

THE FIVE STAGES OF GRIEF

By Rin Chupeco

DENIAL

I hated everything, and I said as much.

Kance, being of a better temperament than I, was more optimistic. "Father does this every year, Kalen," he pointed out quietly as we stood before the crowd, waiting for the ceremony to begin. "It's a time-honored tradition, a public way to show our support for the people."

I grunted. There were thousands of people gathered here to witness the rites. This might be one of the most important moments of an Odalian's life, but it wasn't what I was here for. I was here to scan the crowd for any heartsglass that manifested a desire to do violence to Kance or the rest of the royal family, for which I was given permission to deter by any means my proclivities deemed necessary. I was committed to serving as Kance's bodyguard and, at fourteen, had the training to prove it. I owed King Telemaine that much, though he had every right to treat me like a traitor, like my father was.

Thinking about my father only darkened my mood. He deserved to rot in prison for the rest of his life, but he had been good to me, even if he hadn't been a good person. Some days I had to fight not to excuse one for the other.

I wasn't lucky enough to deserve nice things.

Kance's eyes twinkled, like they always did when he teased. "You're such a worrywart. Nothing's going to happen. Your scowl is enough to chase away even the False Prince himself. I think Chancellor Merdon breaks out in a cold sweat every time you so much as scowl in his direction."

"An unexpected breeze would be capable of scaring Chancellor Merdon."

"Are you nervous?"

I grunted again. It was true that this was my first official appearance as Kance's bodyguard, and I was adamant that I would do everything in my power to serve him well. Whatever Kance claimed, the Heartsrune ceremony was a recruitment opportunity masked as a coming of age ritual. Anyone whose heartsglass bled silver instead of red or purple was required to serve at the King's discretion – as asha for the girls, and as Deathseekers for the boys.

"I know you won't agree, but I rather like that the crowd has grown considerably from last year," Kance went on cheerfully. "Perhaps if there are more asha found today they can stay in Odalia rather than leave for Kion. Lady Mykaela even found a potential Dark asha to train."

"I don't know why you think that's a good thing." My mother was killed by a Faceless-controlled daeva. So was Kance's. Dark asha share similar skills to the Faceless—the same necromancy, the same questionable ability to raise and control daeva, and the same predisposition to go mad because of those powers. I disliked them on principle. The Dark asha tasked to fight the daeva back then had lost her courage and fled, dooming our mothers and the rest of that city. Kance had always been more forgiving than most.

"You saw her, if only for a brief moment. What do you think?"

"I didn't notice enough of her for me to have an impression," I lied.

"Well, she does seem quite shy, at first. Her brother served in the army and was killed by a savul. She gave Father quite the earful about that."

I turned to glare at him. "I wished you'd told me you were meeting them. I would have been there earlier." Councilor Raja and I had arrived just as Kance and King Telemaine were taking their leave from Lady Mykaela and her new charge. I was still put out that Kance hadn't told me about it.

"You were busy giving out instructions to the honor guard, and I didn't want to disturb you."

"Kance."

"You don't have to guard me day and night, Kalen. I sincerely doubt anyone would attack us in the presence of two Dark asha and a familiar."

I didn't bother telling him that it was the Dark asha I was worried about. "I don't want you keeping things from me. Like it or not, you're my responsibility."

"You sound a little like Khalad," he said, and his smile dropped.

"I promised him I'd watch out for you." I knew King Telemaine and Khalad were having problems; I didn't know the specifics, but it wasn't my place to ask. It didn't seem like Kance knew much about it, either.

"I apologize. I'll be sure to tell you next time."

"And don't apologize, you're the prince." Something he'd said earlier finally clicked in my brain. "Wait. Two Dark asha and a *familiar*?"

"Apparently Lady Mykaela found the young novice because the girl went and raised someone from the dead," the prince chuckled. "Remember the brother killed by the savul? That's her familiar. The Dark asha novitiate is named Tea, and the brother is Fox. Lady Mykaela thought it would too traumatic to force her to return her sibling. Lord Fox appears to have accepted his condition, so all Lady Mykaela intends is to keep a closer eye on them both. Dark asha are rare enough these days. Lady Tea would be more amendable to training if she can keep Lord Fox close."

"I wish Lady Mykaela good luck, but I doubt that." I was suspicious. Most competent Dark asha novitiates couldn't resurrect the dead on their first try. The girl was powerful enough for Lady Mykaela to break the rules to placate her.

I didn't like it. The last thing I wanted was a Dark asha growing accustomed to the laws not applying to her.

Kance only laughed, and clapped me on the back. "Perhaps they can stay long enough for me to introduce you after the ceremony. I'm sure you'll like her, too."

The rites seemed to drag on forever. Hundreds of children waited as Lady Mykaela drew out their heartsglass for the first time. The asha had the patience of a saint; she made her way through the line, the crowd cheering at the occasional silver or purple heartsglass.

I scanned the crowd for the new Dark asha that was to be Lady Mykaela's protégé. Kance had excused himself to talk to his father, with Deathseekers Mavren and Levi taking over my watch, but I didn't want to leave just yet. I wanted a better look at the new bone witch beyond the quick glimpse I'd had earlier. I wanted to see if she was someone I would have to guard Kance against.

I found her at the edge of the crowd, all on her own. This wasn't surprising; most Odalians didn't like bone witches any more than I did. Even Lady Mykaela was only tolerated. Her back was to me, and I saw no signs of her familiar anywhere.

A hooded figure emerged from the crowd, moving toward the girl. "Bone witch," he said. He wore a cloak to hide his features, but there was no mistaking Khalad's voice. I stepped behind a post, unwilling to reveal myself just yet.

I don't know if the girl knew enough about asha yet to know he intended it as an insult, but she turned to face him.

She didn't *look* powerful. She was pretty enough, but the Willows in Kion had more beautiful women that I'd been indifferent to. She was small and a bit mousy and very easy to overlook in the throng of people. If anything, she didn't just look like she didn't belong—she didn't look like she wanted to.

Khalad was angry. His heartsglass turned silver only days before his thirteenth birthday, but he would not be doomed to the hard life of a Deathseeker. Narel, the old Heartforger, had asked King Telemaine to take Khalad on as his student, to train him in the arts of forging and healing, a far better alternative for him than a soldier, though he would be stripped of his royal status. He was not in the frame of mind for a confrontation, and with a Dark asha least of all.

I understood his anger, but I should have intervened. I should have grabbed Khalad and dragged him away from the girl, talked to him until he'd cooled off.

"They say you can bring back the dead," he snapped. She looked even more confused, and that made him angrier. "Well? Can you?"

She looked around, found no one to defend her. "It depends," she finally said. "Do you require raising?"

"Can you, or can't you?"

"I'm a bone witch. Of course I can." Shy, Kance had said. The girl sounded confident enough for the boast, with her novitiate barely begun.

"My father says bone witches are demon children. They curse the healthy and blight the sane." That didn't sound like the king, but Khalad had reason to be angry at Telemaine too, so I kept my silence. "No other magic would touch them because they sell their hearts to the Dark. That's how they raise dead men, as soulless as they are."

"Bone witches do not sell their hearts!"

"Because you have no heart to give, the lot of you. So you take others for your own and bleed them dry. You grow the dead by the armies, and if we don't keep you in check, you will let them overrun us."

"That's not true. You hate us for nothing more than prejudice." The girl's gaze dropped toward the heartsglass Khalad was trying to hide.

It was the wrong move. The boy was still sensitive about its newly silver color. He pulled his cloak tighter around himself. "I know your tricks. My father told me all about your kind. If you can't see my heartsglass, then you can't curse me."

The girl's face fell. "I don't want to curse you."

"Your kind killed my mother," Khalad snarled, though his voice sounded anguished. I flinched despite myself, knowing that same grief. But my presence wasn't necessary; the boy turned and ran, already ashamed of his actions.

The Dark asha stared after him, hurt and lost. I couldn't look away. I didn't agree with how Khalad chose to vent his anger, but I didn't want to empathize with her, either.

Dark asha are dangerous. Remember Mother. Remember Kance and Khalad's mother.

But even after she turned sadly back to watch the rest of the ceremony I remained where I was, watching her small form a little longer.

ANGER

I was only here because the Falling Leaf asha-ka always comped our food and drinks.

Kance laughed. "Liar. Mistress Peg promised you a bottle of that Gorvekkkan wine you favor, in exchange for bringing me here."

True enough. To have the Odalian prince patronize your establishment frequently did wonders to its popularity. Especially in Kion, where everything was built on reputation.

"I don't see why you have to request asha to join us," Maeve complained. The princess of Arhen-Kosho had been after Kance for weeks, going so far as to schedule a visit to Kion on some official pretense, knowing he would be here. "I would think I'm more than enough company." She glowered at me, obviously considering me a similar obstacle.

I only grinned back at her, then downed the contents of my glass. I had the night off, but was with Kance out of habit. Ostry and Aleron were patrolling outside, so we weren't wanting for protection. There wasn't much to do in Kion other than drink and eat, and when I had shown up at the barracks earlier, intending to spend the day at practice, Captain Andronen had put his foot down and banned me from the premises, insisting that a day off meant what it was supposed to mean. I then accompanied Kance after learning Maeve had cornered him on a date he was too diplomatic to turn down, much to his relief and her fury.

Kance shrugged. "I don't mind. It would be an insult to Mistress Peg if I didn't bring more guests to her establishment."

"Even on your day off you're a stickler for protocol." I wasn't much of a fan of asha, either—I don't have anything much in common with most—but they were better than Maeve.

"If deciding against their services for one night offends the elders, then perhaps it's because their asha aren't quite as good as they're made out to be," the princess said. "No doubt

the asha-ka mistresses encourage such behavior too, to maximize their profits. In the future, we should ask them to value our privacy more than they value their greed."

Kance's smile started wobbling at Maeve's liberal use of "we" and "our". Maeve's defense of privacy was a rather hypocritical one, but the warning look my cousin shot my way told me he was forbidding me from gleefully pointing that out, lest I set Odalia and Arhen-Kosho relations back a few decades.

"An asha-ka mistress that doesn't make use of its resources would not have made for a very good asha-ka mistress," I drawled instead. "But I agree. To force yourself into company where you are not wanted should be a punishable offense, regardless of who you are."

The Arhen-Kosho princess' face darkened, but I was spared her reply when voices rose from outside of the room. Two asha stepped in, bowing low to us. "Lady Zoya shall be here presently," one of them—Yasha? Yonna?—confirmed cheerfully. "We've brought a new novice along, Zoya's taking her under her wing."

Good; Zoya had entertained for us in the past and was wittier than most of her sisters. She and Maeve could trade barbs all night. I turned to watch them enter, and froze.

The Dark asha was the first to step through the doors, looking like she would rather be elsewhere, and also like she would happily murder the asha prodding her into the room, if given the chance. She was dressed in some elaborately golden hua, her hair was pinned up by several expensive ornaments. What was she doing here?

Of course. Dark asha were still expected to entertain guests in the Willows. But Lady Mykaela rarely participated in such parties, and I'd hoped she would have done the same.

Zoya's voice sounded smug, too smug. There was something happening here that they weren't telling us. "I hope we haven't kept you waiting, your Majesty."

"I'm sorry, but I have the strangest feeling we've met before," Prince Kance said, staring at the Dark asha.

She's the damn bone witch, I wanted to say. It had been two years, but how could Kance not have recognized her immediately?

"One asha is the same as all the others," Maeve was quick to sink her claws in and claim territory. "Why even bother with learning their names, Kance? There'll be a new set next week with the same faces and dresses!"

The smile Zoya bestowed on her was blinding. I knew Maeve had lost before she'd even replied. "To understand asha is a mark of one's understanding of foreign affairs. I would be happy to help you improve your education on such matters if you'd like, Princess Maeve."

"I remember!" Kance exclaimed. "Weren't you in Kneave last spring with Lady Mykaela, during our heartsglass ceremony? Tea, isn't it? I'm quite sure of it."

The Dark asha's eyes widened in shock, before her expression turned adoring. Mentally, I groaned. Without meaning to, Kance had acquired himself another devotee.

I reached for another drink, trying my best to tune out the conversation. Some boys at the barracks liked to throw their weight around, using their family's status to intimidate the other soldiers and feel important. This was the asha equivalent and quite frankly, I was sick of both.

And this Dark asha, Tea. She could raise the dead. She had a familiar walking around Kion. I'd have expected her to be the queen bee of the asha-ka; not ducking her head, meekly deferring to Zoya. Where was the little spitfire who'd stood her ground against the eldest prince of Odalia?

"My sisters were kind enough to make an exception for me for this one night, as a favor to Your Majesty." Her voice was soft.

That irritated me even further. I didn't want to have to defend her, but couldn't help it. "Knowing what I know about Lady Zoya, I think that unlikely."

"Oh, Lord Kalen!" Zoya exclaimed, fluttering her lashes at me. "I'm distraught by your low opinion of me. But as you and Prince Kance seek our companionship whenever you stay in Ankyo, perhaps you do not dislike me too much?"

"Prince Kance makes the arrangements. I'm only along to keep an eye on him."

Kance and a few other asha stepped in at that point, and I snuck another glance at the Dark asha. She was still staring at the prince, wearing a look I've seen so many other girls wear in the past.

"My father is visiting Empress Alyx for a few weeks, to bolster a new trade agreement between Odalia and Kion."

"That's an odd way to describe your impending engagement with Alyx's daughter, Kance." I said, and watched the Dark asha's face fall.

"Do not joke so, Kalen," Maeve sputtered. I shrugged and leaned back, not allowing myself to feel guilty over my bluntness. I didn't want to believe the oracle. But I remembered Longren, and Mavren.

"This is my cousin, Kalen," Kance nodded at me. "You'll have to forgive him. We've been visiting cha-khana since we were eight years old, but he's never been one for good manners."

The girl didn't even look at me. She was staring down at her lap and frowning.

The food soon arrived, and Zoya offered to dance for us. The pretty asha may be arrogant at times, but she was also one of the Willows' best dancers, with every reason to boast. I shot another look at the Dark asha when the performance ended; she wasn't quite adept at hiding her emotions just yet, and her silver heartsglass was swirling with the colors of both envy and grudging admiration.

The night would have ended without incident, I suppose, had Zoya not made the mistake of inviting the Dark asha to perform for us. It was clear this was some punishment that Zoya wanted to inflict on her for some unmentioned offense.

"Lady Zoya," the girl mumbled. "I don't feel well."

"She doesn't look very good, Zoya," Kance said, concerned. "I think we ought to let her rest."

I was already on my feet, moving toward the door to instruct one of the servants waiting there for a warm compress and some gingko-infused tea for nausea.

It didn't help when Maeve, stinging from Zoya's earlier barbs, was only too eager to deflect from the asha's words and turn on the most vulnerable person in the room.

"Witch's get or not, she would have powers of her own, wouldn't she?" The princess taunted. "Do you, little girl? Come, show us your stuff."

I doubted the Dark asha even heard her. Her eyes were unfocused. She was clutching her head, wincing as if in pain.

"Your Highness," Yasha—or—Yonna exclaimed. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

I was no longer listening. I was looking at a tea bowl on the table, where I could see slight tremors rippling across its surface. The whole place was shaking, too softly for anyone to make out at first, but growing in volume with every passing second.

Kance was already by the girl's side, worried. "Are you alright, Tea? What's wrong?"

I rose to my feet. "There's something wrong. We need to—"

I broke off as part of the teahouse's wall crumbled away and tiny hordes of skeletal rats poured in; scuttling across the floor, their bone-tails rattling against the wood.

The girls screamed and scrambled up the table, while curses left my mouth. I flung my arm out, and Fire reduced the first wave into nothing more than ash. But more continued to stream out from the fresh breach.

And then the floor itself splintered open. Something, more skeleton now than flesh, lifted itself up. Its skull swiveled in our direction, grinning broadly.

"Stay with them, your Highness," I barked at Kance, then lashed out with my foot, catching the skeleton square in the face and knocking its head off its shoulders. The undead man collapsed just as quickly as it had risen, and its skeletal rat-army followed suit. The Dark asha fainted. I caught her, and stepped away from the now-unmoving piles of bones and dirt.

"She's an evil witch!" Maeve shrieked from her perch. "Arrest her, Your Highness!"

"Don't be ridiculous, princess," I barked, more shaken than I was willing to admit. I stared at the corpses strewn around us, and then at the unconscious girl in my arms.

She looked... vulnerable. Even in her sleep her mouth was turned down and her brows wrinkled, like she still worried about giving offense. It was a ridiculous thought; she was dangerous, and the carnage around us was proof of that.

Lady Mykaela was the first to arrive in the aftermath; she took a look around, and sighed. "Oh, Tea."

"Your mistress is not going to be happy with her," I said bluntly. Nobody was willing to relieve me of my burden, so I was still carrying the Dark asha around like a rag doll while Kance calmed the girls. Zoya was staring at the sleeping girl, her expression incredulous. "I never expected she would be so..." she began, then trailed off, at a loss for words for the first time since I've known her.

"I'm quite sure it's never crossed your mind, considering that, as I suspect, you are the reason she's here in the first place," Lady Mykaela said, and Zoya actually blushed. "Mistress Parmina will be along shortly to talk to Mistress Peg for reparations. I'll take my charge."

"I'll carry her." Lady Mykaela's frail health was an open secret in the Willows, and I wasn't going to let her carry the Dark asha all the way back to the Valerian asha-ka. A crowd had already gathered to gawk at the mess, and I spotted Levi and Mavren among them, looking bewildered.

So did Kance. "They'll see to my safety, Kance. Go with her."

"I don't intend to leave either one."

Lady Mykaela raised an eyebrow, but thankfully said nothing. After taking my leave, we headed back to the asha-ka, walking in companionable silence for the most part. Like most asha-ka, the Valerian was off-limits to men, but the maids took one look at Tea and scrambled to let us enter.

"Thank you for taking care of her," Lady Mykaela said, as I laid the younger asha down carefully onto her bed. "And I apologize for dragging you and Prince Kance into this mess."

"I suspect this is more Zoya's fault than anyone else's, and Princess Maeva a little less so."

"It's unusual for you to leave Prince Kance's side for anything. Why offer to bring Tea home for me? Any of your other Deathseeker friends would have sufficed."

I didn't have an answer to that. I gazed down at the Dark asha's prone form, and turned away. "She's going to kill someone one of these days if she's this reckless."

Lady Mykaela smiled. "We're all reckless in our own way."

She could have easily compelled assassins instead of dead rats. She was strong, but stupid with her powers. If Zoya could convince her to abuse it, then anyone else can. Dark asha have been overcome for lesser reasons.

And I'm not going to show her mercy just because she looked so lonely in her sleep.

I realized I was still holding on to her, broke contact, and stood. Lady Mykaela watched me carefully, but said nothing.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked.

"I'm going to keep Kance away from her," I said, "for as long as I can."

It was a custom for Deathseekers to seek out the oracle's blessing before they deployed to one of the weeks-long patrols along Kion's borders, and today was no exception. As Prince Kance's bodyguard, I had to remain in Kion, but partook in the tradition in a show of solidarity.

"What do you even need blessing for?" Alstart asked me with a laugh. "You get to stay here in Ankyo and sleep in a soft bed and drink on your days off, while there's hard ground and harder rations in our future. I don't need the oracle to tell me *that*."

"I'll gladly take your place if I could." Before Kance had petitioned to install me as his permanent protector, I'd ridden out with the other Deathseekersto places all over Kion. Sometimes I missed that freedom. Kion politics were sometimes too cloying for the senses.

"You can take Kalen's place if you can beat him in a fight," General Lam told Levi. "And that goes for the lot of you. Kance protects His Highness because he's more than capable of wiping the floor with the lot of you in battle."

The doors of the temple slid open, and Ostry staggered out, looking discomfited. "She always makes me feel like a little schoolboy being reprimanded for something I barely remember doing," he sighed.

For many Deathseekers, this had become more than just custom. Before our first scouting mission, back when we were all still green about the gills, the oracle had told Longren to stay in Kion. He shared her words with us, laughed it off, and left anyway. He was killed by a wandering aeshma four days later. Everyone took the oracle's warnings more seriously after that.

"You ready?" Mavren asked me.

I nodded, and stepped through the doors, my hands suddenly damp. I'd argued that the oracle was often ambiguous enough that her prophecies only made sense in hindsight, but I had good reason to not want to believe her. Longren had told the others about the oracle's prediction for him, but I hadn't told anyone else about mine.

I followed the spiral corridors leading into the heart of the temple, where I spotted the oracle kneeling on the floor before a large brazier, the flames leaping up into the air. I paused by the gateway leading into the room; I never drew too close if I could help it.

"You are still angry at me," she said calmly, without lifting her head.

"I'm not angry at you."

"You are angry because of the words I told you the last time."

I crossed my arms over my chest, trying to shake off my nervous unease.

"My words have not changed. Beware the young asha who loves the young prince. She will fight fiercely to protect him, but it will never be enough. He will die all the same, and her tears will not bring him back."

I didn't want her speaking about my greatest fear like it was over and done with, like there was nothing I could do. After Longren's death, it was Mavren who had stepped out of the

temple at the next summons, ashen-faced and shaking, and we knew it was not an act. He had been given palace duty while we rode out on patrol, and he was alive and well at our return, and had been in every ranging since. That was proof enough for me that nothing was set in stone. What use was a seer who couldn't change the future?

"Tell me what I have to do to change that." I could tell Mykaela, or even King Telemaine. If Kance was in danger and the young Dark asha was the cause, they would do everything in their power to keep her away from him.

"You misread my words."

"By the seven hells! Tell me what you mean, woman!" I shouted, my patience wearing thin. I had to protect Kance. If I had been made of stronger stuff, I would have taken my sword and slain the Dark asha myself. But I wasn't, and I couldn't, and I suspected the oracle knew.

The seeress regarded me steadily, then lifted herself gracefully off the floor. She stretched her hand out to the fire before her, and it seemed to lick and lap at her arm, like it was a pet.

"The newest Dark asha will bring about the death of the one she loves, young Kalen of Holsrath—the price for her own survival," she said. "Ensure that does not come to pass, and all will be well."

"You kicked King Randall in the face?!" Ostry sputtered, choking on his laughter.

I'd offered to pay for a night in town, which I was currently regretting at the moment. I was prepared for the copious amount of food and drinks, but the Deathseekers had insisted on adding in asha entertainment. After the Falling Leaf mishap some weeks ago, my enthusiasm for asha had waned even further than what it already was, but I'd given in.

"I didn't know it was King Randall at the time. His clothes had rotted away." The corpse the Dark asha raised had turned out to be an Odalian king that had disappeared eons ago, a king we'd thought was Kance's direct descendant until, under Lady Mykaela's guided compulsion, it accused his wife of infidelity, claiming their only son was sired by the Odalian general at the time. As far as scandals go, it was ridiculous, but everyone else in Kion lapped it up like it had only been yesterday.

Zoya giggled. Far from being chastened by her complicity in that affair, she had only doubled down and used it to further bolster her reputation. "Lord Kalen was magnificent, gentlemen, the way he immediately scrambled to protect the prince. You would have thought it was an army of daeva that had crawled up through the floor."

"The dead king was not the most irritating person in that room," I grunted, and she only laughed again.

"Tell us more," Mavren encouraged.

"I can only tell it so many times. You've heard it all by now."

"It's true that we've heard your recounting of events," Ostry acknowledged, the glint in his eye warning me he had something planned that I wasn't privy to. "But methinks it's time that we have one of the other participants tell their side of the story. And who else would be better to tell it than the young Dark asha herself?"

I sat up straighter. "Ostry, you didn't... "

"And since Lord Kalen here promised to foot the bill, I thought this would be an excellent opportunity to have her join us for the evening." Ostry pointed dramatically at the door, which slid open to reveal Lady Shadi, and Tea herself, looking just as startled to see us as I was to see her. Her gaze darkened when she took in Zoya, but immediately averted her gaze from mine.

"If it isn't the Valerian girls!" Levi hooted. "And it's the Dark asha, too! Come join us, pretty ladies. We don't bite!"

Everyone laughed; inwardly, I growled. I didn't want to have her here, and made a note to yell at Ostry later for overstepping his bounds. My only consolation was that Kance was back in the palace.

I focused on my drink and tried my best to tune out the rest of the conversation, responding noncommittally to questions thrown my way. Tea was on a more equal footing with Lady Zoya this time. I'd heard she'd been advanced shortly after the Falling Leaf disaster, which was probably quick thinking on both Mistress Parmina and Lady Mykaela's part. Zoya was obviously not pleased, her face darkening as the other began to recount the incident with more gusto than I remember her being, to the fascination of the rest. The Dark asha had gotten more confident since then. It was almost admirable. But when Kance's name was mentioned again, I watched the Dark asha's eyes brighten, and knew there was no room to be complacent.

It didn't matter that I didn't want to believe the oracle. The idea that Kance could die because of her had lodged itself in my brain, failing all attempts at excision. *The newest Dark asha will bring about the death of the one she loves, young Kalen of Holsrath—the price for her own survival. Ensure that does not come to pass, and all will be well.*

Tea soon offered to get the party more wine. I was waiting for her when she returned, and took the tray from her hands.

"Thank you, milord." She was annoyingly chipper. "Was there anything else you wanted me to—"

"Stay away from Kance, asha."

She froze, and her mask slipped. She looked more like the girl I'd remembered; staring, hurt, after Khalad. Sad and lonely, asleep in my arms.

I should have felt vindicated. I didn't want to feel bad, disavowing her of her crush no matter how unrealistic that daydream was. I wanted...

I don't *know* what I wanted.

"I...I...I," she stammered, "I don't know what you—"

"Stay away from him, Tea," I'd die first before I let the oracle's prophecy be proven true.
"And if you do not, then I will make sure you do."

I shut the door in her face, and returned to my seat. It was some more minutes before she entered the room; so much smaller, so much quieter than before, but I raised the wine to my lips and pretended she wasn't there at all. But even as I did, I was all too aware of my heartsglass thudding against my chest, red with anger at myself, that her hurt could affect me so.

BARGAINING

"No," I said, though I knew it was a lost cause once Lady Hami had her mind set.

"You promised," the woman insisted. "She'll learn much from your instruction. You're an excellent fighter, the best in Kion. Prince Kance has already given his approval, and is in fact keen on the idea."

I gritted my teeth. Kance had a habit of acquiescing too easily, and often assumed I would follow suit.

"You've sparred with her a few times now. You know she has potential."

True enough, but I'd only agreed to three, four training sessions. Lady Hami was insistent that I continue beyond them.

The Dark asha was too *damn* friendly. That was my main concern. I'd been terrible to her right from the start, but she'd always shown up with a bright smile and an apparently genuine eagerness to impress me. She learned quickly, rarely made the same mistakes twice, and at the beginning wore some scented potion that made me all too aware of her bare arms and her flushed cheeks and her hair in maddening disarray. The last time I'd gotten close enough to be distracted by the light gold flecks in her eyes she'd hit me, hard, with a wooden sword before scampering

away, gleeful at finally scoring a hit until I'd lied and said I'd deliberately given her the point, much to her dismay. I'd barked at her not to wear spells on her skin after that; if it was an attempt to put me in a better mood whenever she was around, it had backfired. I was now even more aware of her presence than before, and it did nothing to improve my disposition.

This was a terrible idea. I shouldn't have accepted in the first place, and to hell what Kance wanted. "I don't have the time to coach some inexperienced asha on how to fight. I have other duties to attend to."

"From what I've noticed," a voice drawled, and I turned to find Fox Pahlavi, Tea's brother, skulking by a tree, "you have more than enough time to train Tea. The problem is you prefer a challenge."

I've refrained from having an opinion of Pahlavi, he was, as far as I was concerned, a victim of his sister's, albeit a willing one. "And you think you'll be good enough to spar with me?"

He shrugged. "I'm told you're the best. I'm an average fighter, but I doubt you'd ever had an opponent like me before."

I remembered. The familiar couldn't die, technically. He was right. I'd never sparred with a corpse before, and I was curious.

"I take it things are settled?" Lady Hami asked archly, already gathering her things to depart.

I grunted. "Pick up a sword, and let's see if you're as good as you think you are."

The man grinned. "I'm no good at all. But I cheat a lot."

That was true. Fox didn't adopt the same strategies a living person would. He allowed blows to glance off what should have been vital organs and limbs; he was impervious to pain, and used that to his advantage. He never tired, didn't even draw in breath to be winded. What should have been a stunning blow to the head he simply shrugged off, and nearly drew first blood with his counterattack. I realized soon enough that in Fox's case, there was no first blood to be drawn, he simply didn't bleed.

Upon mutual agreement, we halted so I could take a rest, much to my annoyance. My opponents were usually the ones requiring a break long before I did, though the score was in my favor, and double that of his successful hits.

"Well?" Fox asked.

"You take chances that would be fatal to others," I said bluntly. "It's lazy, even in your case. You move like you've got a dozen more arms to spare, and you'd go out of your way to wound yourself to deliver a blow, even if it's a minor one."

He shrugged. "In case you haven't heard, I'm dead."

"Your death was a consequence of your rashness. I've read General Lode's report. You'd scouted too far ahead from your patrol, too impatient to wait for the rest. You were an easy target for the savul to find."

The man winced. "Fair enough."

"You may not lack the weakness or the vulnerability most fighters have, but Dark asha expend a lot of energy to patch their familiars up. Would you put all that hardship on your sister?"

Fox's head snapped up. "Are you saying I'm a burden to her?"

"Yes, if you continue to fight like you're not worth saving." I rolled up my shoulders, feeling the familiar *pop* the joints made when I did. "Isn't that why you approached me? To be better?"

"I was more concerned about why you've been treating my sister like a leper. But wanting to improve my fighting is a close second."

I stilled. "I've been nothing but respectful towards Lady Tea."

"The odd thing about being a corpse," Fox said, "is that not a lot of people are willing to meet your eyes, so most of them don't notice when you watch their heartsglass instead. You're kind enough to offer me that dignity, but I'm not as polite, so it doesn't stop me from looking at yours, either. And your heartsglass turns a bright red every time she's on hand. Now, I'm no

expert at reading colors yet, but way I've been told, that shade of red has two possible meanings. The first is that you're furious at her. Almost to the point of hatred."

"I don't hate her." I didn't owe this boy an explanation. I didn't care if neither of them liked me. But something about the way Fox said it ticked me off. "Dark asha tend to be dangerous to the people they're around, whether or not they intend to. Kance's safety is my priority. Not your sister's feelings."

"Is that all it is, though? I heard about what happened to your mother. My condolences."

"Then you'll also know about my father, but I still serve King Telemaine. I don't hate her. I may not like Dark asha as a given, but I know how to separate my feelings from my job. And my job is keeping the prince out of danger. Lady Tea might not want to hear it, but she's a threat from where I'm stand."

"Might be so," Fox acknowledged. "But you don't seem to be as angry at other possible threats as you are at her. I'm not saying that being a Dark asha on its own has anything to do with your hostility, and I'm probably biased--but being curt won't make her any less of a danger. She's going to be thrown into the prince's social circles whether you want her to or not. May as well try to be friendly."

"Fox?" The Dark asha had arrived. She looked from her brother to me, worry stamped across her features. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," I said, before he could answer. He's only looking out for his sister. I can understand that. "I'll try, Pahlavi, but I'll make no promises. And as for you, Tea, get into position, and attack whenever you're ready."

"Aren't you tired? You just--"

"Whenever you're ready."

She scowled at me, but hurried into position. She no longer wore the perfume, but for the rest of practice she was near enough that it didn't matter.

Fox never talked to me about the second reason he had for a red heartsglass, and I was glad.

"You're insane," I said, and she only laughed. We were returning to Kion, fresh from surviving the azi at Lake Strypnyk. She'd nearly died. Despite her mirth I could see her hand tremble every so often, Fox steadying her when she swayed. But her smile was wide and beautiful; she had controlled the three-headed daeva, done what no Dark asha before her ever had, and I couldn't look away.

She'd nearly died. When I saw her body topple forward onto the ground, heard Fox's horrified cry as he dashed to her prone form. When I'd thought she'd died; not since my mother's death had I remembered such rage. And then the aftermath, the shock of realizing she was alive, temporarily trapped within the azi's body that she sought to compel--the relief was freeing. As was the horror discovering that I cared more for her than she would ever give me.

"I know you don't like me," she said. "But I hope this goes a long way to assure you I'm on your side, and on Prince Kance's. I will never put him in any danger. Or you. So maybe don't celebrate my not being dead just yet."

She was wrong. If she'd died I would have mourned her all my life, like the fool I now realized I was.

But she was alive, and she loved Kance, and so I kept my silence. "You're insane," was all I could say, because *I admire everything about you* was still too difficult to speak aloud, and spurred my own stallion into a gallop.

DEPRESSION

She was waiting for me when I strode out of the room, her face anguished. "Are you going to ignore me from now on when we're not sparring?"

That was exactly what I wanted. She grabbed my arm as I tried to walk past. "Can you at least let me apologize?" she pleaded.

"Why? So you can do it again at next opportunity?" It was easier to be angry, although at the moment all I felt was numb.

Much had happened in the interim. I was no longer welcomed in Odalia. King Telemaine had fallen ill, and my father had taken over the courts, intending to arrest Lady Mykaela and Tea on trumped-up charges. Kance had fallen ill to a strange disease we could not cure, and Mykaela and Polaire were no better, the latter sacrificing her health to keep them both alive.

I should have stayed. I had to protect Kance, and I couldn't do it from a kingdom away. But Tea had taken the choice out of my hands, compelled me to go when everything in me wanted to remain and fight.

She knew my weakness, pounced on it. "You know you could do nothing for Prince Kance if you remained behind, and he would've never forgiven us if you got yourself killed for the most idiotic of reasons!"

"You do not speak for Kance!"

"Yes, I do! His last request was for you to protect me, and I am making damn sure you carry that out! Kance wants you alive, and so do I! I want you to be with me for as long as we can be together. I don't want you to die, you ass!"

I stared at her. Did she know how she sounded? The words she said were perfect, exactly what I needed to hear from someone I loved if they had loved me in return. But this, this only opened the wound, let the gangrene fester quicker.

Her hands traced the air, and I started when an unfamiliar rune glowed over us. "This is the rune Polaire cast over Mykaela," she said. "It's used mostly for healing, but it also grants one person control over another willing spellbinder. The only way I can think for you to forgive me is to put myself in the same position I put you in."

I didn't know much about it, but from its effects on Polaire and Mykaela I knew it required the absolute trust of both sides to work. With it, I could command her any way I

wanted, even without her permission—just as she had done to me in Odalia. The magnitude of her proposition wasn't lost on me.

I knew I should reject this. I don't want her in my head. No one else had ever made me vulnerable the way she did.

But I accepted, felt the warmth spread across my chest.

"I'm not going to dispel it, which means you can choose to take control anytime you want it."

"This is the least sincere apology I've ever heard. Did you think I was going to take you up on your offer? To do what? Clean the barracks for me?" It felt good to be angry again. If she knew me well enough to trust me, then she knew I would never take advantage of what she was proposing. There was nothing in this for me but temptation. Would she like it if I forced a kiss from her? Have her say she wanted me too? It meant nothing if they were lies.

She faltered. "I'm trying my best! I don't know any other way!"

"Do you know what I *really* want, Tea? Do you want another look inside my head?" I stepped closer, watched her eyes widen as I drew nearer than was appropriate. I wanted to yell. I wanted to throttle her. I wanted to pick her up and kiss her. Even if she pretended I was Kance.

Is this what I've been reduced to? Wanting the farce because I couldn't have the truth?

I stepped back. My heartsglass stayed outwardly silver, and I was glad. "I don't need the rune. If you promise to stay out of my head, then I will obey Kance and protect you with my life. That's all the apology I want."

"I promise," her voice was small and soft, "I'll never do that to you again."

"Apology accepted. For now. As inept as it was." I could still feel her as I walked away; the Heartsrune she wove settling around my heartsglass. Without her to see, the heat of the rune as comforting as her presence even as the reality hurt, I succumbed, and my heartsglass pulsed a bloody red.

ACCEPTANCE

"The thought of you in Odalía, alone, scared me so much that I did what I'd sworn I'd never do," she said, and I tried hard not to hope. I'd kissed her before that, in a room full of strangers, continued when she yielded so sweetly. We were in Daanoris—enemy territory, with the old Heartforger still missing and Inessa's ridiculous wedding to the Daanorian prince looming ever nearer—but in that moment I didn't care.

The Heartsrune continued to spin around us, and I wondered if this was a consequence we knew nothing about, if it took the secrets I kept in my heartsglass and sang them into hers without either of us knowing.

I was tired of wanting and had said little of that kiss, ashamed of my impulsiveness. But she had sulked over my nonchalance. She wanted an explanation. She'd wanted a repeat. She had liked it, but I didn't know if that meant something more.

Now I knew. She looked how I felt when she'd nearly died fighting the azi at Lake Strypnyk, when she'd been sitting on the ground tired and smiling because she'd done what no one else had, when all I could think to say was a grunt and a "good job" instead of wrapping my arms around her like I wanted so I could yell about how she was to never do that, ever, because I had feared her dying would never make me warm again.

I wasn't frightened about leaving Prince Kance in Odalía, she said. But I was when you said you were staying.

Everything I needed to know was written all over her face.

"I've been in love with you," I said, trying hard not to make this into an apology, jumping at the chance I'd never allowed myself to take many times before, "since we fought the azi by the lake."

I watched her and saw shock, then realization, then happiness.

She needed no compulsion.

"I can't court you the way Kance would have," I said afterward, and winced, angry that I still talked about the prince like the rival he didn't know he was. "I have no head for poetry and no patience for rituals. I can't worship you with words or song; I never know the right ones to sing."

Her hands brushed against the back of my neck. Her words hung between us, all lightness and smoke. "I don't need worship."

She loves me. "Yes, you do. With my hands." She gasped when I added action to words. "With my mouth." Her small hands made fists against my hair, lovely sounds escaping her. *She loves me.*

"With my heart," I said, and sank to my knees.

It was quiet in Kion tonight.

Clouds rolled across the sky, quickly enough for moonlight to shine steadily in through the window, Tea's sleeping face caught in its glow. I wasn't ready to follow her into oblivion just yet. I wanted to memorize everything about tonight: the shape of her face, the way her body, even in slumber, moved toward mine, seeking out a space only she could occupy, contouring to the rest of me.

It had been an exhausting week. It found Tea banned from Odalia, for delivering justice, but not mercy, to King Telemaine. Caught between Kance and Tea, I had chosen exile with her, forfeiting years of service and friendship with the prince. I would do it again.

She had wept for Kance, and she had wept for Polaire, and she had wept for the black flecks that appeared in her silver heartsglass, a sign of darkrot to come. They were gone now; I could almost believe it had been a figment of her imagination, had I not seen it with my own eyes.

But after the fresh storm of her tears she had also been eager. I could still feel the marks of her nails, relished the faint pain. I'd been just as rough, just as desperate despite our inexperience. We learned gentleness in the hours after; I'd refused to cause her more hurt, and she had clung to me just as tightly.

Black on silver heartsglass was not a death sentence. She was strong enough to survive it, and she will be strong enough to survive everything else. For once, I was grateful to the oracle and her prophecies. Her predictions came with the implication that Tea would live.

Even if I didn't.

The newest Dark asha will bring about the death of the one she loves, young Kalen of Holsrath.

It was cold comfort, to no longer be afraid.

Tea stirred, her hands reaching out blindly for me. I shifted, and she burrowed closer, her sigh sweet against my chest.

"I love you so much," she murmured, half-asleep, before falling into it altogether.

I closed my eyes and breathed her in, trying to remember everything for the day, should it come, that I no longer can.

I wasn't lucky enough to deserve nice things.