

Daughter of the Light

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Please refer to the last pages for a word list

Chapter 1 Mistby inn

The day slipped into evening with haze and drizzle. She pulled the cloak closer around her and wiped the rain from her face with her sleeve. Vanil huffed in annoyance and tossed her head. They had been riding all day as they had done it the day before, and Vanil was getting tired. So was she herself.

The night they had spent in the open. She had often done so together with Elior, but being alone, it was not as exciting. She had not slept much. She had woken up at every sound and even though she had quickly identified the bird or the deer that had made the sound, the fear had stuck inside.

She was not used to being alone and she definitely did not like it. Vanil was also uneasy. Every now and then, she turned her head to look at her rider, and it was as if she asked why they were still riding alone. Where was Oloty? Where was Elior?

Enilia had no answer to the question in the mare's gentle brown eyes. She patted her quietly on the neck. The fine drizzle had soaked the mare's skin as well as her own clothes. The hair from the mare's neck stuck to her hand, and she distractedly wiped it off on her pants.

They neared Mistby now. She could glimpse the lights from the town ahead of her. They had followed the wide road from Tinby all the way here. Not an exciting trip as the ones they would normally take, Elior and her, when they went out on adventures. However, would it not be the road he would have taken?

She slowed down as they came close to the town. The houses reared up above her in several stories. The town wall was unguarded and covered in vines and climbers in several places. The gate that led into town was wide-open on rusty hinges. It had not been used in decades.

She rode through the gate and Vanil's hoofs struck shrilling raps against the cobblestones on the main street. She had never been in Mistby before. When she and Elior left Tinby, they avoided the towns. It was in the forests and out in the open they sought the adventures. Not among human beings. Marian had never seen any reasons to take them to Mistby either.

Mistby was a town you went to if you traveled. When you went to the south or the north. It was a large town. A town with houses in several stories, large squares and market places, cobble stoned streets and several inns. Tinby was merely a clutter of huts compared to Mistby. Dalby was nothing in comparison either. She was not at all used to being in such a large town. This was the first time she had even been in a human town of this kind.

She had weighed for and against spending the night in Mistby. She could have ridden around the town and spend the night in a forest or clearing as the night before, but with the eeriness fresh in mind, the thought of a bed and a roof over her head won. Vanil would probably have preferred the freedom to a stable, but would the mare not probably forgive her again?

Enilia left Vanil in the inn's stable with an apologetic smile and a thousand promises to make it up to her. The mare simply shot her a glance before she went at the oats in the manger. Enilia felt bad, but she could not handle another sleepless night in the open. Not alone.

She was shown to her room by a young, stooped boy who disappeared again the minute he had opened the door for her. She knew why, but ignored the thought. What did it matter anyway?

The room was just a room. Small and dark with only the necessities. A bed, a small table, and a pillar basin. There were no paintings on the wall and nothing else that could imply that they had tried to make the room cozy. There was a window to Mistby's main street. Sixteen small, dark, and rain wet panes in each their wooden frame.

She stood by the window and looked out into town with her forehead leaned on the window frame. Her warm breath misted up the panes and she pulled away from the window again. One day farther away, one day closer to, maybe? The thoughts gained ground in her head now as the day's ride was done. Elicor, it whispered inside of her. Elicor, Elicor, Elicor.

She cleaned up at the pillar basin and hung her wet clothes to dry by the window. Her stomach rumbled with hunger and she kept busy by dressing in dry clothes so she could go down and eat in the inn room.

It was better to think practical. To think about food, think about dry clothes and then a warm bed to sleep in. To think about where she should ride from there? Where would Elicor have gone? Towards Barovia? Towards Livyliar?

Did he even know where he was going? Had father revealed the gathering point to him? He only had a few days lead. She had probably hoped that she could catch up with him. However, if he had not gone towards Mistby at first, it was ruined now.

She pushed away the thoughts again. There was no reason for those thoughts now. They would only bring it all up again. All of the ugly, unbearable emotions. Everything she fought not to think about. Just ride; that was what she should do. Ride out and find him. Find him again.

She pulled on her boots, tied them, and left the room. The noise from the inn room beat up against her through the stairway. Smoke, voices, and a thick smell of food met her in the large inn room. She slowly walked inside while she tried to find a place where she could sit alone. The humans in there looked up as she walked by. Stinging glances.

She ignored them the best she could. She knew those glances. Knew them from Tinby and Dalby. The mistrust and the curiosity. They stated the same: Keep walking, do not sit here, but sit in a place where we can stare at you.

As if she even had a wish to sit with them. They wanted to stare at her and talk about her, but not have her too close. Elicor and she had laughed at them. Together it had been easy to deal with. Now it made her angry. But there were also others here. She saw them among the humans.

They sat by themselves. Two sat by the door, talked and laughed. Four others sat at a table by the counter. Three men and a woman. They were eating. Two other men sat in the middle of the room. Around them, several tables were free, and she chose one of those.

She had only just sat down when the stooped boy came running and asked what she would have. She ordered mashed potatoes with vegetables, bread, and a mug of beer. The boy vanished again without a word. Was he afraid? He had to be used to it since even on this evening there were eight others in here. Maybe it was only she who frightened him?

She was not quite like them after all. Not real neither one way nor the other. Was that more frightening? Not quite human, not quite ainatunari. She shot stolen glances towards the eight ainatunari. The four by the counter and the two by the door talked as happily and freely as the humans around them. The two she had sat nearby were more subdued. They were leaning over the table from each their side in deep conversation.

The sound of Talviri was as music compared to the language of the humans. Even the sight of ainatunari was as music compared to the sight of humans. They looked like humans and then again. They lit up like torches in the room.

She watched them discretely while she waited for the boy to return with her food and beer. Were they looking at her too? She looked away every time one of them turned their head. She was afraid that they would see her watching them.

Would they wonder what she was doing here alone? They were on journey themselves. Their clothes bore the stamp of it as did probably her own. They would not be able to see that it was old wear that had done it. Wear from Elior and hers adventures.

The boy came back and quickly placed plate, cutlery and mug in front of her, then he was gone again. She eyed the food suspiciously for a moment, but found it to be all right. There was no meat of any kind. The inn was used to serving ainatunari. They knew how it should be.

She sipped her beer and then began eating. In the time it took to eat, she could keep the thoughts at bay, but when the plate was empty and the mug likewise, they returned. The entire practical was done now. What were left were sleep and then the further journey.

Where to? Barovia? Livyliar? Tanyvilas? Ivetarlis? There were four options, and then a million more. Would they gather in one of The Four Forests? Or would that be too obvious? The Border would protect them there. It would keep all others out, but would the Dark not be able to see them there in anyway? Would it not sense their gathering?

It would not be able to send its soldiers against them in one of The Four Forests. That provided a certain security. Nevertheless, it was a long way to just one of The Four Forests. And which one would Elior choose? For that was what was most important. Not to find the gathering point, but to find Elior. If she had only known whether he knew the exact place.

The boy came stumbling by with a pitcher of beer and poured into her empty mug without even asking if she wanted more. She mumbled thanks but he was already gone again. She stared blankly at the thick foam from the beer that sent a stripe down the marred side of the mug and formed a small spot on the dark wood of the table.

Her ears were filled with noise, only interrupted by the singing sound of Talviri from the two men at the table next to her. The thoughts tumbled about just below the surface. The emotions were right underneath. Everything she did not want to feel right now.

She had made a decision. She had left. That was all she could do. The rest was thoughts. Thoughts that only made bad worse. Clouds before the sun. Unnecessary and hurtful. She did what she could do. She rode to find Elior.

- ... Calras.

The name reached her ears through the noise in the inn room, and she sat up suddenly and stared at the two men at the table next to her. Was it them who had said "Calras"? She looked away immediately again and tried to catch their conversations through the noise. It was not hard to catch on to the Talviri-language. It was so different.

- There is nothing more to do now. Barovia has been called too and everybody knows, said one of the men.

- It will be great to set the course south tomorrow and come home to Livyliar for a while before we must move on.

- It is unbelievable to think that everybody from The Four Forests will be gathered again soon. I cannot wait although the purpose of the gathering is not the happiest, answered the other man.

She could not believe her luck. It was the gathering they were discussing. But where? Apparently, it was not in Livyliar or Barovia, but then where? Tanyvilas or Ivetarlis? They just continued to talk about how nice it would be to come home to Livyliar.

She dared to look at them discretely. They were beautiful. Beautiful, as the men in father's company who every now and then had turned up in Tinby concealed by the darkness. Beautiful in the fine and luminous way that separated ainatunari from humans. Beautiful as Elior was.

One of them had dark hair that hung loose and long down his back. His eyes were grey blue, clear and all seeing, as were the eyes of the ainatunari. The other man had shoulder long hair tied in a ponytail. He looked tougher but without having rough features as humans could have. His eyes were grey green.

They were both dressed in traveling clothes. Pants that were worn out from riding a horse. They both carried sword and knives even though they were in an inn room. She felt the pressure from her own knife that was still in her belt. Sword, bow, and arrows she had left in her room.

Were they afraid of something? Of the humans? Or of the Dark? But it would not have reached Cathaomatt yet. The karawians had not yet crossed the border to Omyomatt. She knew that much.

She fell back into thoughts and looked away from the two men who now talked about things she did not care about. She caught their names through the conversation. The man with the shoulder long hair was Ryato. The other one was Alaric. She repeated the names in her head. Beautiful names, as always.

The dream of ainatunari was not far away. Elior and her dream. To live in one of The Four Forests, to live surrounded by ainatunari instead of humans. To live among those who knew and those who understood.

Away from mistrust, away from hateful, hostile looks, away from pointing fingers and the derisive laughter. Away from being different. But you will always be different, you are jani, whispered a little voice inside which she immediately chased away. That she would not at all begin now.

An idea had broken through the thoughts. An idea that could lead her on her way. Lead her to Elior. The two men were heading for Livyliar and then to the gathering point. She could follow them. She considered for a moment if she should go and talk to them. She could ask them to take her along with them. Nevertheless, that idea she quickly abandoned again.

Too much was at risk. They would ask her too much, which she could not answer. She had too much to hide. They would see the concealment and the lie. She was jani, and she carried a secret. She would be an enemy rather than a friend.

No, but she could follow them on a distance and let them lead her to the goal. She could ride around Livyliar, wait by the pass through Rantulinoa, and follow them again from there. Then she would quickly be able to see whether they set course for Tanyvilas or Ivetarlis, and there she would find the gathering point and hopefully Elior.

She had decided on it already before she had finished thinking the thought. The two men were as sent by the Light. They would lead her through the unknown Omyomatt and around any danger. They were from Livyliar and they knew Calras. That was enough for her to trust them. The fact alone that they were ainatunari was enough for her to trust them.

A smile broke out on her face. How many days had it been since she had smiled? The last days had been chaos. From the night she had woken and found out that Elior had gone and until now. Chaos. At first the weeping, then the anger, then the decision to leave. The emptiness inside. Alone. He had gone without her and he had closed off. Alone outside and alone inside.

And then the nightmare of his death. It had never been like that before. So many feelings at the same time. And he had not been there to help. No one had been there. There was no one else. He had always been there. She had not spent as much as one day without him before. Hours maybe, but never a day.

And if he had not been there next to her, he had been in her heart. A whispering voice, laughter, a smile. Now he was not there. A resounding emptiness was there instead. A cold that beat up around her and was everything. And then the desperation. There was only one thing to do, and that was to find him again. Wherever he was.

The stooped boy came past yet again and filled her empty mug. She did not even try to thank him this time. The word would crash to the ground on the spot where he had been the second before. A rushed glimpse of large, scared eyes. She drank while she tried to drown out the thoughts.

Memories from the night when father had come with his company. The night before the night when Elior left. They had come with laughter and Light. Talnoi had been in the company but she had not even looked at him. The wound was still too deep. They had spoken about the war that would come. About the karawians that raged in the south and threatened to cross the border to Omyomatt. They spoke about wanting to gather now and go to war against the karawians.

They had left again the next night. Father had told them to stay in Tinby. He did not want them to come. She was angry. Angry with father, and angry with Elior because father had spoken to him alone. She had never before been angry with Elior. He had not done anything to deserve that anger. The memory cut through her like a knife and the tears brimmed in her eyes.

She pushed away her mug making it grate across the table. It tilted and the rest of the beer spilled out onto the table in a puddle. Everybody around her looked at her, even the two ainatunari men. She quickly got up and hurried out of the inn room with all of their stares on her back. A blend of anger and sorrow, and the feeling of being so completely alone.

She threw herself down onto the bed without undressing. Her heart pounded in her chest. The stares of the two men, curious and seeing. Had they seen more than a young woman who had knocked over her beer? How much could they see after all? Did she look as the one she was? Could they see Calras' traits in her face and soul? Would they be able to read the secret in her eyes?

She had no idea. She had never before met other ainatunari than father and his company. She knew nothing about them except for what she had been told or read. Would they sense it if she followed them? Thoughts. Nothing but thoughts.

She turned on the bed and bore her head into the pillow. It was impossible to find calm with all of those thoughts. She needed to sleep, needed to find peace.

She tried to imagine that Elior was next to her. That they were back home in Tinby. That everything was as it had been once. The sound of mother making breakfast in the kitchen. The birds singing outside the window with promises of a summer's day filled with laughter. Elior who whispered about everything they were to experience that day. Mother who sang while she washed the apples.

Everything that had once been so good, so safe. Calm down. Breathe. However, what returned was merely the knowledge that all that was gone. Elior had gone and mother had not been there for a year and a half. Mother had died, and Elior was gone. Then the tears came.

She got up before dawn, packed her things, and tiptoed out of the room in the inn. She paid by the counter where the newly woken girl stood yawning. In the stable, she fetched Vanil herself. Not even the stable boy was awake yet.

It was still dark but luckily, it did not rain anymore. With loud huffs, Vanil let her know that she was still angry about having been locked in a pen in a stable all night. Enilia quietly apologized while she saddled the mare and tied her backpack and the bow behind the saddle. She secured the sword in her belt and the quiver on her back before she mounted Vanil and rode out into the street.

The town had quietly begun to wake up but there were not a lot of humans on the street. The thoughts had stayed behind with the night. She was quiet inside. The day had only one purpose, and that was to get on the heels of the two ainatunari men from the inn room. Ryato and Alaric. She rode out of Mistby's gate to the south and continued away from the town.

The first long stretch after Mistby was open land with wavy spring fresh grass, dandelions, and daisies on both sides of the broad way towards Cathalinoa, but then a small forest appeared ahead. She rode away from the road and into the forest. There she could wait in hiding until the two men had passed.

She sat on the forest floor with her back against a beech tree. Vanil grazed behind her. Ahead, between branches and bushes, she could glimpse the road to Cathalinoa that cut through the landscape like a dirt colored line. Now all she had to do was to wait.

- He carries the Sign, Calras. He is Ainatstiello, the Son of the Light!

Gawavolf stroke a finger over the seven- star shaped mark on the left shoulder blade of the newborn boy. Thoughtfulness wrinkled the wizard's forehead even deeper than normally.

- Yes, he is my son, Calras said almost angrily and with emphasize on the word my.

Gawavolf gazed at the king for a long time. It might be anger that was in the king's voice but it was sorrow that was in his eyes. The king knew what would happen. He knew what he had to do.

And Ceniur knew it. She was sitting up in bed where she a few hours before had given birth to her son. She had hidden her face in her hands. Not a sound came from her, but both Gawavolf and Calras knew that she was crying. They felt it without being able to see it.

- The Dark will see him here. You will not be able to hide him in any of The Four Forests. All of the Dark's attention is on ainatunari. You know this very well, omian.

- What do you want me to do? Do you want me to be separated from my son, my first-born?

Gawavolf listened in silence while Calras' voice rose with the anger. It was the sorrow speaking and Gawavolf did not take the king's anger personally. Ceniur's weeping now became audible and as if the newborn boy knew that it was his mother who wept, he began whimpering too.

Then the anger left Calras. They spoke through the long night. The hours prolonged as if time itself knew that the decision that needed to be made demanded more time than what was in its night. With the first light of day, it had been decided.

Gawavolf left the royal couple back alone for their farewell. Their sorrow was too great to be shared with others. The boy slept in his mother's arms, happily ignorant as to what his birth into Laru had caused.

They appeared in the northern horizon as two small dots that slowly grew into the shape of riders. She recognized the horses that she had seen in the stable when she fetched Vanil that morning. One was black as coal, the other one was silver grey.

They caught the careful rays of the morning sun as they galloped down the road towards Cathalinoa and she followed them with her eyes from her hiding place.

Vanil moved a little when she sensed the nearness of others of her kind, but Enilia whispered calmly. The men were right in front of her hiding place. Even on the far distance to the road, she saw the Light in their gazes. Alaric looked towards her. For a short moment, she felt as if he was looking straight at her, but then they had passed.

She waited until she could no longer hear the horses' gallop, until the men were merely black dots in the southern horizon. Then she pulled Vanil out of the forest and followed.

The lights grew with the number of hours of the day. She constantly kept the distance, as much distance as the men ahead every now and then disappeared between heaven and earth in the horizon. As long as they followed the same road, she could always find them again. And she knew that they were riding towards Livyliar. They would follow the road to the south across Cathalinoa. There were no other ways.

The monotonous road allowed space for the thoughts again, but they were calmer now. She was on her way. She had made a decision. There were no more questions, no more doubt. She could not know if Elior would ride to the gathering point, but she knew that he would try to find it. Eventually, she would find him there.

He had closed off so thoroughly that she only knew that he was alive. No other thoughts or emotions from him reached her. He had closed off so that she would not follow him. That was obvious. However, now that she did it in any way he might as well tell her where he was heading? But maybe he could not feel her either when he had closed off? Maybe it went both ways?

She only wished that she could talk with him and tell him about the dream that had frightened her so much. He needed to take care. It sought him. The dream had said so. The Dark knew about Ainatssithan and it sought. It knew Elior existed but still not where or in what form.

It would kill him. If anyone learned about their secret, the Dark would kill them. Find him. It was him she had seen in the dream, not herself. She did not fear for her own life. Did not fear death. What she feared was Elior's death.

Everything would have been much easier if it was not for the secret. Everything would have been much easier if she could just have resorted to the first and best ainatunari that she met and told who she was and whom she sought. But she did not dare.

Father had always said that they were to keep it secret. No one knew it. None but father, his company and the Wise. The less who know it, the smaller was the possibility of the Dark catching on to their presence.

And none would have sought them in Tinby. None would have figured out that the two ainatunari children who lived with the human woman Marian in Tinby were the children of King Calras. No humans in Tinby knew anything about the legends and tales of the ainatunari. No humans in Tinby had any kind of contact with ainatunari.

It had been the perfect hideout for Elior, and later on her. A perfect hideout, which the attention of the Dark would never reach, but also a place that had let Elior and her grow up without any contact with their own kind except for the king and his company. Elior at least had lived in Ivetarlis for seven years. He had known the Forest of the Light and ainatunari there.

None had known who he was. Everybody thought he had left with his mother, Queen Ceniur, to Namilia when she left. That was why she had left, to bring the boy to safety from the Dark. It could never reach Namilia, their Home. None had known that the boy carried the Sign. Then Calras had found Tinby, and the widow, Marian, who had agreed to take care of the boy. There his identity would be hidden until the time came. And now it had come.

The sun threw its last red rays up on the western horizon. The shadows stretched across the ground as far as they could reach. Ahead, the two men still rode, small, black dots, and she followed.

They did not stop until it was dark. She found out as a campfire suddenly blazed up ahead a little to the east of the road. She stopped immediately and pulled Vanil away from the road. She did not light a fire herself. The light would immediately give her away. She made do with eating some of the supply she had brought from Tinby.

Vanil begged for treats even though her dinner stretched as far as the eye could see. Enilia quietly told the mare that she was the lucky one. There was lots of fresh grass, but Vanil would rather have what Enilia was having. She threw some bread and an apple to the mare that happily munched it down.

Enilia had sought shelter by some trees and a large cliff that shielded her to the south, to the men. She rolled out her blankets and used the backpack as a pillow. Vanil began grazing in the darkness. Peaceful sounds. Grass being ripped off and chewed, a long tail swirling away insects. Little cracks from hoofs and knees as Vanil moved a little. The thought of now really being on the way. She had a goal now. It was good. And she fell asleep.

She woke up as it became light and sneaked out from behind the cliff to look towards the place where she had seen the fire the night before. There was nothing to see ahead. The light made it impossible to see if there was a fire, and there were no black dots ahead on the road.

She quickly gathered her things and packed them on Vanil. The men could be far ahead already. She quickly rode down the road. Vanil, who always loved to run fast, swung her head and whinnied against the air of the spring morning.

Quickly they were by the place where the men had camped. A stretch from the road she saw the pile of ash where they had had fire and the grass that was flat in a circle around it. She continued at the same pace. Vanil had stopped whinnying and now just galloped in her flowing rhythm.

To the south, Enilia glimpsed the shadow of Cathalinoa, the large mountain range that separated Cathaomatt from Omyomatt. The road went straight for the mountains. They would reach them in a few days. Ahead she saw the two small black dots she had longed to see. As soon as they appeared, she made Vanil go back to trot, and dug in her packs for an apple for breakfast. Vanil looked back at the apple a few times and huffed when Enilia only let her have the core in the end.

In the early evening on the fourth day of the journey, they reached the foot of the mountain range. The men were not visible any longer. The path that led up across the lowest point of the mountain range wound in and out and it would be impossible to see someone further ahead than fifty meters. She rode up the path in walking pace. Vanil walked carefully and huffed at the strange surroundings. She was not used to mountains and was not sure she liked them either. One could not run fast here.

It was warm. Enilia had taken off both cloak and the thick sweater and now just rode in her thin blouse. The sun mercilessly baked down upon them. Vanil was also breaking a sweat although she was only walking. Enilia stopped by a stream, filled her water sacks, and let Vanil quench her thirst and graze a bit.

The sun was setting now. As soon as it was gone, it would be cold. This was still only the beginning of May. Even though the days could be scorching hot, it was still cold in the night and the altitude they had reached did not make it warmer. She rode on until it was fully dark, then she stopped. She could not see far enough ahead of her to know when the men stopped. She would not risk riding straight into their camp.

She found a place with a bit of grass for Vanil and a protruding rock she herself could sleep underneath. She took the packs off Vanil, asked her to stay where she was, and then sneaked forward down the path to find out how far or close she was from her guides.

She held her breath every time the path took a turn, and she stuck out her head to see if there was anything to see before she sneaked on. The path turned every other moment and shielded the view. It was nerve wrecking to sneak forward like that but she could not find peace before she knew exactly where the two men had stopped.

She knew they would not have continued after nightfall. Not even ainatunari would dare cross the mountain in the dark even though the path was broad enough for wagons. She continued her search and after five minutes like that, she was sure that she at least had not ridden too close to them. Still, she kept walking, curious to see how far she was from them.

It was cold now. She was happy that she had been considerate enough to put on her thick sweater again. She only wished she had also put on her cloak. She carefully stuck her head out behind another corner, and there they were. She saw the campfire and quickly pulled back her head.

She stayed for a moment breathing deeply. Even though she had expected to see them, it had still been a shock that they were suddenly there. After she had seen them in the inn, she had not been as close to them as she was now. They were right there. Fifteen, maybe twenty meters from her.

She ought to turn around and tiptoe back to Vanil. There was no reason to stand there and risk being seen. Four days had passed trouble free. Why risk it now? There was still a long way to Livyliar, and from there she had no idea where to go. Go back, she hissed soundlessly at herself, but the curiosity had already won.

You are here to find Elior, do not risk anything, she scolded herself on while she once again peeked out behind the rock she was hidden behind, and looked towards the men. Alaric was boiling water on the fire and Ryato was sitting telling something. They laughed at what he said, and she caught herself smiling with them.

The sight of them reminded her of Elior, especially Alaric who had this beautiful, grey blue sky gaze. The longing for Elior burned in her heart, but it was known now. In only six days, it had become almost normal to miss him like that. It was what was. In a way, it helped to see those two. They were everything that Elior and she had longed for. The life in The Four Forests, the Light, the nearness of those who knew and recognized.

Maybe, if everything had been different, Elior and she would have known these two men? Maybe they could have been friends and ridden together now to gather ainatunari? She smiled again. It could have been so good.

Then suddenly Alaric looked straight at the place where she stood. His gaze cut through all of the thoughts straight into the soul. She rushed back in hiding behind the cliff. Her heart pounded. Had he seen her? Or had he just coincidentally looked towards that cliff?

She turned on the spot and ran quickly and soundlessly back down the path. In any moment, she expected to hear steps behind her in the darkness, but it was all quiet. When she reached back to Vanil, she halted and stood for a long time looking back the path. But no one appeared, and there was nothing to see or hear.

Slowly she calmed down. He had not seen her. If he had seen her, they would have come for her. Would they not? She sat down on her blankets and found food and water. Vanil came over and begged and she gave her some bread and fruit. She was still on guard. At every sound, she looked towards the point where the path turned.

She scolded herself for having risked everything like that. So much was at stake. This was bigger than just her. She was here to find Elior. Because she could not live without him. That alone should be enough for her to control her curiosity.

But it was also about more. It was about what she and Elior were. It was about Calras. It was about the growing Dark. About the war that would come. She had no right to risk all of that. If they found her all that would be at risk of disclosure.

She cursed herself so severely that Vanil finally came over and placed her nose on her lap in an attempt to comfort. Enilia quietly caressed the silk soft nose while she blinked away a few tears.

Chapter 2 Alaric & Ryato

Alaric and Ryato sneaked back the path to their camp after having seen where the young woman had set camp for the night. Not until they both sat with their blankets around them and each a cup of tea, did they speak again.

- So, it is us she is following, Ryato said as if to say out loud what they were both thinking.

Alaric nodded and stroked a loose lock of his long, dark hair behind his ear.

- There is no doubt about that any longer. However, one has to say that she is brave. I had not thought she would dare come that close to us.

Ryato laughed, but Alaric huffed at his own remark and shook his head.

- Youthful foolhardiness, he added.

- Maybe! Ryato tilted his head thoughtfully and watched Alaric. – You find her attractive? he said a little later as Alaric did not say more.

A crooked smile lit up Alaric's face and he laughed silently.

- The karawians were once the most beautiful people of all humans, he said dryly.

- She is not karawian, Ryato said. – She is jani.

- Yes, half human.

- And half ainatunari!

The two men looked at each other for a long time, one more firmly than the other, then they laughed again.

- There is something she is hiding, Alaric said and broke off the stare between them.

- And is it of the bad or of the good? Ryato sighed, leaned his head back against the rock wall, and stroked his forehead.

Thoughtfully he began running his fingers through his hair. Alaric followed the motion.

- And that question once again lead us to another question, he said and sipped his tea.

- What should we do with her, Ryato said.

The same question which had followed them since the inn in Mistby. They both fell silent again and looked out into the darkness where they had earlier on seen the young woman behind the mountainside.

- We cannot keep giving her time. I do not know if she is trying to get to Livyliar or all the way to Calras, and really, it is ancillary. It would have been easier if she had been human then the Border in the forest would have made sure she did not go further when we reached Livyliar. However, when she is jani, she can ride straight through the Border without it stopping her.

- What really makes me wonder is where she is from? Her clothes are more humanlike than ainatunari-like, but her weapons look like weapons from Ivetarlis. It would be logical to think that she is from Barovia since she was in the inn in Mistby, but I do not think so. I simply cannot figure it out. Moreover, no matter what she is or where she is from, it is not normal that a young woman rides around alone.

Alaric leaned back against the rock with an almost angry look on his face. Ryato stared blankly at it. It was seldom to see Alaric in that state. He was a beautiful man. His face was straight and fine like a sculpture from the old times, but he was also masculine with firm features and strength in body and movements.

He looked a little younger than he was. At the age of thirty-three, he still had part of the youth's roundness to him, the perfectly smooth, radiant skin, the rounded cheeks and shoulders. Ryato let his eyes slide down over Alaric's upper body, but then stopped himself.

In Barovia, he had met several whom he in immediate love had made love with, but it had been a while now. His body reacted to Alaric's beauty. He moved about on his blanket and Alaric looked up. A grin on his face revealed that he knew how Ryato had looked at him.

Ryato returned the grin.

- So, what are we to do? Alaric said to return to the subject they came from.

- We have to confront her, Ryato said.

Alaric nodded.

- But when?

- We have given her four days. If she follows us tomorrow, I think we should do it tomorrow night. Then she has had enough chances.

Alaric turned his mug upside down and poured out the rest of his tea on the grass.

- Right, let us stick to that! he said, happy that a decision had finally been made.

Yes, then that was it. Ryato nodded and followed Alaric with his eyes while he washed his mug in water and put it back in his backpack. He was far gone in thoughts. Not until Alaric laughingly shot him an expressive gaze did he realize that he had stared while Alaric had taken off tunic and shirt.

Alaric stood looking at him almost provocatively beautiful only dressed in pants.

- Oh, come on, Ryato said laughingly. – You are not that attractive. You are merely a bit more interesting than these rocks.

He gestured to the surrounding grey rock. Alaric looked around.

- You have found me interesting and attractive before, he said teasingly and lay down on his blanket again.

Ryato smiled crookedly. Yes, once, many years again. Had they been barely twenty? It was a long time ago.

- I wonder how old she is? Alaric said who had followed Ryato's thoughts.

- Early twenties, Ryato said.

Alaric turned onto his back and let the moon shine down on his naked torso which once again mercilessly caught Ryato's gaze.

- Hmm... sighed Alaric.

The smile on his lips could not be misunderstood.

- You are completely lost in her! Ryato laughed.

Alaric did not say either or. He just stayed with that expressive smile on his lips. Ryato shook his head and got up to clear off and get under the blankets himself. Alaric followed him with his eyes, as revenge but also with pleasure.

Ryato shot him a disapproving glance while he pulled off his tunic and shirt.

- You are worse than I am, he said laughingly when he lay down and pulled his blanket over him.

- That is impossible! grinned Alaric. – None is worse than you. I am more like your little brother!

Ryato did not acknowledge him with an answer. Alaric definitely was not any more reluctant, but Mevarn, Ryato's younger brother, was a bit more reluctant with the physical love compared to most others. However, it was more because he was selective than because he did not desire it.

Alaric kicked dirt onto the fire until it only glowed, then he turned to Ryato again.

- Do you not find her attractive?

Ryato merely laughed for an answer. She woke up every other minute and stared into the darkness between the rocks. When the sun sent its first light down over Laru, she did not feel she had slept at all. She was cold, she was uncomfortable, and she was furious with herself. She was convinced that she had not been seen. But the fear that had kept her awake most of the night revealed how much she had put at risk. And for what? For a glimpse of the two ainatunari men.

Memories of the nightmare, Elier's death, had chased her through hours in the darkness. She was still angry when she packed up her things and led Vanil forward down the path by the reins. She did not dare to ride before she knew whether the two men had left. She tiptoed to the corner where she had seen them the night before. The memory of her stupidity made her heart pound when she looked around the corner.

They were gone. The fire was covered with dirt. She mounted Vanil but moved on in walking pace. She could not know how far they were and only riding straight into them would be stupider than what she had done in the night. Vanil had given up on cheering up her rider and just trudged along the mountain path all day.

A stretch into the evening they reached the foot of the mountain and thereby Omyomatt. It was dark now and the men had as always lit a fire, which was easy to see as a little light ahead. Soundlessly she pulled Vanil with her to a small grove of trees. Safely in hiding behind trunks and bushes, she took the packs of Vanil who immediately began grazing.

She put her blankets on the ground next to a small stream and sat down heavily. She was tired now and she had no appetite. She just felt like sleeping. Sleeping without dreaming, without feeling. Sleep and forget. The sound of the water clucking along ought to have been calming, but there was no calm.

It was not anymore as it had been. Everything was different. She was not even herself anymore. She was more like someone else, someone, she did not know and maybe did not even like? The time was new. It was not day and night, as it had been day and night for the twenty-three years she had lived. She reached for something that could comfort, but found nothing. Not even Elijor because he was gone and with him, he had taken everything she knew.

Vanil puffed quietly in the dark and Enilia's mouth curled into a smile and weeping at the same time. She was not scared of this Laru, which was so different to everything she had known before. However, she was afraid of everything that could happen. Afraid of the nightmare. For Elijor's sake. She did not want to think anymore, not feel anymore. All of these emotions. They were so overwhelming in their strength.

She had not known them before, not like this. This was the new, the unknown, who staggering sought for foothold in another Laru. She just wanted to sleep, forget and wake up tomorrow and continue on her way to Elijor. Find him again.

She woke up suddenly at the sound of a horse galloping away. In a jump, she was back in time and place. She sat up and stared into the darkness for Vanil but she was nowhere to be seen.

- Vanil, she called lowly.

She got up and ran to the outskirt of the trees, but she could not see Vanil anywhere out there. She looked towards the men's camp, but there was no fire, not even embers to see. It could not have burned out on its own already?

What had happened? Had they gone on in the middle of the night? Had something scared them away? And where in Laru was Vanil?

- Vanil, she called again, a little louder this time.

But there was not a sound to be heard. No trace of the mare. What should she do? If the men had gone on, she had to follow them, but without Vanil she could not leave. Then she would have to leave most of her packs and walk on foot and then she could not keep up with the men in anyway. What had made Vanil run away like that?

In frustration, she kicked the backpack making it tumble to the ground. For one in Karawia, what was she then to do out here? Angrily she began packing her things. She had to go look for Vanil and then hope she found her as quickly as possible so that she could ride back for her things and still catch up with the men ahead. It was the only option she had.

She had just managed to roll up the blankets when she heard a sound behind her. Expecting to see Vanil appear among the trees, she turned with a smile, ready to blame her momentary frustration on the mare. However, there was nothing to see, no Vanil, and the smile vanished immediately. Only darkness between the trees.

She quickly turned to the other side and stared into the darkness. Nothing there either. Without looking away from the darkness, she loosened the sword at her side and slowly pulled it. There might not be anything to see, but there was something. Consciousness in the dark. With her eyes on the spot from where the sound had come, she walked backwards out between the trees. There was someone in there among the trees, someone, or something, watching her.

The creatures of the Dark, karawians, humans with shadows under the skin? But not here? Not this far north? Just before she reached out of the small grove, she turned to run out into the open land where she could see better. As she turned, a shape stepped out from behind a tree just in front of her.

She turned on her heel to run away again, but behind her, another shape appeared from the darkness. They moved closer while she step by step walked backwards away from them. They were calm; they had not pulled weapons against her. What did they want?

Then suddenly everything was showered in clear moonlight, and she halted in the middle of a step. Barely two meters from her stood Alaric and Ryato. They had halted too and their gazes hit her like a blow to the stomach. Their faces revealed nothing, but their eyes saw through everything.

She tried to make herself cold and held the long, polished sword firmly with both hands in front of her. There was nothing else she could do.

- Who are you and why are you following us?

Ryato spoke Talviri. He had seen what she was. His voice was as dispassionate as his face. She stared at him to see more, but in the same moment, Alaric took another step towards her and she turned to him.

- Stay where you are, she yelled in terror.

She had the sword raised against him but really did not want to use it. Alaric halted with a glance to Ryato.

- Answer me! Ryato just said.

- I do not know what you are talking about, she answered while she quickly looked from one to the other.

How much did they know? How much could they see?

- You know very well what I am talking about. You have followed us for several days now. Who are you? And why are you following us?

- I am not following you! I do not know who you are or what you want from me. I do not owe you any answers. Leave me alone.

She knew very well how clear the lie was in her voice. But what else should she do? She grabbed the sword firmer even though it was of no use. It was obvious that she did not stand a chance against those two. Elicor and she had practiced much with weapons, mostly for fun. They had become skilled, but against these two men?

A little smile glided over Ryato's face as a sign for her that she was right. He glanced at Alaric who smiled in the same way.

- Give us your name and tell us what so "coincidentally" brings you on the same way as us. Answer us honestly and we will consider leaving you alone.

Her only chance was still lying. She made her voice angry.

- It is none of your business! Go away! What the Dark gives you the right to scare away my horse and sneak up on my in the middle of the night accusing me of...

- I do not think you fully appreciate whom you are dealing with, timie omian. You do not stand a chance, do you not know this? I advise you to give us some answers now!

The anger appeared in the eyes of the two men like flames when Ryato interrupted her in a voice a good deal stronger than before. Maybe it had been stupid to speak like that, but she had no other options than to play the part to the end.

She gave Ryato a look that clearly let him know that she had no intentions at all of saying anything.

- My patience is close to running out now! Give us your name. Say what it is you want from us, he said threateningly.

He took a step towards her and Alaric followed right behind. Her sword cleaved the air only centimeters from Alaric's chest. If he had not moved back, there would only have been one to fight now. Had they not thought she would use it?

Now they both grabbed their swords. She saw it and turned cold inside. They smiled now. She had not a chance. She took a step back without looking away from them, then she turned on the spot and ran out of the grove.

She threw the sword and grabbed the knife instead. They were right behind her. They closed in on her much too quickly. She did not take the time to turn her head to see just how close they were. She just clutched the knife in her hand and ran as fast as she could. This was the only option: to get away.

Then someone grabbed her from behind and she fell face first into the wet grass. Alaric fell too but he still held on to her shoulder. The fall had knocked all air out of her and she gasped for breath as she turned onto her back.

Alaric moved his hold and kept her down. It was impossible to avoid his gaze as his face was right above hers. Ice cold. It froze her heart to ice in the same second as she lifted her hand with the knife. She fought her own kind.

- Watch her knife!

Ryato's shout came just in time for Alaric. The knife only went through his clothes and skin as she tumbled away from her into the grass. Ryato almost fell down on her other side, grabbed her hand, and twisted the knife from her.

In a moment, he had pulled her up and thrown her into the grass again with both of her hands twisted on her back. He tied her hands tightly together and she lay with her face in the grass incapable of moving.

She breathed in the heavy smell of wet dirt. His one knee bore into the small of her back and sent lightning bolts of pain through her back.

- Release me, she yelled in both fear, anger and pain and tried to get out of Ryato's grip.

- Did she cut you? Ryato just asked Alaric who stood a stretch away.

They completely ignored her.

- It is just a little scratch, Alaric said and ran one hand down his tunic that had been cut open behind his left arm. He looked at his fingers. There was blood on them.

- Let me see!

Ryato got up and left her lying back in the grass. He carefully examined Alaric's wound.

- It is not deep, but it is bleeding a little. Here!

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and pressed it against the wound. They just ignored her? She fought up on her knees, still dazed from the fight. Wet grass stuck to her tunic and pants. She shook in a blend of anger, shock and hurt pride.

Alaric calmly watched her and Ryato followed his gaze to her.

- It would have been easier if you had merely answered us. However, in all circumstances we would probably have taken you along, he said and walked to her and pulled her to her feet.

She tore loose from his grip and stared angrily at him. Again, he merely ignored her.

- Call the horse back, then I will get her things, he said to Alaric.

- I am not going with you, she shouted after him, but neither he nor Alaric reacted.

Alaric turned to the darkness ahead and called out in a singing tone. She turned to him as she in the distance recognized Vanil's neighing. Had he made Vanil run away?

She jumped when Alaric answered that without her having asked.

- I asked her to do it, yes, he said.

She looked away from him and closed off. He had read her thoughts. She had better remember who she was with now. They were like Elior. Like father and his company. Had they had the time to see anything in her in the grove? What had she thought of there?

However, it did not seem as if anything had been disclosed. Alaric's gaze was seeking, asking, but now there was nothing more he could find against her will. They were her own kind, and yet so different. She distanced them and closed off all contact.

Clenched up, she looked to the north where Vanil appeared in the darkness. Why had Vanil obeyed him and not her? The mare halted a stretch from them as if she at first did not know who to approach. Then she trotted to Enilia and gently pushed her with her nose, almost apologetically.

Ryato came back to them with all of her things and put them down on the grass. She looked from one to the other. The worst thing that could have happened had happened. Not only had they discovered her so that she no longer had them to show the way, but they were going to take her along.

She breathed deeply a few times, then she looked to Ryato who was getting ready to put the packs on Vanil. It would be worth a try.

- Listen! I have not been following you. I have no idea who you are. I have seen you ahead a few times, but it is merely a coincidence that we have been following the same road. I was scared when you suddenly appeared, that is why I reacted like that.

They both looked at her. Inexpressive faces. They did not allow her to see anything at all. Did they believe her or not? Did it have an effect at all? She added as much sweetness to her voice as possible as she continued:

- I did not mean to harm you. I am sorry that I hurt you, Alaric...

By the Light! What had she said? They were both upon her at once, wild, seeing, searching gazes.

- From where do you know my name?

Alaric was as changed. He towered up in front of her. The sky gaze was a sea of flames. Ryato was right next to him. No expression replaced by threatening cold. She yielded back, but Alaric grabbed her shoulder and stayed her.

- Answer! he shouted.

- I heard him call you so!

The desperation only made it even harder to lie. She tried to pull away from them, but they kept her in place.

- You are so obviously lying! Ryato said. – I have not called him by name at any time.

- It is about time you tell us the truth, Alaric said.

He held her gaze.

- It is the truth, she said and returned the resolve in his eyes.

No, they would not believe it, but what else could she say?

- We have seen you before, Alaric then suddenly said. It was as if his gaze bore all the way into her soul. – You were at the inn in Mistby. You were sitting at the table next to us. You have followed us ever since. We know it!

He nodded to Ryato. The same was to read in his eyes.

- So was it there you heard my name? Or did you know it before?

She said nothing, just bent her head, and stared at the ground. Her stomach coiled up in desperation and her mouth went dry.

- Now answer us, Alaric yelled and tightened his grip on her shoulder.

She did not react. A mixture of panic and despair blocked everything. Ryato sighed.

- Let us go back. This will not lead to anything now.

They would ruin everything. They would surely take her to Livyliar if they did not just choose to kill her right then and there. Now when they knew that she knew something. No matter what, it meant that she would not reach Elio. Then it would be better to die and in that thought, there was just a bit of calm. Rather die than cause Elio's death.

They took her back to their camp. They did not say anything at all, neither to her nor to each other. First after having sat and watched them for a while, did she realize that they actually did talk with each other. They were talking with the heart. She had not thought of it before. She was so used to being surrounded by humans that it was hard to get used to others being able to do the things Elio and she could do.

Alaric came over to her and untied the rope which Ryato had tied her hands with. She looked at the ground while she rubbed her sore wrists. Now the questions would come. She could feel it.

- Should we not get the truth out? We have a long day's journey ahead of us tomorrow. We would all benefit from some sleep, Ryato said in a slightly tired voice.

She looked up at him without answering. He had sat down to her left. Alaric was to her right starting the fire.

- If we start by you giving us your name, you already know ours! I know that all that you want is to leave here, but that will not happen, unless you answer our question. And no more lies! Ryato continued.

She closed her eyes, just for a moment. The emotions were so strong. If she did not control them, they would reveal everything. If she was to try with a lie, she at least had to sound just a bit calm.

- Why did you follow us from the inn in Mistby where you heard my name? Alaric asked.

- I rode after you when you left the inn because I heard that you were going to Livyliar. I am going in the same direction, but I do not know the way and I am alone.

- What are you doing out here alone? Ryato asked.

- I am looking for someone.

- Who?

Who? Yes, who! What could be true without being completely true? It was so hard to say anything across the chaos of emotions that threatened to make her voice tremble and break.

- I am looking for someone who left me. He left in the night about a week ago and left me back alone. I love him and I will not let him leave alone. I only have him...

The truth of it made her throat clench up and she could not say anymore without starting to cry. Just let me go, just let me be! But why would they?

Alaric looked down. He perceived her pain, but the compassion from him only made it worse. The flames from the fire burned in their eyes. She avoided them by looking into the grass.

- Where are you from? Ryato asked.

- A small town in Cathaomatt. Tinby, she answered without looking up.

- And what is your name?

It did not matter. They still would not let her go. She caught herself sighing deeply and almost laughing at the inevitable in the situation. Still, she lied.

- Lelia.

- Lelia, Alaric said. – Something still puzzles me.

Yes, of course. Basically, it was a lie. She felt like letting the weeping come, yell at them, kick and punch. But what good would it do? She buried her face in her hands and closed her eyes.

- You are jani, but you say you are from Tinby in Cathaomatt. That is a human village? What were you doing there?

Alaric's voice was much too real. Even though she had closed off and even closed her eyes, he was right there. She moved on the spot without looking up. The nearness of those two was almost suffocating.

- We were two in the town, she mumbled. – There were me and him. He is ainatunariier. We grew up together, and we only had each other. My mother was human, my father is ainatunariier. But I grew up with only my mother.

- Who are his parents then? What was he doing in Tinby? Ryato asked.

- He lived there, as I did, with a human woman.

Still it was true. Still it was as intense. They were around her and above her. The feeling of being seen all the way in was so strong. She had to keep on closing off, being cold, keep them out. They sought, but they must not find. Not see it.

Nevertheless, it would be so easy just to give in. They had so much Light, so much nearness. Safety. Like mother. Like father and Elier. Like Talnoi. Maybe they would love her, take the evil away, and make everything good again? No, Enilia, get a hold of yourself. Be strong now. You must do this, for Elier.

- And he is the one you are looking for? What is he doing out here? Alaric asked somewhere out there.

- I do not know.

- But who left you with humans in Tinby? And why?

She shook her head. She could not even find a lie that could explain it. The secret. She jumped when Alaric suddenly placed a hand on her shoulder. She jumped up and stared at him wildly, but his gaze was too much and she looked away again.

She had to leave. She could not be here. They would see it. She must not let anyone find out about it. She bit her lip hard to calm down. Alaric and Ryato had both jumped up at the same time as she, but when they saw that she was not trying to run away, they did nothing. Ryato turned towards the fire.

- Let us get some sleep, he said.

She lay between the two men in the dark of the night. She could not tell from their breathing whether they slept or were awake. She lay on her back on her blankets and stared up into Laru's clear star sky. As a small sun compared to the other stars, Namilia shown down to her. She focused on the star until it became a haze before her eyes.

She blinked until it once again was clear. Namilia. Home. The Dimension of the Light where they all originally were from. Was that not how it was? The Land of the Light. She breathed as soundlessly as possible. The nearness of the two men affected her so much that she could not calm down. The time passed around her without anything changing inside.

She kept focusing on Namilia. It became a luminous haze. She blinked. It was clear again. The sun broke out in the east and as it grew lighter, Namilia turned paler. Another day had arrived, and Ryato and Alaric woke up.

Calras looked around in the small, cozy living room while the human woman across from him silently tried to grasp what she had just agreed to. The men from the company sat as silent and quiet as he himself. They waited patiently.

It had taken them seven years to find this woman. Marian, seamstress in the small human village, Tinby, in the southwestern Cathaomatt. She was a widow and had no children. She did not remember the Light, but three days of intense conversation had brought much back to her.

The boy sat on the rug in front of the fireplace and played with the toys they had brought from Ivetarlis. Every now and then, he looked up at them, smiled, and laughed. How much had he understood from their conversation? Did he understand that they would soon go and leave him here?

Calras' gaze rested on him and he felt the pain far into his soul. It broke his heart, but he had no choice. He whispered without words to his son, and the boy looked at him, now without smiling.

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