

Chapter 1

III

Outside Pontibus stood an old, gray estate: an interconnected W of buildings encompassed by overgrown gardens, statues, and fountains. Somewhere beneath, Nalabeathan carried a small chest through a dim, cobwebbed hall of shredded paint and wall lamps, until she happened upon a young man with light brown hair and green, cat-like eyes. Unlike the aildon, the eilvden were good elves, but she wasn't fond of either.

"Good evening," said the man.

Nalabeathan studied the worn door behind him.

"I'm Shores, ambassador of the eilv—"

"I know who you are."

Shores' brow furrowed. "This way—the misses waits."

The torch lit room had a wide fireplace, three tables surrounded by several dark red chairs, and a maroon rug. A griffin sat at the center table; its feathers shimmered in the fire's glow. It had the head, wings, and talons of a hawk; the legs and tail of a lion; and its yellow, dark-centered eye observed them as they entered.

"Cobeyla," said Nalabeathan, addressing the griffin.

"The wildflower returns," said Cobeyla. "You've kept busy?"

Nalabeathan grinned. "Busy enough to find this." She placed the box on the table.

Cobeyla gestured to the chairs. "Please."

Shores and Nalabeathan sat.

Cobeyla turned to Shores. "Have I mentioned Nala's mother?" she asked.

"No, you haven't, missus," said Shores.

A short, neatly dressed man with thinning, gray hair entered with a tray. As he set down cups and poured tea, Nalabeathan noticed cracks along the walls and a painting of a griffin, but it was too dark to tell whether it was Cobeyla or some other important figure.

After the man left, Cobeyla moved the box with her talon so the clasp faced inward. "Xagipa fetched for us years ago," she said. "But our methods were crude back then. Everything was from scratch, and there weren't any official holders." The griffin cleared her throat. "She procured many. One particular box had a way of slipping through everyone's hands, but she kept it for quite some time, and this benefited me greatly."

Nalabeathan sipped her bitter tea. "My mother never mentioned them."

Shores stared at his cup, said: "I'm sure it was for the better. Maybe she wanted to forget?"

Nalabeathan's face grew cold. "And how would you know?"

"It's only a guess," said Shores. "Up to now, I've had little to do. I learned of the boxes a year ago, and until then I suppose it was more of an aildon underground pastime—by underground, I mean both in the actual and symbolic sense. Many in my family worked under King Reginald himself, so with respect to your mother, I didn't know how they used the boxes back then. Although, I can imagine her loyalty. My father came to me once and said, 'Mongu Shores', my formal name—despite my objection, he used it—'Mongu Shores, you should sign up and serve the king.' I'd heard of the brigade, although I didn't know much, aside from what my father had mentioned, and I found, after I joined, we were to observe the aildon and any human interference they might cause. It was boring, and my desk took half a small room, but it was good to be in the brigade. I filed anything that had to do with the aildon in a secret chamber and

each into a particular drawer. We weren't allowed to read, but I couldn't resist. I happened upon a document marked *Spiritus*. That's when I learned about the boxes. Before the brigade, I wasn't even aware they existed, so I wasn't involved back then."

"They took me in and trained me at a young age," said Nalabeathan. "My life wasn't easy. They kept us beneath for months. I only did it in the beginning because my mother convinced me to. But later, it was for the griffin's cause." She nodded. "There was the chamber test, a large room of tangled tree roots, and we had to find a doll hidden within the twisted, hollow bales. And if you failed, you entered the spider room—an old, abandoned kitchen with dark, empty windows and crawling insects. There was the corridor of recitation, where they dropped us in a narrow place, and we stood up to our necks in mud, reciting from books on a ledge before us. The historical stanzas didn't make any sense. *1854, the tenth of May, one goblin met his friend on a hot day. Two goblins met again the same year, a rainy seventh of August.* It was cold, and we couldn't speak, aside from to ourselves. I feel cold recalling it."

Cobeyla lifted and studied the box. "It was on an estate much like this one. Disguised as a servant, your mother uncovered and circumvented an unknown flooded passage. But the stairless tower was the biggest challenge. You see, there was a mossy side, where sunlight barely entered; and slime lay opposite, where the light never hit; and one used proper holds to reach the top. It lay in a compartment inside a beam, which she breached with a knife. Getting down was tricky. She tied a rope to the beam, and it left burns on her hands. She moved without being found out. Each day a tutor came and brought the children musical instruments, and so Xagipa hid it in a cello's carrying case. It was merely a matter of getting into the teacher's home and retrieving the box before it was discovered."

A groan reverberated through the room, and Nalabeathan saw the cracks move as though the wall tried to speak, but wasn't sure if she imagined it.

The butler appeared in his doorway.

Cobeyla gave a dismissing flap of her wing. "Don't fret. We'll deal with it after our guests leave."

The butler retreated as the groan subsided, and the griffin continued: "And now for the lure. The teacher was a bachelor, and Xagipa knew the governess had planned a gathering. The ball included unmarried, young ladies. However, when the governess requested the ball, she didn't have the tutor in mind. So Xagipa knew a bookbinder and had a fake invitation made up. While the teacher attended the gathering, she got into his house, found the case, and retrieved the box."

As the meeting continued, each shared another tale: the impulse normally occurred whenever they gathered, and Nalabeathan suspected a thing behind the walls, or under the floorboards, caused one to speak. Although what it was, she could only guess. As usual, Cobeyla slightly opened the box; the chamber thrummed with a series of jolts; the dimness lifted; and all fell silent.

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