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Zuhra

Giant flames licked greedily at the pile of dry wood in the once-dank hearth, at the far end of the dining hall. The hiss and crackle of the fire devouring its fuel was a comfort, filling the cavernous room with warmth. Sami bustled around those at the table, setting platters of food in front of them. Her presence was familiar, soothing. As long as Sami was there, bringing us the meals she worked so painstakingly to make, things couldn't be *that* bad. Something in our world was still good, still *normal*.

Inara sat next to me, hands clasped together in her lap. After all these years, she was truly lucid—*permanently*. I longed to take her somewhere else, to talk to her alone, but it would have to wait until after the meeting that still hadn't begun.

Our parents sat on my other side, Mother next to me, her hands fluttering restlessly—from twisting her skirt in her fingers, to adjusting the silverware on the table, to pushing stray hairs behind her ear. Every time I glanced at her, she was looking at my father. I wondered if she longed to reach out and touch him, to assure herself he was real and solid and actually *there* at her side. I was still reeling at seeing them together—the sudden reality that our family was reunited after nearly sixteen years of separation. But what should have been a moment made radiant from dazzling joy was overshadowed by the carnage and suffering that had accompanied his return.

It wasn't just the four of us at the massive table I'd only ever

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eaten at once before, that first night Halvor had shown up at the citadel. Raidyn, Sharmaine, Sachi, Loukas, Halvor, and two other Paladin were also there. A tense silence hovered over the room, a sort of foggy disbelief that made the gathering seem hazy and unreal. This couldn't possibly be happening, surely I was dreaming that *actual* breathing Paladin sat across the table from us. But every glance up confirmed the reality that this was no dream.

Finally, Sami placed the last dish—a tureen of soup—down on the table in front of my mother.

“Sami,” Mother’s voice broke through the quiet, and I flinched, expecting her to give her an order of some sort. Instead, she said, “Please, sit and join us.”

“Oh, madam, I couldn’t—”

“Sami, I insist. You’re part of this family, and you deserve to be part of this discussion.”

My eyes widened. The Paladin who had never known the mother I’d been raised by didn’t show any sign of surprise at her invitation; my father nodded encouragingly. But Inara was astonished enough to glance at me, eyebrows lifted.

With a flush and a little nod of her head, Sami hurried down to the empty chair beside Sachi and sat, her gaze lowered.

“Thank you for taking the time to prepare all this food,” my father said as he reached out and spooned some roasted potatoes onto his plate. Everyone followed his cue, the next few moments filled with the sounds of cutlery and dishes clinking as everyone served themselves, though I wondered if they, like me, only did so not to offend Sami. The last thing I wanted to do was eat. Not when my grandfather still awaited burial tomorrow at sunset; not with the hole in the hedge still gaping wide, a wound the previously impenetrable plant seemed unable to heal; and Barloc still out there somewhere—powerful and dangerous, somehow managing to disappear into thin air, according to the Paladin who had gone after him and returned without news.

I glanced over at Inara and noticed her hand trembling as she spooned one tiny portion of steamed green beans onto her plate. The *sanaulus* from healing her enabled me to sense the tumult

within her—a volatile mixture of hopelessness, pain, and fear. But she sat tall, her spine straight, expression benign, hiding her suffering as best as she could. Only that tremble in her hand, that she quickly folded back into her lap without taking a bite of the beans, gave her away.

A separate tug of awareness pulled my focus. I glanced up to see Raidyn watching from across the table, eyebrows pulled down over his brilliant blue-fire eyes. His concern was palpable even with the space between us. The *sanaulus* from when he'd healed me had grown even stronger after we saved Inara together, nearly draining us both. No one had ever been healed after having their power ripped from them before; she was the first known Paladin to have survived it—because of us.

After living my entire life believing Inara was the only one who had inherited our father's power, it turned out we'd been wrong.

In the hours that had passed since that death-defying act, Raidyn's eyes had grown brighter and brighter as his power rebuilt within him. There hadn't been time to ask why my eyes didn't glow, when it turned out I did have power after all. Though I really wanted to know, glowing eyes—or the lack thereof—was low on the priority list of questions that needed answering at that moment.

“So, what do we do now?” Loukas finally broke the silence. He sat stiffly, skin pallid and his temples damp. Raidyn had only partially healed his wound—sustained while fighting Barloc beside my grandfather—just enough to keep him alive. Raidyn and my father were hesitant to use any more power than absolutely necessary, needing to reserve as much as possible in case Barloc did make another appearance. But though Loukas was still in pain—at least until Raidyn finished healing him later tonight—he'd insisted on coming to dinner.

“How long will the *jakla*'s ability to absorb our power last? At what point can we *fight back*?” one of the two Paladin I didn't know asked. He was young, maybe only a couple years older than me. We weren't sure how many more had come from Visimpe-
rum; it had all been so chaotic. I had been so intent on my sister,

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I only had vague recollections of Paladin and gryphons coming through the gateway before it had shut again, trapping us all here. Not all of them had returned yet; we knew that much.

“There’s no way to be certain, Ivan,” Sachiell responded. She’d cleaned the blood off the side of her shaved head, but she still looked more worn than I’d ever seen her; there was a tightness around her eyes and mouth that hadn’t been there before the events of this day. “His ability to continue to absorb our power could last through the night . . . or even for a few days. It depends entirely upon how much power he already stole and how his body responds to the change.” Her glance slid to Inara, then back to her plate.

My sister stiffened beside me; I sensed her misery intensify at the reminder of what had been done to her—what had been ripped *from* her. Raidyn and I had barely managed to save her life. The memory of that gaping hole within her, roughly patched together by our joint power, sat heavily in my belly, leaving no room for any of the food I’d put on my plate.

“Is there a chance he won’t survive it?” The young Paladin—Ivan—sounded so hopeful.

“If he were fully human, there would be a possibility of his body being unable to handle it,” my father answered this time. “But if, as he claims, he had a Paladin grandparent, the chances of him surviving the change are much higher.”

“He claims to have had a Paladin grandparent?” Sachiell’s eyebrows rose.

My father sighed, using his fork to push his half-eaten potato around his plate. “Yes. He said there have been other Paladin who have opened the gateway and traveled to Vamala at different times, and his grandfather was one who came with a small group about a hundred years ago. He didn’t tell us why they came—but based on what he wants to do with the Paladin power he’s claimed, I don’t think it was anything good.”

“What does he intend to do?” Sharmaine, who had remained silent the entire time, finally spoke. I tried not to think of Raidyn running out to her when she and Sachiell had returned, how he’d enveloped her in his arms.

“He said he was going to find other Paladin who feel the way

he does. He believes we deserve to rule over the humans because of our power and strength. He intends to bring an army back here and show Vamala what the true might of the Paladin is, and he will be the one to unleash it on them.”

Sachiell and Father shared a grim look. “You don’t think he’s part of the *Infinitium* sect . . . do you?” she asked.

The unfamiliar phrase sent a shiver over my skin, raising bumps on my arms, as though some deep, visceral part of me understood the direness of his speculation, even if my mind didn’t.

“I don’t understand how he could be . . . having lived here his whole life. But the fact that he knew how to steal Inara’s power and the things he was saying—wanting to gather an army to rule over the humans—it’s deeply concerning.”

“That’s an understatement,” Loukas muttered.

Everyone fell silent. Who knew where he’d go or what he’d do now that so much of his plan had failed. But my guess was that he wouldn’t stay away from the gateway for long. Not if an army was what he was after. I didn’t know what the *Infinitium* sect was, but it didn’t sound good.

“Halvor, he is your uncle. You knew him best.” My father turned to Halvor, sitting beside Inara. He flinched at the reminder, his plate as untouched as the rest of ours. I wondered if his stomach was cramping, sick, like mine. “What can you tell us about him?”

“Nothing,” he answered quickly, *too* quickly, his neck flushing. Some of the Paladin exchanged glances with eyebrows lifted. “I didn’t know about any of this, I promise. He kept some of his books hidden from me—locked in his office. He said he would let me read them when I had proven myself a better scholar of their ways. But now . . . after . . .” His eye flickered to Inara, then away again, the flush spreading to his cheeks. “I wonder if he didn’t want me to know what he was *really* researching.”

“But he couldn’t have known there was a Paladin at the citadel . . . could he? How could he have created a plan to come here and steal Inara’s power if all of Vamala believed the Paladin to be gone?” Sachiell pointed out.

Inara’s fingers were entangled in her dress, so tight I feared it

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might rip. I hesitantly reached over and put my hand on top of hers. She flinched at the unexpected contact, but quickly turned her hand over to thread her fingers through mine, clutching me as tightly as she had the fabric. And with that grip, her shoulders sagged infinitesimally, as though my touch were enough of a balm for her to release her guard, ever so slightly, the concealed truth of her suffering pressing down on her.

“My uncle—Barloc—the *jakla*—” Halvor stumbled over the words, his uncertainty and confusion evident in his every tone, the way his gaze moved from person to Paladin to person in the room, fear coating his skin like sweat. “He was connected to anyone in Vamala who had ever expressed an interest in the Paladin. Those who venerated them and wished they hadn’t gone, and those who feared and hated them. Both groups had theories of their continued existence, hiding in the shadows. He spoke to me of rumors . . . stories whispered about a town at the base of the supposedly abandoned citadel, how the villagers spoke of Paladin living there, *hiding* there behind the hedge. That was part of why he’d wanted to come, why he asked me to fund our expedition. I thought it was to learn more about them, to possibly meet and *help* them, if they truly did live here. I never thought . . . I never would have . . .” He swallowed hard and broke off, his eyes dropping to where I clutched Inara’s hand, our fingers interlaced, knuckles white. “I’m so sorry.”

There was a long pause, before my father said, “We know you had nothing to do with his actions. You need not fear us.”

Halvor looked up at him, a sheen on his hazel eyes—a reflection of firelight or tears, I couldn’t say.

“Which brings us back to the question of what do we do now?” Loukas asked.

Halvor sagged back into his chair at the turn in conversation, the focus drawing away from him.

“I think we stay close to the citadel, run patrols, take watches, and wait and see. He’ll show his hand before too long.” My father looked to Sachiel, the other Paladin general in the room, and she nodded in agreement.

“We’ll be safer in numbers, so I think staying close

together—and to the gateway—is for the best. At least for now. Though he won't be an expert at utilizing his newly gained power, he will have sheer will and strength on his side until the power settles.”

“We'll divide into pairs, then, and take shifts. The rest of you try to get some rest.” My father's pronouncement signaled an end to the meal—for the few who had managed to eat anything—and within moments, they were all pushing their chairs back and standing. I avoided looking at Sami, afraid she'd be upset by how little of the food she'd painstakingly prepared had been consumed.

“I'll take the first shift,” Sachiel volunteered.

“I'll go with her,” the other unknown Paladin, a female who looked Mother's age, added.

“Thank you, Lorina.” My father nodded toward her and she inclined her head. “I'll take the next shift, then, in a few hours.”

“I'll do it with you,” Raidyn immediately spoke up and my father nodded.

My throat tightened at the thought of both of them out there, during the night, waiting and watching . . . not knowing if or when an attack might come. Barloc's eyes and veins pulsing blue—my sister's blood on his mouth and chin—flashed, a lightning strike of memory. A sudden pressure in my chest stole my ability to breathe.

“Inara . . . may I walk you to your room?” Halvor's hesitant question startled my sister, her fingers flexing against mine. But then she released my hand and stood with an attempt at a smile.

“Thank you,” she murmured, but paused to glance back at me. I nodded for her to go. If she wished to be with him—if it would bring her any joy or comfort—she should go.

My father walked out the door behind Inara and Halvor, deep in conversation with Sachiel. My mother shadowed his every step as though afraid he might disappear into the darkness once more, his return nothing more than a phantom of her imagination.

It was impossible to believe this had all happened today. That this morning I'd been in Visimperum, standing by the *luxem magnam* with my grandfather, saying goodbye to the breathtaking

room full of light that was the birthplace of the Paladin and their power. And tonight, his lifeless body lay in the citadel where I'd been born and raised in seclusion. A cold wave crashed over me, despite the waves of heat from the fire engulfing the stack of wood nearby. I shivered as Sami finished gathering the leftover food onto her tray, and the other Paladin divided up the night and next day into shifts. It was a burble of sound and activity that washed over me without piercing the pounding of blood in my ears. My body flashed cold then hot, my breath came faster and faster—

Someone touched my arm, and I jerked with a half-swallowed gasp.

“Zuhra, are you all right?” Raidyn's voice was a low murmur.

I blinked, shocked to realize everyone had gone, save for Loukas hovering by the door with Sharmaine at his side—both of them watching me.

And Raidyn. He'd stayed. His fingers still lingered on my skin; only the slightest pressure, but it was enough to bring me back to my senses, to interrupt the unaccountable panic that had seized me.

“I . . . I'm sorry,” I finally responded.

“For what?”

I looked up into his glowing, blue-fire eyes, and lifted my shoulders slightly. I wasn't even sure; I didn't know what else to say after all that had occurred—knowing they were now trapped here with us.

After a beat he said, “It's been a very long day. I think it might be best if you lie down, try to get some rest.” His fingers curled around my arm, and he tugged, gently pulling me into motion, to my feet first, and then toward the door.

“I can't lie down. Not yet.” A knot lodged in my lungs, trapping my breath at the mere thought of facing my empty room alone with the panic still simmering within me.

“I was going to check on the gryphons in the stables. Could you show me the way?” Sharmaine asked. “Then *you* can go finish healing this lout before he undoes everything you already did,” she added, jerking a thumb toward Loukas.

“Did you just call me a *lout*?” Loukas's eyebrows lifted.

“Yes, I’ll go with you,” I immediately agreed. Anything to avoid my room—and the solitude that awaited me there.

“Great, it’s settled.” Sharmaine smiled at me, that same genuine smile I’d come to know in Visimperum.

Whatever was going on between her and Raidyn—or me and Raidyn—she continued to treat me like a friend. It made the jealousy I struggled to subdue all the hotter in my chest. It would have been so much easier if she were rude or unkind. I could have hated her and felt justified in hoping to win Raidyn’s affections—taking them from her.

I averted my eyes from his searching gaze as I followed her out of the room, my cheeks and neck hot. My arm still tingled where he’d touched me as we left the boys behind us and silently began to walk through the shadowed hallway. Sharmaine paused after a moment and turned to me. “This place is . . . something else.”

“That’s one way of putting it.” The wide, dark hallway gaped open before us, pulsing with oppressive menace. Nothing like the castle in Visimperum that was all light and bright white marble and shimmering diamonds. “Follow me.” I took the lead, and we lapsed back into silence, passing the old, familiar statues, tapestries, and doorways I’d spent my entire lifetime with, but now experienced anew, as I tried to imagine what Sharmaine thought, how she saw the only home I’d ever known.

I took her to the back staircase, not wanting to pass the destroyed doors of the main entrance to the citadel—or the hole in the hedge looming beyond it. When we passed through the exit nearest the dilapidated but still usable stables where the Paladin had put their gryphons, I finally ventured the question that had been hounding me ever since I’d seen Sharmaine and her gryphon burst through the glowing doorway in the Hall of Miracles with the others who had come to Vamala.

“Why did you do it?” My voice was barely above a whisper, but I knew she heard me by the way she stiffened beside me. “What made you come here?”

She had to have known what a risk it was to come to Vamala—where, as she knew, Paladin were feared, hunted, and murdered

for what they were. Why, then, had she steered her gryphon toward the gateway and come?

There was a heavy pause, as though she were weighing her words, or perhaps considering *me*—trying to decide what to confide and what to keep to herself. Though she had always treated me kindly and helped with my training, we'd never really spoken about anything of *importance*. It had been rash of me to ask such a personal question. Especially when I feared the answer had the power to shatter my heart: Raidyn.

"I came because I had to," she began slowly. "People I loved were in danger, and I am trained to protect those I love—or any innocent lives, for that matter."

People. Raidyn, yes, but not *just* him. I nodded like I understood her bravery, like I could possibly comprehend what must have gone through her mind in the moments it took between seeing Barloc burst through the gateway, attack them—including my grandmother—then leap back through it into Vamala, and her decision to follow after him. And not *only* her, so many others. At least seven or eight Paladin had come through, and possibly more that hadn't come back yet, knowing they were likely risking their lives. Not only from Barloc's stolen power, but because of the death trap they knew Vamala to be for their kind.

We reached the door to the stables and Sharmaine pushed it open. It was shadowed inside, almost too dark to see.

"We should have grabbed a lantern," I commented.

Instead of responding, Sharmaine lifted her hand. A split second later, her veins lit up with her power, until a small ball of light hovered above her fingers, illuminating the space around us. She glanced at me and smiled. "I think you know I can create a protective dome with my power," she said before I could ask, and I nodded. "That's what this is, only much smaller."

"That's . . . remarkable."

She shrugged. "It's a parlor trick. But it is useful sometimes."

A parlor trick. Even though I knew I had power now, her casual disregard for something so wondrous to me stung. My father and Raidyn had *seemed* awed by the fact that I was an enhancer. But

I'd never even be able to do a "parlor trick" with my power—I could only make someone *else's* abilities stronger. It had saved my sister, and I knew I should be grateful for that . . . So why did I look at the light Sharmaine lifted as she walked toward the stalls where the Paladin had put the gryphons for the night and feel a pang deep inside?

A soft hooting sound came from nearby, followed by other noises of gryphons moving and acknowledging our presence.

"It's all right, Keko girl, I'm here," Sharmaine murmured as she stepped closer to the nearest stall.

A gryphon with golden feathers lifted her head over the tall door and made another soft noise deep in her throat.

"Is she yours?"

Sharmaine nodded as she lowered the hand with the ball of light and lifted up on her tiptoes to press her forehead against Keko's.

I watched rider and gryphon silently. Keko closed her eyes and made a low noise deep in her throat. Sharmaine rubbed her hand down the gryphon's neck a couple of times, then pulled back.

"Sleep well," she said with one last brush of her fingers over the gryphon's beak.

"What are we going to feed them?" I asked as we moved down the row, Sharmaine peeking in on each stall. I wondered which one Raidyn's gryphon, Naiki, was in, or Taavi, my father's. But none of the other gryphons pushed their heads out to greet her, as if they knew it wasn't their Rider in the stable.

"I doubt you have anything for them here . . . so we'll have to take them out hunting. At least you live near these mountains. They should be able to find enough to eat without causing too much of a problem with the people of Vamala."

It was true, the mountains were uninhabited—with their sharp, unforgiving peaks, tangles of wild bushes, and trees clogging any possible path through them. I'd spent countless hours staring at them from my window. Trying to picture a flock of massive gryphons flying through them, hunting for dinner, was *almost* beyond the scope of my considerable imagination. If anyone in Gateskeep

did notice them, who knew what they would think—or do. But that was a problem for tomorrow. We still had plenty to focus on for tonight.

“They all seem fine,” she finally commented, after peeking into the last stall. “This place needs some work, but . . . it’s better than being outside in the elements.”

I glanced up at the cobweb-filled rafters, barely illuminated by the glowing blue light hovering over her hand. A gust of wind rattled the walls, but though it sounded questionable, the structure held firm against the onslaught.

“It’s survived some terrible storms,” I felt compelled to assure Sharmaine when her eyes widened, a flash of worry crossing her face. “It should be fine.”

“I’m sure you’re right.” But she didn’t look sure when another bout of wind sent the stables trembling beneath its might.

“Really, there have been a few times when it seemed like the *citadel* wouldn’t make it, so I thought for sure we’d wake up to find the stables destroyed, but it hasn’t collapsed yet.”

She glanced back at me. “I really do believe you. If there were any danger of it collapsing, the gryphons would sense it and be agitated. But they’re all calm. Well, as calm as can be expected after what they’ve been through.”

“Right.”

“We’d best head back in.” She strode through the stable to the door we’d originally come through. In the brief time we’d spent inside it, night had settled more firmly over Vamala, shrouding the citadel and the grounds in darkness. I struggled to subdue a shiver as we hurried back the way we’d come. Sharmaine kept the light hovering above her hand and even brightened it a bit—as if she, too, felt the foreboding weight of nightfall pressing in on her.

Once we reached the security of the citadel, the door shut firmly against the oncoming storm, I sighed. If Barloc returned there was seemingly nothing and no one that could stop him, but being back in the citadel with all of the Paladin now residing within its walls felt like the safest place I could hope to be until they somehow came up with a plan to stop him.

Because that's what they *would* do—what they *had* to do. The alternative was unthinkable.

Sharmaine looked around and then with a little shrug admitted, “I don't know how to get back to our rooms.”

“I can show you.”

There was certainly no shortage of rooms in the citadel, but only some were in good condition. There had been no reason for Sami or Mother to maintain the others, with only the four of us trapped there. Mother had stayed in the room where she'd lived with Adelic before he'd been taken from us, even though it was in the wing on the other side of the kitchen, far away from where Inara, Sami, and I all lived—which only now struck me, how she'd secretly clung to the memory of him, even while professing to abhor him. Though the other rooms in the wing where the rest of us dwelt hadn't been lived in, they were still more habitable than the one poor Halvor had been forced to sleep in. The Paladin and Halvor were all staying in the same wing as us now, just down from my room, past Inara's.

Sharmaine followed behind me as we climbed the stairs and walked down the hallway, past my room, past Inara's, and the next and the next, until we reached the one where I knew Sami had aired out a bed for Sharmaine—next to the room Loukas was in. Raidyn was on the other side, one closer to mine.

“I think this one is yours.” I gestured and she finally let the light above her hand die as she turned the knob and glanced in to find a fire burning in the hearth, her bed turned down, ready for her. The sheets were shabby and worn, but clean. I didn't hear any telltale scurrying of rodents, so I could only hope the room was free of unwelcome inhabitants. “It's the best we could do . . .”

“It looks warm and cozy,” she assured me, “and I'm so tired, it could be a bed of stones for all I'd care and I'd still sleep for two days if I were able to.”

I couldn't help smiling, even though the panic that had been somewhat subdued by the distraction of going to the stables with her was already rising, knowing she was about to close her door, to go to sleep, seemingly untroubled by the events of the day,

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leaving me to retreat to my room—alone with my memories and trembling hands. “Sleep well, then,” I managed.

“You too, Zuhra.” A flash of something—concern or sympathy—crossed her face, but I turned away before she could say anything further, not wanting to keep her from much-needed rest. I felt the shutting of the door behind me like an echo through my bones.

I paused in between the rooms where Loukas and Raidyn were staying, straining for any hint of sound—wondering if Raidyn had finished healing him and gone to bed, or if they were still together, perhaps talking of the day’s events. But there were no discernible noises.

A throaty growl of thunder shuddered through the citadel. With a shiver, I forced myself forward. But rather than going to my room, I decided to go to Inara’s. We’d barely had a moment alone together yet, and she was *alive* and completely lucid, and there was no way I was going to be able to sleep anyway.

I hurried to her door—but paused before reaching for the handle.

What if *she* were asleep already?

She desperately needed rest, to let her body heal. As much as I wanted to speak to my sister, I refused to be selfish enough to wake her. I was leaning forward to press my ear to her door when a click down the hall startled me. Straightening as if caught doing something wrong—though I didn’t even know why—I spun, expecting to see Sharmaine coming after me. My heart skipped up to my throat when, instead of her red hair and smile, I found myself facing blue-fire eyes that glowed in the darkness and thick blond hair that looked as though a hand had been running through it continually as Raidyn stalked toward me.

I stood still, unable to move even if I’d wanted to.

“Zuhra.” Raidyn uttered my name in a low whisper, as he halted close enough that I had to tilt my head slightly to meet his gaze. “I hoped to have a word with you before you retired for the night.”

“Why?” I whispered back, the darkness swelling to envelope us like a cloak. Another angry clap of thunder crashed through

the hallway, startling me. Raidyn lifted his hands—to steady me, perhaps—then paused, mere inches between his fingers and my arms. Likely it had only been instinct and he'd caught himself at the very last second. I wrapped my arms around my waist as he slowly lowered his hands once more.

“Why?” I asked again, a little louder this time.

He flinched. “I don’t want to overstep my place, but I . . .” He paused briefly. When I didn’t speak, he barreled on, “I’m worried about you. What you’ve been through—what you’ve *seen*—”

“I’m fine,” I cut in, though I wasn’t fine and he obviously knew all too well just how *not* fine I was, thanks to the *sanaulus*.

“Zuhra, the hardest part of any battle—of any loss, especially someone close to you—is not the heat of the moment. It’s the quiet minutes afterward, when you’re alone with your thoughts and the images that have been seared into your mind, when—”

“Stop,” I cried out, heedless of who I might wake. “Please, just—*stop*.” The vise of panic constricted, tightening around my heart, so I couldn’t speak another word, my breathing shallow.

“I know what it’s like. I know how hard it is.” Raidyn was still quiet, and this time when he lifted his hand, he didn’t stop, brushing the back of his fingers against my cold cheek. He took a step closer, swiping my hair behind my ear, and cupped my jaw, staring into my eyes, the warmth of his touch chasing away the chill.

“Can you make it go away?” My voice quavered. “Can you heal me?”

Raidyn shook his head silently, his gaze mournful. “This is not something I can heal.”

The images began to cycle through my mind again, unbidden but unable to be suppressed. I trembled under the onslaught of death and carnage and pain. Inara lying on the ground with her neck ripped open, Barloc crouched over her . . . Grandfather staring sightlessly into the unfeeling sky, a hole torn through his body that no amount of Paladin magic could repair . . . that endless, terrifying blackness inside of Inara that Raidyn and I had barely managed to pull my sister out of . . .

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“Look at me, Zuhra.” Raidyn’s voice sounded too far away, too quiet, over the roaring of my blood and the flood of terror that turned my legs weak and my arms inexplicably numb. My eyes burned and I gasped for air. “*Look at me.* Into my eyes.” The hand that cupped my face tilted my chin up, his fingers firm against my skull and jaw. He laced his other hand with mine, lifting it up to press against his chest. “Feel *this*. Feel my heartbeat—and my hand on yours. Breathe with me. In and out . . . yes, there you go, just a little slower . . . in . . . and out . . . Look at me, Zuhra. Look right here and just breathe. You’re all right. I promise, you are safe.”

I succumbed to his gentle commands, staring up into his eyes, forcing myself to focus on the feel of his hand over mine, of the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath my fingers. I matched my breathing to his and slowly, slowly, the rush of blood in my veins calmed and my breathing slowed and my trembling stopped. I hadn’t even realized I’d been crying until he brushed his thumb beneath my eye, to wipe away the tears that were still wet on my skin.

“Thank you,” I whispered at last.

Raidyn’s hand tightened over mine. “It won’t always be like this,” he said softly. “Even though it feels like it right now.”

“I’m scared,” I choked out, admitting the truth at last. “I’m scared to go to bed.”

Normally, such an admission would have made my cheeks flame with embarrassment, nervous he would take my meaning wrong. But somehow, I knew he would understand.

“Would it help if I sat with you? Only until you are asleep,” he quickly added. “Then I’ll go back to my room.”

His offer took the warmth from his touch and sent it straight into the depths of my heart. Oh, how I longed to say yes, except . . . “But you have to be up in a few hours anyway with my father. You need to be resting, not sitting with me because I’m such a mess.”

“There is nowhere else I would rather be.”

I didn’t have the willpower to refuse him again—not when the fear and panic hovered, waiting to swoop in. My eyes dropped to

where his hand clasped mine against his chest and I whispered “thank you” a second time.

Keeping our fingers laced, he rubbed his thumb across my jaw once more, leaving a trail of heat on my skin. Then he turned and guided me toward my door, opening it for me and keeping our hands intertwined as I followed him across the threshold and into my room.

“Do you wish to change? I can leave if you do, and then you can open the door when you are ready or call out for me.”

“No,” I quickly responded. “I’ll go to bed like this tonight.” I’d changed out of the bloodstained dress for dinner; the one I was wearing was clean and I didn’t dare let him leave, afraid of how quickly the images might resurface if he did.

He nodded. “Would you like me to start a fire? It’s chilly in here. That won’t help.”

“If you think so.”

He had to drop my hand to place a few logs in the hearth. I stood a few feet back, my arms wrapped around my waist once more as he stretched his hand out. His veins lit with power, and then he sent a small blast of Paladin fire at the wood. The blue flames slowly morphed into normal orange and yellow as the logs caught and billowed warmth out into my room.

Raidyn turned to me. We stood there for a moment that drew out long enough to be both awkward and enticingly forbidden. We were alone, in my *bedroom*.

He cleared his throat and glanced toward the bed. “Why don’t you get comfortable and then I’ll tell you a story.” Without looking at me again, he strode over to the lone chair by my desk and carried it over to the side of the bed.

“A *story*?” I repeated, though I did as he bid and pulled my covers down, climbing into my cold bed with a shiver, despite the spreading warmth from the fire.

“Yes, a story,” he replied with a small smile—a true smile that lit his striking eyes with something even more powerful and beautiful than the Paladin fire in his irises. Something I’d so rarely seen that I couldn’t help but smile back, even though I was trembling again. “Lie back, and give me your hand.”

“I . . . I . . . can’t . . .”

“Trust me, Zuhra,” Raidyn murmured, sitting in the chair and resting his hand on the side of my mattress, palm up. “I promise to stay with you—to keep you safe. Give me your hand. Focus on the pressure of my grip and the sound of my voice. Wall yourself into this moment, with me, here, in this room. For right now, there is nothing else but you and me, and our hands, and this story.”

I inhaled deeply and then hesitantly lay down, my pillow compressing beneath the weight of my head. He nodded encouragingly, and I placed my hand in his. He squeezed it, firm but gentle.

“I can’t close my eyes. I don’t dare.”

“Then look at me. Look at my eyes. Listen to my voice. And just breathe. Slowly . . . in and out.”

“And if I don’t fall asleep?”

“Then I will keep telling you stories until the sun rises.”

I gripped his hand tightly, my throat thick with unspoken gratitude and so much more. I didn’t know why he was willing to do this for me—why he’d known to come, to be there for me tonight. Was it merely a sense of responsibility because of what he could sense through the *sanaulus* . . . or was it something more?

“Once, not so very long ago, there was a young girl who dreamed of flying,” he began, his voice low and smooth, the familiar melody of it washing over me as he spoke, my hand in his hand, his eyes on my eyes. I listened and felt and breathed and, miraculously, there was only Raidyn and me and his story and the warmth of the fire washing over us both as he wove a spell of comfort and calm.

And somehow, slowly, my eyes grew heavy, and my breathing steady, as he told me story after story, until eventually, I succumbed to exhaustion and was able to drift off to sleep, the memory of his blue-fire eyes on mine following me into my dreams, where I prayed they would keep the nightmares at bay.