





WILLING SACRIFICE

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CHAPTER 1

The large undulating cloud spread across the fields, its hunger almost palpable. Food was near, food and entertainment. Thousands of them, all gathered directly in its path. Lightning flashed through the cloud from its eager anticipation.

Long tentacle-like appendages touched the tall city walls, as if caressing a lover, as the cloud glided upwards along its surface. The scent of prey was near.

A resounding gong filled the night as a lone foodling spotted it and called to others in alarm. *Yes, make it ring. Call your brethren to the feast.*

More foodlings appeared, some in their protective shells of metal and others not. It went over the wall, satisfied and reached out to begin the fun.

Screams echoed in the night as its acid touch ate through their shells to sear the flesh beneath. Ah, the smell of it. The eons it and its fellows had dreamt of this. Their time was finally here.

The foodlings' attempts to foil its progress sent ripples of amusement through it. Their puny metal weapons bounced off its tentacles without effect. Those foolish enough to enter it screeched in agony and then were abruptly silenced—tasty snacks before the main meal.

The cloud did not slow, but flowed down the other side of the wall, expanding as it went. Like a wave, lights flickered on across the city as it engulfed the nearest homes, the horrified cries of those

within waking those without who were still asleep. It could feel the panic rolling before it, frightened foodlings leaving their homes in a vain attempt to avoid its advance.

A lamp fell and shattered inside a shop and flames attacked the wood within reach. The cloud was not bothered by heat or cold and enjoyed the extra fear the fire inspired in its fleeing meal.

The blaze and the hunger closed in about the city until soon there was nothing left but the taste of death.



“No!”

Làtiera sat up, her eyes wide with horror. The green luminous aura surrounding her dimmed, shrinking back unnoticed to outline the birthmark of a closed eye on her chest. Her damp golden hair falling about her like a veil, she leaned forward, shaking, trying to catch her breath.

She'd had another horrid vision—this one more vivid, more terrible than the last. Feeling cold at the memory, she quickly reminded herself it wouldn't be long now—it wouldn't be long before she would never have one of these troubling dreams again.

Grabbing her robe from the end of the lavish bed, she stood and wrapped it around her. She doubted she would be sleeping again this night.

She silently crossed the fur rugs strewn over the cold stone floor and made her way to one of the small stained-glass windows, her heart gradually slowing within her breast. Opening it, she stared out into the darkness toward the east.

Beyond the low wall at the edge of the manor's back garden, past the large stone ramparts encircling the estate and the hidden city beyond it, she could see the lightening of the sky proclaiming the coming of the dawn. Wistfully, she turned her gaze upwards, looking for any signs of the Herald. The comet was there, barely visible but growing larger each day, its tail not yet noticeable. But it would be soon, that much she was sure of. And then the nightmares would stop.

Làtiera retreated from the window, a sudden desire not to be alone welling through her. Knowing her uncle was usually up before the sun, she left her rooms to go searching for him.

The high, long hallway was quiet except for the padding of her naked feet. It was a familiar silence, one she was used to whether it be

the height of day or at night, for little to no sound of the outside world ever reached here. Hugging herself for warmth, the terror of her dreams still lying within, she passed the doors to her library, the dining area, the sewing room, the stairs leading down into the garden and finally reached her uncle's study.

Stopping before the domineering double doors, she tied her robe on straight, brushed her thick hair with her hands and straightened her shoulders. At this stage of things, she had no intention of rushing into his room like a frightened child. Not when her nineteenth birthday was so close at hand.

Feeling slightly more dignified, she raised her hand and rapped on the closest door.

"It's open."

Smiling for a moment in relief at the sound of her uncle's voice, La'tiera eagerly reached to open the door.

Within was a broad room jammed with books, papers and shelves of curios from around the world. A dark ironwood desk resided on the far side, an ample leather chair behind it. She loved this room. It, more than anything else, encapsulated her uncle's personality for her, yet it was more than that. In some ways it was as if the room and its contents encapsulated the world as well. Fertility statues from the Barbarian Reaches, masks from the hunter tribes in Gaya, purported demon skulls, strange insects trapped in amber, prayer wheels, curved knives, stuffed animals from faraway jungles—she never tired of looking at these things, of touching them. Gathered over her uncle's lifetime and some by his ancestors before him, these things gave her a glance at the people and places she would never see.

In the corner, facing a tall shelf of books, she found the one she sought. Though taller than she was, her uncle was not a large man but rather thin and wiry. His white hair thickly ringed the sides of his head, which was otherwise bald. Age spots covered much of his exposed skin and a slight stoop hunched his shoulders. He leaned heavily on a thick cane with a silver head while holding an open book in his free hand.

Yet all his age was belied by the bright energy and intensity of his gaze.

She saw the familiar brightness now as he finished the passage in the book he was holding and glanced toward her.

“La’tiera?” He let the book close and set it back on the shelf. “You’re not normally up this early. Is something amiss?”

Seeing his welcomed concern, she suddenly found it hard to keep her previously contrived calm. “I..”

“You’ve had another nightmare.”

Her thin veneer suffered another crack. “Yes, I did.” Her voice shook. “It was awful.”

Her uncle’s lined face softened and he held his arms out to her. “Come, child.”

As if it were a blow rather than an offer of comfort, her veneer shattered and tears sprang to her eyes as she quickly crossed the room to fall into the offered embrace. She felt his thin arms wrap around her.

“It was terrible. A whole city was destroyed. So many people died!” She hid her face in his thick robe, trying not to sob.

“Shush, it’s all right.” He held her, softly caressing her hair as he sometimes had when she was a child. “Everything is all right now.”

La’tiera tried to pull herself together but was having a hard time of it.

“Here, wipe your face.”

From a pocket, he produced a handkerchief and handed it to her. She took it, not meeting his eyes as he moved away from her to settle gingerly in the large chair. Wiping her face, she sat down on the cold floor beside him and laid her head on his knees.

“I’m sorry. I really don’t mean to be a bother to you.”

With a slight smile, he caressed her cheek, his right hand appearing like a talon so wracked it was by age. She thought it wonderful.

“Nonsense, you’re my treasure and could never bother me. I’m only sorry the Eye burdens you with such visions—especially since you already know how important your mission is.”

Yes, her mission, her whole reason for existence.

“You won’t have to put up with them much longer.”

Though she already knew this, it was comforting to hear him say so.

“I’ll try not to let them bother me,” she said, looking up. “As long as they’re only visions and don’t come true, it’ll be worth it.”

“Yes and it will all be thanks to you.” He lifted her head so she could sit up, a soft smile on his face until he looked down at her.

“La’tiera...”

She stiffened slightly, familiar with the chastising tone. “What is it?”

“What have I spoken to you about before?”

She pulled back for a moment, not sure what he meant, until she noticed her robe had come slightly apart near the collar.

“The Eye!” Unbidden, her delicate hand shot up to her chest to cover the strange birthmark housed there. It was what set her aside from all others and gave her a purpose in life. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking.” She quickly stood and arranged her robe to keep it from view.

“You know how important it is for no one to know you who you are. It’s why I had your necklace made.” His voice turned very serious. “And why it is important that you never take it off.”

La’tiera bowed her head in apology. If only the necklace weren’t so heavy. It made it very difficult to sleep at times.

“I’ll try to do better.”

“I’m sure you will.” His expression lightened. “By the way, it seems we will have entertainment this evening. A traveling troupe arrived in town yesterday afternoon. If nothing untoward is learned about them today, they will be allowed into the manor.” He shot her a sly look. “Unless you’d rather not see them, of course.”

La’tiera felt a bolt of excitement shoot through her. “No! I mean, I would welcome the distraction, if you would permit it, Your Excellency.”

She gave him a small curtsy. Her uncle was the viscount of the area and in all things he held the final say. And she so hungered for things from the outside.

He laughed at her sudden formality. “Yes, of course, pending their approval. Now, run along so an old man can get back to his studies.”

“Thank you, Uncle.” She curtsied to him again, her excitement growing by the moment. Still, she managed to take ladylike steps to the door and let herself out.

Once in the hallway, however, she let out a small squeal of pleasure and took off for her suite. Her bare feet slapped against the floor, echoing off the stone walls.

Out of breath by the time she got there, she crossed her spacious bedroom and jumped into her bed, snuggling into the thick covers. A

performing troupe would be coming by tonight! It was too delicious. New music, new faces—it would be wonderful. It would also be a sweet pain to have to wait for it until the evening. She'd have to make as much of it as she could. She wouldn't have much longer to take advantage of such opportunities.

A smile on her face, she didn't mind too much as she reached to her nightstand for the necklace bearing the viscount's family crest and placed the heavy thing around her neck, hiding from view her reason for being.

CHAPTER 2

Dal hefted the tied buckets a little higher on his shoulder, watching as the small city woke up around him. Sleepy-eyed men and women swept the sidewalks as others either brought out their wares or rear-ranged merchandise.

This part of the country believed in a dual-component architecture—stone for the foundations and first full story, anything above made of wood. The roofs all gently sloped in four directions, in honor of the Gods, and their awnings were wide, providing shaded sidewalks and balconies.

They were a big difference from the adobe buildings he'd encountered to the far south or the cliff dwellings on the northern coasts, but these buildings were home.

As the morning traffic increased, he slowed his pace, observing everyone and everything. Passersby moved briskly, some in the viscount's livery but most wearing the simple clothes of peasants or servants. On the surface, everything appeared as usual, but the keen observer could see signs of rising anxiety lying underneath. He would see a shopper or servant who would suddenly pause to glance up at the sky, eyes searching for the comet now hiding behind the sun's growing light. Pieces of jewelry or patches of clothing would be touched or gazed upon, all of them representing one or all of the Four Gods, or the image of a lone eye.

The people were not the only ones showing the signs. Windows and

storefronts carried banners or pots in red, blue, yellow and green, the colors of the Four. To a foreigner, it might look as if the city was gearing up for a festival or holiday of some kind, but it was neither. Dal was sure more banners and colorful streamers would appear as the days moved on and the comet drew closer. The histories at the Mother House spoke of price increases, of people hoarding goods in case the unspeakable should happen, of tempers growing frayed, or people showing amazing acts of kindness, all brought forth by the impending Time of Trial.

The day would soon be here and though many did not believe, the time between trials being so long, the stories and legends kept the knowledge alive. With the Herald's coming, many had started paying attention to them as never before.

He and his people were mandated long ago to make sure no one forgot, for in ignorance all might be lost. As he had often of late, Dal felt a surge of pride at being a part of it all, to have been fortunate enough to become an actual member of the Order. It was mostly through their continued efforts the knowledge of the Trial was kept alive.

Though the Order had remade itself many times over the eons, it had always been their dedication, their continued efforts which kept the people aware. The Order had found the Bearer cycle after cycle as well and kept them safe, helped them prepare for what would need to be endured, aided them in whatever way possible to promote the continuation of humanity.

Dal's mood sobered.

Except for this one. This time they had been unable to find the Bearer, though they'd been searching for almost nineteen years, since the current cycle for the Trial began. There was no way to know if the Bearer was prepared, if he or she had heard the stories, if he knew what was to come and what he needed to do.

Dal didn't understand how his father could just stay at the Motherhouse and do nothing, to let things happen around him while the Bearer was still missing.

Aside from fanciful dreams of being the one to find him, Dal knew his actual chances were none; but at least he was out here looking, doing his part, not just sitting around waiting.

He plastered himself against a wall, making sure not to splatter

the well-dressed maid rushing by with a loaded basket nestled on the crook of her arm, looking distracted.

If only the Gods had seen fit to provide them a way to find the Bearer! Not once in the last nineteen years had they found a trace of his location. The other Motherhouses in the other kingdoms and empires had had no better luck. It was unprecedented and disturbing. The few feats of magic that could be coaxed from those in the know hadn't found him. Aside from the relics left to the Order by the Four, magic was difficult, the knowledge rare, a lot of it lost during the massive wars in the previous cycle. Wasteful wars fought over who would have control over the Bearer, as if somehow the Bearer were capable of conveying powers or riches to anyone, when they actually only existed for one purpose and one purpose alone. Yet as soon as two of the countries started fighting others had joined the fray until eventually all were affected. What if it happened again?

For a moment, the street currently filled with the bodies and shouting of sellers, the talking and swaying of shoppers, the clomping of passing horses, changed in his mind's eye to one of angry soldiers, bloodied cobblestones, all surrounded by the cloying scent of death.

Dal shook his head, moving on, realizing he was more worried about the coming Trial than he'd thought. But there were some advantages to the current situation. Though the Order might not have found the Bearer, neither had anyone else—or if they had they were not advertising it. If someone were hiding him, as long as the Bearer had been taught what was expected of him, all would be well.

Traffic on the streets thinned as Dal came near the center of the city and the viscount's walled compound. The troupe had been allowed space just outside the walls to set up their wagons and make camp.

The compound's walls were rather formidable, taller than those surrounding the city. They were manned as heavily—if not more so—than the city walls, which was unusual for something thought of as a last line of defense in a place that hadn't seen war in generations. As if to excuse the excess, they were told the viscount relished his privacy and went to whatever means necessary to preserve it.

The large doors leading in were open, but guards blocked the open space, checking everyone wishing to go in or out. If you had no business with the viscount or his aides you wouldn't be getting in.

That, however, was one of the favors the troupe had received after a rather surprising invitation to perform there. They had the run of the place, at least as far as setting up for that evening's performance was concerned.

Dal grinned, remembering Rostocha's proud smile as the messenger intercepted them when they'd stopped to make camp at the appropriate place just outside the city. It had only dulled slightly a little later when they were told of the restrictions on what they could perform before the viscount, the nobles and other higher citizenry who would be their audience.

"Daltimoneous, taking your sweet time, were you?"

Dal grimaced, not liking his first name and liking even less that the leader of the troupe enjoyed using it. "Not especially."

The big man grinned and took the buckets from him, hefting them with ease.

"Anything interesting?"

Dal shrugged. "More banners were flying this morning. People are looking more tense." He fell in step with Rostocha as the latter led the way behind the first of the three wagons to where they'd tied up the horses.

Rostocha grunted. "I expect they'll grow more so before it's over."

Dal agreed.

"Was the little scamp not with you? She was supposed to help Bentel cut vegetables this morning."

Dal shook his head. Aya was better at avoiding chores than he was. "Haven't seen her since breakfast."

"That girl." Rostocha slowly did the same, his eyes bright. "She's got a talent for trouble, that one. I'm almost afraid to guess what she might be getting into now."

Another thing Aya was better at.

"Keep an eye on her, if you can. All we need now is to get them annoyed at us. With all the rules about what we can and can't play tonight, I've a feeling the viscount may not be the most forgiving of souls."

"She's not the easiest person to keep track of."

"Too true, lad. But you've got the best chance of any of us."

With a resounding smack to the back and a chuckle, Rostocha left him to his quest. Now all Dal had to do was figure out where Aya

might have scampered off to. He gave a heartfelt sigh. Something a lot easier said than done.

CHAPTER 3

“Milady, it’s time to wake.” The short, squat woman swept into the room, a no-nonsense expression on her face.

La’tiera sat up slowly and stretched. “Good morning, Mela.”

“Morning.”

Sour as ever, Mela brought over a tray containing La’tiera’s breakfast to a small table with gracefully carved legs and matching chair. La’tiera was well used to the maid’s dampened disposition—Mela had been with her for as long as she could remember. Aside from her uncle, the older woman was the only other person she was allowed to interact with. The danger of her existence becoming known didn’t leave much room to meet others. For all she knew, everyone outside was like Mela, though she actually hoped they were closer to being like her uncle.

“I think it’s going to be a wonderful day today, don’t you?”

Every moment that passed meant the evening would be here that much sooner.

Mela nodded absently. “I’ll prepare your bath while you eat.”

She closed the open window, a slight frown to find it so on her face.

“Thank you, Mela.” La’tiera scampered over to the table and ate her breakfast with unusual relish. Yes, it would be an exceptional day.

Seeing her room washed with the rays of a new dawn, it was much easier to dismiss the horrid visions from the night before. The wood paneling on her walls broke up the austerity of the stone walls,

their coloring enhancing the light coming into the room, the grain filled with sparkles, which she'd been told were only found in this rarest breed of tree. The matching armoire, table, chairs and bed frame, all shaped with curves, no harsh angles, made to encompass her femininity—or so she was told. How furnishings could be used to represent such things she wasn't at all sure, not having seen enough of what there was to make comparisons.

By the time Mela returned, La'tiera had finished her meal. As the woman cleaned up after her, she slipped on her slippers, knowing how much the older woman worried about her walking barefoot on cold floors. Mela would be very disapproving of her little foray without them last night.

The room beyond the tall archway was almost as spacious as her sleeping chamber. Marble columns bordered the circular room, protectively sheltering a sunken pool. Wisps of steam rose from the water, carrying with them the scents of flowers and aromatic oils. Water lilies floated like fallen leaves on the surface, as well as petals from a dozen other flowers.

La'tiera didn't entirely understand how the water was heated, other than it began outside in an oven, its heat sucked under the flooring to warm the stones and then the water. It was one of the many marvels her uncle had encountered and brought home from his travels years and years before.

Mela helped her pin her considerable tresses out of the way before La'tiera slipped into the water, nude except for her necklace, her one constant companion. Leaning back into the luxurious warmth, she stared up at the mosaic tilework in the high ceiling. It was a giant representation of the Herald's arrival. Nestled in a sea of darkness, his head floated above her, with a thrusting chin and eyes that glittered with purpose. His hair streamed out behind him in a long fiery trail. His purpose was to remind everyone the time for the Testing was close at hand.

Every four hundred and fifty years the Eye would appear on a newborn child. Nineteen years later, the Herald would be sent by the Gods to warn that it was time. Then, on the day of his closest passing, on a night with a full moon...

"Milady, you don't want to prune. It's not good for your skin."

La'tiera sat up, pulling her gaze from the Herald. Mela stood at

the pool's edge, a clean robe open for her to step into. Glancing one last time at the Herald, she rose to her feet. Soon he would be in his full glory, soon the time of the Trial would be at hand.

Mela wrapped her in the thick robe and steered her to a nearby cushioned table. Efficiently, La'tiera was dried off and then oils and luscious lotions were applied to her skin.

"Mela?"

"Yes, milady?" The woman had her turn to her side, briskly massaging her skin as she moved.

"Will you be going to see the entertainment tonight?"

Mela didn't hesitate. "No, milady. It's a total waste of time."

La'tiera didn't know why she asked. The answer was always the same. But strangely, the woman's obvious disgust at the prospect only helped heighten her own excitement.

Once her skin was cared for, they returned to her bedroom.

"Any particular dress today, milady?" Mela headed toward several armoires that stood against the wall near the door as La'tiera made herself comfortable before the room's bronze-mirrored dressing table.

"The blue one, I think, the one with the half-sleeves. I'm in the mood to paint today."

"As you wish." Mela opened the doors of the armoire in the center.

La'tiera released her captured hair and watched it cascade down over her shoulders. She started brushing it with a large silver-handled brush but handed the task over to Mela once she had placed the chosen dress on the bed. She watched in the mirror as Mela worked on her hair with strong, meticulous strokes.

"Will you miss me once I'm gone?"

The squat woman never looked up. "Of course, milady."

Sometimes La'tiera wasn't so sure. It gave her a strange feeling inside. But it didn't matter, did it? Not in the end. She would have served her purpose, risen to her destiny. She would be with the Gods, with Yrr, Ath, Hurr and Ryh and then it wouldn't matter whether her maid missed her or not.

Once Mela finished with her hair, she helped La'tiera dress.

"Where do you wish to paint, milady?"

La'tiera slipped a couple of clips matching the color of her dress into her hair as she took her time pondering the question.

“In the garden, please.” With tonight to look forward to, she doubted she could stand being cooped inside.

“As you wish.”

Mela led the way down the main hall of La'tiera's wing, given generously by the viscount for her use and protection. Stopping only long enough to pick up the paints and canvas, Mela stuck close to her as they descended the side stairs to the private garden. She opened the barred gate midway between the second story and the ground floor with a key hidden in her bodice.

The garden was tended only when La'tiera slept, and was empty except for the two of them. Almost as large as the wing of the house itself, it was hers alone. Paths meandered through the space, tall trees, bushes and flowers filling it with color and pleasant scents. Partially overgrown with ivy, a wall taller than a man demarcated the boundary. Some distance beyond it rose the higher walls guarding the manor.

Mela placed La'tiera's things on a marble bench close to the small fountain near the garden's entrance. With practiced ease, La'tiera set up her stand and prepared her easel.

“Will there be anything else, milady?”

“No, I guess that's all. Thank you, Mela.”

The sour woman nodded once then took her leave. La'tiera turned her attention to the blank canvas. She picked up her brush, still staring at the virgin cloth. After a moment, she dipped the brush in the vibrant colors and spread them over the canvas to bring out something only she could see.

Painting was the one thing she felt she would truly miss once the Herald arrived and her time came. It was her only true means of expression, of escape. It was also a way for her to leave something behind of herself, some enduring feature those few who knew her could remember her by.

Her strokes slowed as she glanced up and saw the same view that had greeted her for almost nineteen years—the tall weeping willow with its streaming limbs of leaves; the yellowberry bush, whose fruits grew golden in the summer heat; the roses, the morning glories, the magnolias. And beyond them, always beyond them, the containing wall and, farther still, the ramparts.

Proud of her mission, her purpose, ready to do what was required,

she possessed but one regret—that this garden would be as much of the world as she'd ever get to see. Still, it was the price she had to pay for the important role given her. And she would do everything in her power to do it right. It was too risky to allow her to see the world. There was too much of a chance someone would figure out who she truly was.

La'tiera turned her attention back to the partially finished canvas. For another half-hour she added details to the landscape she imagined lay beyond the wall before finally setting her brush down.

She studied her efforts with dissatisfaction. She was too distracted by too many things to do her art true justice today. She gathered her utensils together, knowing Mela would pick them up later and take care of them for her. Though she would have done it herself, there were a number of things, that being one, which Mela just didn't allow.

It was still too early for lunch, so she decided to take a stroll. Her steps rang softly on the cobbled path, assorted scents rising to wrap about her. If she pretended not to see the ramparts, she could almost believe she was somewhere else, somewhere *out there*. Possibly going to a clandestine meeting with her parents, so she could say goodbye before the time came.

Her parents—a father and a mother. Might there be siblings as well? A sister or a brother—perhaps both, if not more. The viscount, who wasn't truly her uncle, had told her her parents brought her to him for protection once they realized who she was. She had often imagined their pain at parting, at the bravery and sacrifice it took them to give up their daughter for the benefit of the country and the world.

For with the many dangers abroad, only someone with the viscount's influence could protect the Bearer of the Eye. By cutting all ties to her, they also kept others from using them against her—from those insane enough to try to keep her from what must be done. She would be like them, giving all she had to fulfill her destiny, as she was meant to.

“Oh!”

She stepped back, startled from her thoughts as something dark abruptly moved at the bottom of a nearby wisteria. She was soon more astounded as she glanced toward it, thinking to spy a squirrel or

chipmunk—or less appealing, a rat—when she realized the creature sitting up and rubbing sleepily at its eyes was, in fact, a child.

“You...You shouldn’t be here.” La’tiera blinked twice, doubting her own eyes as her hand reflexively rose to cover the necklace sitting over her chest.

A big yawn greeted her statement, then curious green eyes met her own. The child’s round face was dirty, a crop of long, unruly red hair framing most of it, homespun clothes looking to have seen better days. Yet for all that, the child looked healthy, her eyes bright.

“Hello!”

La’tiera nervously glanced around, wondering if there might be more than just this child in her garden.

“My name’s Aya.” The girl sprang to her feet and pointed at herself as she spoke. “What’s your name?”

La’tiera stood very still, saying nothing. Where did this girl come from? What was she doing here?

Aya frowned up at her. “Don’t you have a name? Everybody has a name.”

“Ah, yes, I have a name.” Would it be safe to say it? She’d never realized children would be so small. She’d only seen them from far away and never very clearly. “La’tiera—my name is La’tiera. But what are you doing here?”

Aya gave her a gap-toothed smile. “Napping, playing, looking. This place is nice.”

She was standing here talking to a stranger, a child. Was this a gift from the Gods perhaps, allowing her to see a little of the outside through this child? Or should she assume she was in danger? Yet children were always innocent in the stories.

“I’m glad you like it...Aya, was it?”

The girl nodded emphatically.

“But where did you come from?”

Aya pointed to indicate the other side of the wall.

It was La’tiera’s turn to frown. Was her question not clear?

“I realize you’re from beyond the wall, but where?”

If she were smart, she should be rushing to get inside instead of taking the chance of talking to this girl. It would be what Mela and her uncle would prefer, she was sure. Yet she found she couldn’t just leave. She couldn’t take the risk this was a gift and that she’d be

throwing it away out of fear.

Aya shrugged. "I'm from all over. We travel lots."

"We?" La'tiera felt a twinge of uncertainty shoot through her. She glanced about her again.

"Uh-huh. Me and Lalu and Tera and Dal and Kyr and Rostocha and..."

"All right, all right." La'tiera's head was spinning from the cascade of names—so many strangers. "Who are all of you?"

Aya's chest swelled with pride. "Why, the Great Rostocha Troupe, of course!"

"The Rostocha Troupe?"

"Uh-huh. We dance, we sing, we do tricks!" The girl did a handstand then flipped back to her feet. "See?"

"Oh." Everything now clicked into place. "You're with the entertainers who are playing tonight."

"Uh-huh." Aya gave her a satisfied grin. "We're good, too."

La'tiera wasn't too sure, wondering if the rest were as untidy as this child.

"What's that?" Aya pointed straight at La'tiera's chest.

She felt a bolt of fear then realized the girl was only asking about the necklace, not what was hidden underneath.

"It's the viscount's crest. This was a present from him."

Aya stared at the yellow-and-green squares embossed with a figure of a large lizard. "Looks a little scary."

La'tiera silently agreed, it being yet another reason why she didn't like wearing it. "Aya, you should go back now. No one is supposed to come into this garden from outside. You could get into trouble."

The girl stared at her. "You're here."

"That's true, but I'm not from outside." She doubted she could talk Mela out of turning the girl in if she caught her.

Aya crossed her arms and pouted. "That doesn't sound fair. I like pretty flowers and trees."

"I understand that, but I'm serious. No one is supposed to come here. No one is supposed to see me." She realized too late she'd said too much.

The girl's eyes lit with curiosity. "No one can see you?"

Frantically trying to come up with something to explain the strange statement, La'tiera fiddled nervously with her necklace. "Aya,

it's not really—”

“Milady?”

La'tiera felt her stomach flip at the sound of Mela's voice. No, not now, the girl was still here. She spun around, thankful for the path's curves and the trees.

“Coming!” She glanced over her shoulder at Aya, hoping Mela wouldn't continue looking for her. “Please, stay out of sight for a few moments. As soon as Mela and I are gone you have to go back.”

Without waiting to see if she understood, La'tiera followed the path back toward the fountain. Mela wasn't known for her patience.

“There you are, milady.” Mela had already appropriated her paints and other accoutrements. “Your lunch is waiting. It's not healthy to eat it after it's gotten cold.”

“Sorry.”

“You hurry on inside, then. I'll join you as soon as I take care of your things.”

La'tiera nodded and went on in, forcing herself not to glance back toward where she'd left Aya.

Taking the stairs up to her wing, she moved down the hallway to her small dining room. From what she understood, her wing was almost a house onto itself. She had her own dining room, sitting room, library, bedroom and bathing room. The only thing not available was a kitchen, her food brought to her by Mela from another part of the manor. She'd always thought it would be interesting to see how her meals were actually prepared.

The viscount's study lay within La'tiera's wing, and she was not unhappy at sharing the space. A large gate cut off the hall from there, her uncle's room on another wing past it and the grand stairs leading down. These were guarded halfway down where there was another large gate. Having snuck there on occasion, she'd heard the guards talking with one another but had never actually seen them.

Very rarely was she allowed past the hall gate, for as Mela never tired of reminding her, it was best for all concerned not to take chances and let her be seen.

She entered the dining room, lightly running her fingers over the dark-colored wood-paneled wall. The table was rectangular and elegantly carved. Two large cushioned chairs sat at either end. Unlike in the evenings, covered dishes were set out for her. Once Mela arrived,

she would stand behind her and serve her more drink or food, making sure she ate but never joining her.

In the evenings would she have an eating companion. Her uncle would spend time with her, and she would ask him about his day and hear of things and people she would never see or meet. She eagerly looked forward to them, her only glimpse of matters on the outside.

La'tiera sat down in the comfortable chair, thinking about her unexpected encounter. How open the girl was—trusting and brave. She hoped she would see her again during the performance tonight. She amused herself wondering if she would see the dirty, scraped-up child of this morning or if she would be transformed into a clean little princess from a quaint tale.

She hoped the girl had had the sense to listen to her and leave the garden. She'd never heard of anyone having come into the garden or her rooms without permission, so she had no idea what her uncle would do to such a person. She'd never actually considered it before. She knew from her uncle's talks that punishments varied from fines to being put to death, depending on the crime. But what would he do to someone like Aya if she were caught?

Not really sure she wanted to know; La'tiera uncovered the soup and quiche Mela had brought up for her lunch.

At times, it felt like she lived in some remote place, one where no one could ever find her no matter how hard they looked. Yet not really all that far away there were those who worked in the house, those who took care of her uncle's business and, beyond, a city full of hundreds, if not thousands, of people. All unaware of her existence.

"Milady?"

She looked up, startled, never having noticed Mela come in.

"More wine?"

"Ah, yes, thank you." She watched the older woman refill her cup, envying her a little. Mela might have to work and toil to keep La'tiera healthy and out of harm's way, but she could also cross the barriers. She knew and mingled with those elsewhere in the manor, those beyond the manor walls. She had experienced a myriad of things La'tiera never would.

Still, for once, she knew something Mela held no inkling about. She'd met someone from the outside—face to face. And though it was highly unlikely, she found herself selfishly hoping she might meet Aya again.

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