

Chapter 5

I woke up on the bier. It was a low, squat block of stone, uncut and unpolished, white marble shot through with veins of silver and speckled with quartz. This was where Koru told me to come for a reading of my dreams, where Zeni performed her day-job. Night-job, I guess. I sat up and my leg was cured. Zeni sat on a chair nearby, playing cat's cradle with herself, and looking unutterably bored.

My schemes and flattery aside, she was quite pretty. Her skin had the same reddish tint as the river silt, carried down from the Tsme. She had big eyes and small, long-fingered hands. Her hair and clothing floated in the water as if they were weightless, and underneath her clothing, her form curved in most interesting ways. That was the thing about gossamer. It revealed shapes and no details, form but no specifics, and hints. She looked amazing.

She looked up while I was looking at her and put her game away.

She really was quite pretty, but now, instead of looking passionate, enraptured, or amorous, she looked curious and a little cynical.

"I fixed your leg," she said, waving her finger at me.

"Thank you."

"With less pretty language, why are you here? Be honest."

"Mostly for the leg," I said.

"Fair."

"Also, I want your help to escape the valley."

She shook her head. "I don't get involved in the affairs of the Hakan."

"I hate your sister."

Zeni perked right up. "What now?"

"She's a plague, and I want to work her downfall."

Zeni's eyes narrowed. "Which one?"

"Astras." I paused. "Aelof's fine. She's quite nice, honestly, but she complains a lot."

"She does do a lot of work," Zeni said quickly.

"Maybe so, but I don't want to hear about it! Anyway, I wish her the best. I'm talking about Astras. I want to work her downfall."

"I don't know if I should get involved--" said Zeni, and I hurried on.

"I think she's cheating on Koru."

That stopped her like I'd staked her through the heart. "With who?"

"Dr Simmons."

She looked away, and the gears of her mind clicked audibly.

I went on. "He's the really annoying one with the too-big head on the too-thin neck and laughs like a harpy."

Zeni looked down, and her eyes fixed on me. She leaned forward in her seat, pulling barely-there fabric tight. "Why him?"

"A few reasons. One, he's an idiot, she seems to like him, and I can't imagine anyone putting up with him unless he was giving her a little something extra. Two, I don't think Koru would suspect. Simmons gives a slightly-gay vibe. Three, I've never seen Koru give a lot of attention to Astras. She has to show up, look hot, and he treats her as being decorative. I wouldn't be surprised if she was watering other fields as a way to get revenge."

Zeni squinted. "Why do you want revenge?"

"She tried to have me killed."

"Did you try to sleep with her, and she turn you down?"

"Who?" I yelled. My voice cracked. I didn't mean to, but that meant there was no way I could have faked it. "The evil plague?"

"Yeah. You just said she's hot."

I stared at her for several seconds, then said, "No."

"I'm just saying," she just said.

"No."

This turn of conversation had moved away from me. I was still kinda trying to seduce her.

"Baby, let's not talk about other women."

"Yeah, yeah. Enough with that, buddy. What do you want?"

"I'd like you to smuggle me out of valley without anyone knowing."

Zeni waggled her head side-to-side a few times. She looked up at the Moon again and frowned.

"And I'd like to talk with you a little bit," I added.

Her head stopped wiggling, and Zeni looked at me. It was a flat gaze. Her eyes didn't open all the way, but she arched her eyebrows. Her lips made a thin line. But I got the feeling through her mask she wasn't quite as cold as she implied.

"Come here. Talk with me a little bit," I added. There was plenty of room on the bier.

She stood up with marvelous posture, and that made her hips and curves draw the floating gossamer tight. I enjoyed looking at her. She shifted her weight to her right leg, as if to take a step, but the movement made her curves curvier. Her left foot went up on the toe.

"Night Witch, Daughter of Alph, Oracle, come to me!" yelled the voice of the idiot above, the true blister under my sandal strap, Mithrak. "Give me your wisdom."

"I won't give you a bleeding thing," muttered Zeni, slipping out of her position to stand flat-footed with fists on hips.

I slipped up from the bier, took her about the waist, and kissed her. She looked surprised, and she didn't kiss me back. But she didn't move away either.

After a long, pleasant moment, I leaned away without letting go. "Help me. I must escape."

"Okay."

"Mithrak's going to ask you where I am. Don't tell him."

"I'll lie to him."

I expected more fight there, honestly. "You can do that? As an oracle?"

"Do what? Lie to a customer? Oh, sweetie."

"Dang."

I'd always sort of suspected, but I'd just assumed it was impossible.

"Where do you want to go?" she asked.

Hyperion, I thought, but I didn't say. "Just out of the valley, and far enough away I can't be tracked easily."

"Follow this stairway down, but when you come to the Moon, turn around. Before you, you will see many pools. One will bear the reflection of Angel's Crest. Walk through it, and you will be there."

"Can I come see you again?"

"If you want."

And I did.

But I didn't want to die. Fighting Mithrak would get me killed. If he fired even one round from that .43, Hoarfrost would hear. And then...

I looked at Zeni.

"It would be great if they thought I was dead."

She shrugged a mysterious shrug, but underneath she was smirking.

I ran down the stairway toward the Moon at the bottom of the lake.