arbiters.

As if he didn't feel the need to even consider the possibility.

A cold shiver ran through her. She instinctively looked toward the garden exit, but it was too far for their conversation to be heard by the guards, and because they were standing under the trees, they were invisible to those standing on the walls. If she didn't start screaming, no one would come to her rescue.

"A moment ago, you were ready to make a promise of fidelity," Nihhal said. "And now you are thinking about how to get rid of me. A quick change for someone who requires steadiness from her partner."

Lannahi forced herself to meet his eyes. "Why did you do that? What do you want from me?"

Nihhal arched his eyebrow. The warm glow of adoration in his gaze was replaced by the cold, calculating expression of an arrogant fae. "I thought it was obvious. I want to fuck you."

Lannahi couldn't believe her ears. She recalled with bitterness the conclusion she'd reached four years ago. She was right. She shouldn't consort with powerful fae. Too many of them believed they could take anything they liked.

"I don't think we would be suitable partners for each other," she said, hiding her fear behind the wall of diplomacy just like her mother had taught her.

There was a chance that someone would enter the garden. She just had to remain calm.

Nihhal smiled, amused. "I disagree. You want commitment, don't you? I will be committed to you, I assure you. I've planned our future together a long time ago."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, her throat dry.

The man sighed and raked his fingers through his dark golden hair. "This isn't something I wanted to tell you yet, but so be it. You will have something to look forward to." He regarded her figure approvingly. "You will be my Royal Consort. You will look beautiful in a diadem... and a leash."

Her eyes widened.

"Did I manage to attract your interest?" Nihhal teased. "The diadem of a princess and the leash of a slave. Your father will like it, don't you think?"

Slowly, a gruesome understanding came to Lannahi.

"You want to take revenge for your father's enslavement," she whispered, numb with terror.

"Smart girl," Nihhal commented.

When he took a step toward her, Lannahi backed away, but all he had to do was utter the word "Stop," and she did. She opened her mouth to scream, but he lunged toward her, gripping her by the nape and slapping a palm over her mouth. She lowered her gaze, but he ordered her to look into his eyes.

"You must not talk about what you learned from me today, nor about what happened between us," he said, and Lannahi couldn't believe that she hadn't heard the Charm in his voice earlier. The air surrounding them was vibrating with

magic. *"If you try to even make a suggestion or send a note, you will die."*

He watched her in silence for a while, observing as understanding mingled with fear in her eyes. *"You must not act to my detriment,"* he added more gently.

When he took his hand off her mouth and placed it on her shoulder, Lannahi tried to scream, but no sound came out of her throat.

Nihhal smiled with satisfaction, then embraced her and began stroking her hair. She wanted to push him away but could only stand still.

"This evening could have ended differently, Lannahi," he said in a normal voice. "Try to be less selfish in the future and don't try to force promises on me. You don't have to worry about other women. You will always be special to me. No one can replace you."

He leaned back to look her in the face. "You have to admit, I've been patient with you. I could have had you right away, but I haven't touched you for four years. I deserve a reward, don't you think?"

Lannahi answered with a cold look. All that was left was her pride.

Nihhal chuckled softly. "I hoped for a more enthusiastic reaction, but it's all right. Next time, I will give you a better incentive. You will suck my cock as if the life of your mother depended on it."

Lannahi felt sick. She suddenly understood why wars usually ended in the annihilation of entire families. Even a child not yet born could become a mortal enemy.

"Take vengeance so that your enemy won't be able to" was practical advice.

Lannahi never suspected herself of cruelty, but at that moment she knew that if Nihhal hurt her, she would pay him back tenfold. She didn't know how or when, but she

knew she would try, and her hand wouldn't even tremble.

Nihhal leaned in and kissed her temple. "Go back to the palace, Lannahi. I will be gone for a long time, but don't be sad. We have decades ahead of us."

Upon returning to her chamber, Lannahi heaved up the contents of her stomach and locked herself in her room for the next three days. The first hours when memories mixed with the visions of what might have happened were the worst. The thought that Nihhal was somewhere in the palace paralyzed her ability to act. Even though the night was warm, her body shook uncontrollably. Her heart thudded wildly in her chest locked in a cage of fear, disbelief, and betrayal. Her face was wet with tears of helplessness. She didn't fall asleep until the morning when a servant who brought her herbs for her upset stomach informed her that Nihhal had left the city. Although her body succumbed to fatigue, her mind ran in circles, painting a vivid picture of her naked, with a heavy diadem on her head and a tight collar around her neck, kneeling before Nihhal who stood among the corpses of her family members. She woke up covered in sweat and spent the next few hours staring at the ceiling, numb.

Beneath the iceberg of terror, however, was a flame. At first, it was small and seemed pointless, but it slowly grew, melting the ice layer by layer, until it was so large that its heat effaced the poignant chill.

The next day she tried to write a letter to her father explaining what Nihhal had done to her. Her throat closed up instantly, the breath stolen from her body. Suffocating, she slumped to the floor. She only managed to take a breath when she started repeating in her mind: "I will not send any letter." She spent the rest of the day in bed.

On the third day, her mother came. After ensuring that Lannahi was feeling better, she asked her about Nihhal.

“He left a day earlier than he intended. Did you have an argument?”

The words Lannahi wanted to say got stuck in her throat. She stared at her mother, not breathing.

Like a living corpse, a thought flashed through her mind.

For some reason, it seemed funny to her. She took a breath.

“No,” she said.

That was how she learned to keep death at a distance.

On the fourth day, she returned to her routine. Practice magic. Play the harp. Sing. Talk about politics. Attend the balls.

A month later, she composed her first song. She named it *Garden of Life* and sang it to her father after the evening meal. He was delighted.

After long pondering, she came to the conclusion that she had to become a queen.

When someone asked her about Nihhal, she mostly lied.

She was not a coward.

She was fighting to survive.