

Rage of a Daughter

by
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“It’s beautiful,” Ashani whispered, staring at herself in the dark glass. The mirrored surface had once been part of a large window, repurposed now in her bedroom. Its reflection was dim and distorted, but it was clear the dressmakers had outdone themselves. She touched the silver lace sewn onto the bodice of the gown. “What do you think, Inaya? Do you think he’ll like it?”

“Like it?” The image of another pretty, young woman appeared in the mirror. Inaya gently touched the long braid of Ashani’s dark hair, a stark contrast to her own loose, blonde locks. Then she smiled. Even in the dingy glass, the expression was radiant. “He’s going to fall in love with you for the first time all over again. Imagine, you marrying an earth artificer!”

Ashani felt her cheeks warm. Having shown no predisposition to magical talent herself, those endowed with the skill to manipulate the elements had once made her uneasy and skeptical. There was no way she would have ever trusted someone with the ability to move stone or hold fire in their hands. That is, until she had met Reyan.

Running her hands over the flawless, silken skirt of her dress, Ashani took a deep breath. Within minutes they would head to the party, a celebration of their engagement. Thinking of the moment when she would appear before her future husband, Ashani’s heart fluttered.

There was a knock on the room’s double doors, and a powerful, masculine voice called to them. “Girls? Are you still in there? Are you finished dressing?”

“Just a moment, father!” Inaya leaned forward, wrapping her arms around Ashani’s shoulders and squeezing.

“You look amazing, sister. Reyan is a lucky man,” she said. Dropping her hands, she pinched Ashani hard on both of her arms. Then she was gone.

Ashani frowned and rubbed at the pain, grateful she didn’t bruise easily. Inaya had always been a little rough, but it had gotten worse in recent months. Some of the previous jabs had left visible marks, and the blonde’s usual clever remarks had taken a bitter, spiteful turn. They would have to talk about it soon, but not today.

Ashani smiled at her reflection. She slowly twisted her hips causing the heavy skirt to wrap itself around her ankles before spinning away. Everyone would be envious of the wealth of material spent to make the dress. Unstained, without a single rip in the fabric, the costume represented a small fortune.

“Inaya, my Sunlight! You positively sparkle.”

Ashani turned around as a large man, dressed in a fashionable plum-colored cocktail jacket embraced Inaya.

“Father, you’re going to crush my dress!” The blonde brushed imaginary dirt and imperfections from the golden gown she wore. Though her tone was stern, the glint in her eye was playful and her smile full of adoration. She took the man by the arm and turned him toward Ashani.

“Moonbeam,” the man said, his face softened with wonder. His voice was so gentle that he sounded almost breathless. “You look just like your mother.”

Ashani smiled, knowing he meant it as a compliment. Though she had no memories of her parents, Baig Guli, the man before her, had known them well and often told her of them. Over the years, he had been so kind that Ashani now considered him her adoptive father, and his natural daughter, Inaya, a sister.

As Baig approached, adjusting his purple jacket, Ashani noticed that his thick, auburn hair had begun to lighten at the temples. And though his beard was now speckled with grey, his smile still emanated paternal warmth and affection. He took one of Ashani’s hands, lifting it above her head and requesting a spin. She obliged.

“Stunning,” he said. Then his brow furrowed. “But it’s missing something.”

Ashani looked down at her dress, confused. She was sure they hadn’t forgotten anything.

When she looked back up, something silver dangled from a chain in Baig’s hand. It took her a moment to recognize the Key to the Guardhouse. Goosebumps rose on Ashani’s arms as she realized what he was offering.

The pendant was a symbol of Baig’s position as Commander of the Guard. Overseeing all defense preparations, patrol rotations, and authorization of weapon distribution in the fortress, his was a rank of great power and authority. The key meant Ashani would someday assume Baig’s title, and with it all the responsibility and reward it entailed.

As Baig lowered the necklace over her head, Ashani looked at Inaya. She found her adoptive sister’s eyes narrow, her lips pressed together. The blonde’s jaw flexed as she clenched her teeth.

Ashani understood her anger. They had both spent their lives training for the day Baig would allow them to join the guard. While they had both been accepted into the ranks without question, it had been generally accepted that, when the time came, the key and Baig's position would pass to Inaya.

"I've spoken with Emperor Vaarem," Baig said, lightly touching the pendant and drawing Ashani's attention back to the gift. "He supports your appointment as my official successor, and sends his blessing for your marriage."

Ashani found herself unable to speak. Baig had chosen her over his own daughter. The leader of their community had supported the decision. She felt the weight of her future descend on her shoulders, thrilling and terrifying. Already emotional from the excitement of the day, a tear slipped down her cheek.

"You've made her cry!" Inaya stepped between her father and sister. Her hands flapped around Ashani's face like the wings of a bird, trying to dry the tear. "Do you know how expensive this make-up is?"

"It's alright," Ashani said, sniffing. "It's just a lot."

"Of course, it is," Inaya took Ashani's hands in her own. The compassionate smile on her face made it clear she'd recover from Ashani's unexpected promotion. "Congratulations, sister. You're going to be an amazing commander. But, wait." Inaya's face crumbled, as if she'd eaten something distasteful. "You're going to be my boss."

Ashani laughed, grateful for the humor.

"Well, I'm not sure how I feel about that," Inaya said, playing up her concern even as Baig gathered both girls into his arms.

Heedless of their nice clothes, Ashani leaned into the embrace, grasping at the last moment of quiet before the party. She had known marrying Reyan would change her life, but it was from this moment that nothing was ever going to be the same. She closed her eyes and breathed in the familiar, calming scent of her family.

Inaya was the first to pull away. "We should really get go—"

A sonorous boom silenced her and the floor shook. The dark mirror rattled ominously, and a small vial of perfume on the dressing table crashed to the floor. The bare bulbs hanging from the ceiling swayed and flickered.

"What was that?" Ashani asked, her heart racing. She gripped Baig's arm. "Father, what was that?"

"I don't know," Baig said. "Are you both alright?"

When they had confirmed that they were uninjured, Baig went to the door of Ashani's room and looked into the hallway.

"Nothing seems amiss...wait."

Ashani suddenly heard the faint sound, as well. "Is that someone screami—"

There was another loud rumble, similar to the first, followed by a second reverberation. Anashi reached out, steadying herself on a nearby table while Inaya clung to a bedpost. Dust fell from the concrete ceiling.

"What on Earth is going on?" Inaya asked.

"Stay here," Baig said. His face had gone oddly pale and there was a wild quality to his eyes that Ashani had never seen. It occurred to her that he might be remembering the Hargrave Attack, a madman's revenge that had claimed the lives of many in the upper sectors. The assault had killed her parents, and made Baig a widower.

"We're coming, too!" Inaya said.

"No!" Baig said, his tone desperate, but commanding. "You will stay here!"

Baig raised his hands and closed his eyes, silencing Ashani's immediate argument. He took a deep breath and released it slowly. When he spoke again, his voice had become calm once more.

"Please, my sunlight, my moonbeam, stay here. Stay together. I'll return shortly."

Exchanging a look, both girls nodded.

When Baig had disappeared into the hallway, Inaya turned to Ashani. "We're not actually staying here, are we?"

"Of course not," Ashani said. "Come on."

Deep within the fortress, the residential wing was persistently gloomy. Fragile electric bulbs, rare and costly, were reserved for the private chambers of the elite. Ashani and Inaya stepped around small tables piled with flickering candles.

Within moments, they had reached the first of several common rooms, lit by stinking oil torches. Here the fortress had once had windows, but they'd been covered long ago, boarded and sealed with cement to protect from the sands and radiation that had long covered the world.

"Oh! Wait a minute." Inaya released Ashani's hand, stopping mid-stride. She gestured back down the hall. "I have a small medical kit in my room. It might be helpful."

“You have your own kit?” Ashani asked, frowning. They had both taken the emergency response course mandatory for all guard, but it was unusual for any single resident of the fortress to have their own medical kit. The resources required were rare and preciously guarded.

Inaya shrugged, already heading back to the residential wing. “Better to be prepared, right? You go on. I’ll be right behind you.”

The decision made for her, Ashani continued alone toward the source of the disturbances. Dust slowly began to fill the passageways as she approached the Grand Entry Hall. She entered the massive room cautiously.

To her left, a set of double staircases rose to the second floor of the fortress. They would have been mirror images, but only the one on the left was serviceable. The flight on the right was missing a large portion in its middle. A disfigurement that stood as a monument to the violence of the past, reminding all of the struggle and sacrifice needed to keep Symador a peaceful and productive city.

Across the room, massive wooden doors allowed admittance to the fortress. The wall above them was made entirely of windows. Broken over time, many of the panes had been repaired with glass scavenged from ruins in the wasteland beyond the city’s walls. The kaleidoscope of mottled light that was emitted was always grimy, filtered through years of settled dust, but it never had such a gritty quality. A thick haze of dust particles swirled through the room. Ashani could hear people yelling, though it was muted and seemed far away.

Covering her mouth with her arm and plunging into the billowing cloud, she quickly crossed the room. On the far side, there were several sets of double doors that opened into the ballroom, the place that had been prepared for her engagement party. As Ashani approached, the dust grew thicker and a sense of dread buried itself in her belly.

Seeing the outline of a doorway in the shadows, she rushed forward. Just as she was about to enter the ballroom, someone emerged from the dust, their arms covering their face. They ran directly into Ashani. She staggered away, almost falling.

“Hey! Careful!” Ashani said, rubbing her shoulder. “Wait. Who are you?”

The stranger didn’t answer. He simply stared at her with pale blue eyes, rimmed red. His expression was slack, as if in mild surprise. Dust clung to his face. His hair, poorly dyed an uneven blue, was cut in the short, shaggy style of the lower city. His clothing, badly sewn and hanging off of him as if it had been made for someone larger, confirmed that he did not belong in the fortress.

“Who are you?” Ashani asked, repeating her question. “Why are you here?”

Before he could answer, a tall woman stumbled out of the ballroom. She held her hand pressed to her side. Her hair, similar to the young man's but dyed pink, was covered in small pieces of concrete. "Bijan! Get away from her!"

"What's happened?" Ashani asked, watching as the man hurried to the woman's side.

The woman gasped as he slipped under her arm, closing her eyes and clinging to him as her knees buckled. She was evidently in a great deal of pain.

"I can show you to the infirmary," Ashani said, deciding her questions could wait. It was a guard's duty to help the injured. She approached them with her arms out, ready to help support the woman's weight. "It's not close, but I can help you."

"Stay away from us," the wounded woman said, glaring fiercely at Ashani. "We don't need help from lying prigs like you."

Ashani took a step back, her brow creased. Having done nothing to offend these people or to be so rudely insulted, she simply gestured toward the exit. She would do nothing more to hinder their departure.

The woman looked at the blue-haired stranger, and then jerked her head toward the entrance, hidden in the dust. Without another word, they hobbled away, becoming phantoms in the haze and then disappearing.

Ashani stared after them, wondering if they had been hired for the party. She hadn't expected anyone from the lower city, but it wouldn't have been the first time the fortress had utilized a cheaper workforce. Pushing the strange pair out of her mind, Ashani turned and passed into the ballroom.

The concentration of concrete particles in the air made it difficult to breathe. Covering her mouth with her arm, Ashani tried to suppress the coughing she knew would only make the itch in her chest worse. She squinted into the swirling cloud, unable to see much beyond her own feet. Someone was speaking nearby in an urgent tone, but she couldn't make out what they were saying.

Tripping over rubble, Ashani wondered if her presence was about to become more of a hindrance than a help when she felt a breeze on her cheek. The gentle wind fluttered the fabric of her skirt as it grew stronger, scattering small pieces of loose debris against her ankles. The dust was being driven toward the end of the room, gathering in a condensed orb of grit and sand hovering between two of the fortress's air artificers. The pair were pale and sweating, using massive amounts of energy to bend the wild element to their will.

Ashani's arms dropped to her sides as she took in the revealed devastation. Boulders of concrete, torn from the walls, lay strewn across the marble dance floor. The crystal chandeliers had fallen and glittered in shattered heaps, their electric bulbs eviscerated. Tables that had held food and drink were broken or overturned, the costly refreshments

ruined. Delicate paper decorations, arranged only the day before, had settled like confetti over everything. Worse than this destruction, small groups of people, dressed in ruined finery, knelt weeping above others who lay unmoving on the ground. It took Ashani a moment to recognize Reyan on the floor. His mother knelt above him, holding his hand to her cheek as she wailed.

Despair wound itself around Ashani's insides and squeezed. She couldn't breathe. She clawed at her neck with trembling hands, trying to loosen the invisible rope around her neck. She stumbled forward, falling to her knees. Her vision blurred, growing dark at the edges.

Suddenly, someone large was kneeling next to her. Their strong arms surrounded her body, pressing her tightly to their broad chest.

"Shh, it's alright," Baig said as he held Ashani. "It's alright, Moonbeam. It's alright. I've got you."

Ashani closed her eyes and sobbed.

"I know, Moonbeam, I know. But, we can't do anything for him, now. Let's get you back to your room."

"Reyan..." she said, unable to say more.

Baig turned, keeping himself between Ashani and the gruesome sight as he lifted her to her feet. She held tightly onto his arms, looking up at his face and seeing his own deep grief. She wondered how long the wrinkles had been so sharp at the corners of his eyes.

A brilliant white light flashed above Baig's head, causing Ashani to shut her eyes. She felt him jerk upward and for a moment, it seemed as if they were in the air. The heaviness of her body lifted, and she felt a moment of weightlessness. Then they hit the ground.

Ashani's head cracked against the hard marble floor, sending a lightning bolt of pain down her spine. Something heavy landed on top of her, knocking the air from her chest. Then everything grew quiet, calm, and dark.

"Hello, Earth to Ashani. Are you listening?"

Ashani blinked and turned toward Inaya, unsure how long she'd been standing at the window, staring at the stained and pitted glass. They had brought her another round of

painkillers. The strong drugs worked quickly to dull her physical suffering, but they fogged her mind and made it hard to focus. It was a numbness she welcomed.

“I was saying, they gave father and Reyan and the others a beautiful vigil,” Inaya said, lowering her eyes to the board in her lap. She sat in Ashani’s bed, a piece of charcoal in her hand, sketching as she spoke. “Imperator Vaarem noted your absence. You should have come.”

Ashani looked back at the sealed window, letting the accusation roll over her and away. She knew Inaya was right, but she had found the idea of leaving her room, of seeing the sadness and blame on the other resident’s faces, more than overwhelming. When they had come to escort her to the service, she had locked the door.

“Are you in any pain?” Inaya asked without looking up from her art. “You don’t need anything, do you?”

Ashani shook her head and raised her hand, almost touching the bulky cotton dressing that covered her shoulder. She wasn’t yet used to the emptiness where her right arm had been, but the amputation had been clean. The doctor had promised that the occasional sharp pains she sometimes felt in a hand that no longer existed would pass.

“They spare nothing for my comfort,” she said.

“Good. That’s good. I told them to take care of you,” Inaya said, her tone distracted. “Can’t lose you, too.”

Ashani swallowed the sudden, hard lump of emotions in her throat. Even drugged, there were some feelings that pierced the intentional emptiness. Guilt had particularly sharp edges.

It had been a third, unexpected explosion that had knocked Baig and Ashani across the ballroom floor. The doctors had said that she was lucky she hadn’t felt the shrapnel shred her arm before she was knocked unconscious. They said she was lucky Baig’s body had protected her from the worst of that blast, and the next two. She had wondered if theirs was a special, uncommon definition of luck.

After the attack, Ashani had spent days sleeping, waking in pain only to weep uncontrollably, lost to her sorrow. Eventually, the medical attendants had taken pity on her, smuggling her stronger medicines to ease her misery.

“What do you think?” Inaya asked, raising her drawing to show Ashani the sketch. “I think it’s one of my best.”

Ashani stared at her own likeness. Inaya was right, it was one of her best. She had perfectly captured the drug-induced emptiness in Ashani’s eyes, the pallid glow of her sickly skin, the bulk of the white-cotton dressing piled on her shoulder. Around the image’s neck hung

the Key to the Guardhouse. Ashani touched the pendant, warm on her chest. Before she had had the strength to get out of bed, Emperor Vaarem had personally come to visit her, offering his condolences and then bittersweet accolades on her elevation to Commander of the Guard. He had assured that her duties would be waiting for her when she felt well enough to assume them.

“Is there any word on the investigation?” Ashani asked, shaking her head to focus her mind. This was something she needed to hear and remember.

Inaya’s lower lip jutted out in a childish pout. She lowered her art, gazing at it as if to find the imperfection that had warranted Ashani’s disregard.

“Nothing,” she said, still squinting at the drawing. “They can’t seem to find the vagrants you saw.”

Ashani remembered pale blue eyes, badly dyed hair, and a stranger’s hateful name. She had given this information to the guard. They had promised to bring the criminals to justice.

“What is taking them so long?” Ashani asked, a touch of annoyance in her voice. It had been little more than a week, but she expected a quick resolution. She needed it. There had to be a reason she was still alive when so many others hadn’t survived.

“You know how the guard works,” Inaya said, touching charcoal to paper once more. “They had to get all the paperwork done on the attack. Then they had to ask other survivors if they saw anything. A few did, so you’re not crazy, which is a relief.” She chuckled, but her amusement seemed hollow. “They’ve gotten the signatures and made the initial sweep of the lower city. I’m sure they’ll find something soon.”

Ashani wasn’t sure if it was the painkillers, or if Inaya had meant the explanation to seem both impersonal and disparaging. A quiet cold bloomed in Ashani’s belly, an anger the drugs couldn’t quite silence.

“It’s not enough,” Ashani said. She balled her hand into a fist against her thigh.

“You could always do it yourself, miss Commander of the Guard,” Inaya said.

Ashani heard the mocking tone in her sister’s voice, but the suggestion didn’t seem unreasonable. She was Commander of the Guard. It was only logical that she should be out searching for those that had committed this act of terror. As if it had been waiting, the fog in her mind suddenly rolled back revealing a plan. Instead of blindly scouring the lower city with the guard, she would speak to Baig’s personal informant. They were sure to have the information she needed. The answer was so simple.

Images of a man with blue hair, and a tall woman with a bitter face flashed through Ashani’s mind. They wouldn’t be able to hide. She would find them, and they would be punished.

In her chest, a calm rage unfurled its petals. It tingled in her fingertips, demanding vengeance and whispering a stranger's name.

"Really, I'll be fine," Ashani said, moving past the guard at the gate. She knew his face, but his name was buried in the part of her mind that was still hard to access. Even on a smaller dose of painkillers, there was still so much she couldn't recall. As Commander of the Guard, she would have to do better.

"We'll need to document your departure," the guard said.

Ashani waved her hand, dismissing the concern in his voice. She understood the departure procedure and she had made her decision.

"I'll be back by dark."

Leaving the guard to his duties, Ashani emerged on the far side of the inner wall. From here to the outer wall, the lower city of Symador spread out in predetermined sectors, each ruled by their own people. The fortress guard, called the Symguard by the populace, patrolled the city regularly, keeping an unsteady sort of peace. Everything beyond the outer wall was considered lost. Irradiated sand dunes spread out in every direction to the very ends of the Earth. Very few people had ever braved the wastelands, even fewer had ever returned.

To Ashani, anything outside of the fortress was bleak and cheerless. Each of the city's sectors had always looked the same; shoddy buildings covered in red sand, streets and alleyways covered in red sand, residents in protective masks covered in red sand. Though the fortress was considered by some to be claustrophobic and dreary, it was generally free of radioactivity and considered the safest location in the city. Ashani adjusted the heavy mask over her face and moved into the lower sector.

Halfway to the outer wall, exhaustion caused her to slow down. She had to focus to lift each foot, her legs stiff and heavy, and a persistent throbbing had begun in her shoulder. She realized her morning's painkillers were wearing off. Soon she would be in real pain.

Sidestepping into an alley, Ashani crouched down, feeling in her pocket for the tin of medicine she'd smuggled from Inaya's room. Knowing the medics would never freely supply her with a few days' worth of the drug, she had snuck into her sister's room searching for the contraband emergency kit.

She had been shocked to discover Inaya's "little" kit was fully stocked. Not only had there been enough clean dressing to bind Ashani's shoulder thrice over, but there had been two full tins of painkillers and three of radiation medicines. Taking a tin of each, Ashani couldn't help but wonder how Inaya had come into possession of so much and why her sister might be keeping it secreted in her room.

Popping open the lid of the painkiller tin, Ashani used her forearm to pull her mask off her face. She dry swallowed the pill. Then, exchanging the container for the other in her pocket, she swallowed two more pills. These would help keep whatever radiation she was being exposed to from making her sick. Both tins back in her pocket, she unscrewed the cap from the canteen on her hip and took a long drink. The long days of survival training for the guard were paying off. She had come prepared.

Refastening her mask, Ashani sighed. Adjusting to life with one hand was frustrating. The smallest actions took more of her concentration and were far more complex than they had ever been. Before she could convince herself it would be easier to return to the fortress and let the guard handle the questioning, she moved back onto the main street, continuing toward the outer wall of the city and this sector's street market.

She saw the queue before she saw the food depot. A long line of people, most not wearing any sort of face protection, stood with their heads down, slips of paper clutched in their hands. While Ashani had never had to worry about her own meals, the poorest in the city could only exchange their coupons for food once a week. It seemed a dehumanizing practice, but one to which the city had become accustomed.

Ashani passed through the nearby market quickly, her eyes scanning the left support beams of each wooden stall. Finally spotting the mark she was looking for, she approached the vendor, keeping her eyes on the odd collection of items on the seller's table. Ragged-edged books were piled next to scraps of stained cloth. Small bits of metal, cogs and screws, sat in chipped ceramic bowls. Shards of broken glass as long as a forearm glittered in the early morning light.

"Looking for something specific?" the vendor asked, tilting her head and considering Ashani. "I might have it stored away."

"Information," Ashani said, looking up at the short, dark woman. "About a young man."

The woman chuckled, a sound like the grinding of stone on stone. "Information? I don't deal in information. Only scavenged goods."

Ashani bit her lip and reached into the fold of her jacket, pulling out the pendant she still wore around her neck.

The woman's thick eyebrows slowly rose. She clearly recognized the Key to the Guardhouse.

“Where is the old man?” the vendor asked, looking around Ashani as if she were searching for Baig.

“Retired,” Ashani said. She knew her voice sounded cold and hard, but it was better than the trembling she feared would become evident. She shifted her weight, focusing on the feel of her boots in the sand and turning her mind away from thoughts of her father. “I’m in charge now.”

The woman looked at Ashani’s jacket, the way the right arm hung empty from her shoulder. She ran her tongue over her front teeth making a grotesque sucking sound.

“Look, girl, my agreement was with the old man.” The vendor lifted her hands, flicking them at Ashani in a shooing motion. “I owe you nothing.”

Ashani felt her face go hot under her mask. She had been foolish, thinking Baig’s informant would work with her for nothing. Her heartbeat quickened as she thought of returning to the fortress without the information she needed. That was not something she was prepared to let happen.

“What if I owe you?” The offer was made quickly.

The woman paused, mid-flick, and slowly lowered her hands. “What are you offering?”

“What do you need?” Ashani asked.

The woman sucked on her teeth again, and began to nod. Her eyes narrowed in consideration.

“Medicine,” she said. “Anti-radiation drugs.”

“Anti-radiation... you must be mad.”

The woman shrugged, and turned away. There would be no negotiation. The conversation was over.

Ashani took a deep breath and reached into her pocket. Her hand closed around one of the medical tins. She pulled it out and found it to be the correct container. She set it on the vendor’s table.

The woman had turned around at the sound of the tin, her eyes widening when she recognized the medic’s seal on its lid.

“His name is Bijan,” Ashani said. “He has blue eyes, blue hair. He’s about my age. I need to know where I can find him.”

The woman sucked on her teeth and then, lightning fast, reached out and snatched the medicine from the table, tucking it into an invisible pocket.

“Boy lives with some other strays in the tunnels,” she said. She was watching Ashani with suddenly sharp and curious eyes. “You’ll find the tunnels on the far side of the market, down an alley marked with a white stone.”

Ashani turned away, moving in the direction the woman’s hand had suggested.

“Pleasure doing business,” the vendor called out. “Come back any time!”

Ashani wondered if Baig had ever paid so much for the information he had bought from the woman.

The alley was harder to find than she expected and she walked past it twice before recognizing the small white stone set into the wall. Making her way quickly between the buildings, Ashani didn’t realize she had been followed until the man said her name.

Ashani turned, barely stepping away in time to avoid the knife in the man’s hand.

“They do train you well up there, don’t they?” the man asked as he advanced, giving Ashani no time to recover and run. His arm went wide, slashing the air where Ashani had stood.

Already panting, Ashani knew that she had reached her physical limit. This was a fight she had no chance of winning. She raised her hand, showing it was empty.

“I don’t have much,” she said. “But, it’s yours. There’s no reason to hurt me.”

The corner of the man’s mouth lifted in a cool sneer. Without a response, he lunged.

A line of fire opened on Ashani’s thigh as she tumbled away. Exhausted and off balance without her arm, she found herself sitting in the sand unable to rise. She growled in frustration, her vision blurring with angry tears. She had been so stupid, leaving the fortress before she had fully recovered.

“What do you want?” she screamed at the man.

Still smiling, he seemed amused. He leaned down and grabbed the side of her mask, jerking it up and off of her face. Ashani grimaced as the man leaned close, sliding his hand into her hair and pulling her head back, exposing her throat.

“Just doing my job, chicken,” he said. “Nothing personal.”

Ashani closed her eyes and felt the gathered tears slip over her cheeks. This wasn’t how it was supposed to end. She was Commander of the Guard. She deserved a better death. Baig and Reyan had deserved better deaths. The thought caused her to sob.

“What the—”

The man above her grunted and the knife lifted from her throat. Ashani took a shaky breath. She heard the approach of footsteps and the thud of something heavy hitting the dirt. She

opened her eyes and struggled to her feet, wincing as she put pressure on her wounded leg.

Two men had ambushed the would-be murderer. In between his attacks, the pair were making use of the openings he gave them, taking turns striking him while they spoke to each other in calm, easy voices.

“Watch his blade!”

“I’m watching! Ooh, bad timing.”

“It’s just a nick, looks worse than it is.”

Each time the man with the knife advanced, they would dance away laughing. It almost seemed as if they were enjoying themselves.

“On your right!”

“Appreciated. We had about enough of this?”

“Yeah. Should check on the girl.”

“Alright, you go on. I’ll end it.”

Ashani watched in amazement as one of her rescuers smoothly disengaged himself from the fight, setting his hands in his pockets as he walked toward her. Behind him, the other fellow continued the fight.

“Are you alright, miss?”

Recognizing the man approaching her, Ashani felt the breath leave her chest. Her cheeks suddenly felt flushed and she could hear her heartbeat in her ears.

“You,” she said.

“Yeah, me,” the man said. His hair was lighter than she had remembered, but the blue of his eyes was the same pale. A smile flickered across Bijan’s mouth. It was a wary, amused expression. “Have we met?”

A coldness raced over Ashani’s skin as if she had been hit by an icy wind. She drew her arm back and punched him.

Bijan took a step backward, but not from the force of her hit. Overbalanced, once more, Ashani had overcompensated and almost fallen. He had caught her.

“Everything alright over here?”

The man who had stayed behind to fight her attacker appeared, his amber eyes open wide in confusion and curiosity.

Ashani growled and pulled herself out of Bijan's steady grip. "This man is under arrest!"

She knew it was a mistake as soon as she said it.

Bijan and his friend exchanged a quiet look, and then began to laugh.

"Arrest?" the man asked. He ran a hand back through his russet-colored curls. "He's a scoundrel, alright. But, begging your pardon, on whose authority might you be arresting him?"

"And what for?" Bijan asked with a smile.

"Mine," Ashani said, pulling the Key to the Guardhouse out from where it had shifted under her shirt. "For the recent attack on the fortress. You'll answer for what you've done."

The two men went quiet. They, like most residents of Symador, recognized the sigil of authority. Bijan had gone pale. The other man, larger than Ashani had first noticed, stepped toward her, his expression grim. Ashani took a quick step back, scanning the ground for something to use as a weapon.

Bijan placed a hand on the other man's chest, halting him midstep.

"We didn't do that," he said. There was softness in his blue eyes that might have been called sadness. Ashani saw the gentleness as a sign of guilt, a clear confession.

"Didn't... Didn't do it?" She threw her arm wide, noticing that the chestnut-haired man flinched. "I SAW YOU!"

Frowning, Bijan stared at Ashani. Then he sighed deeply and shut his eyes. "I remember. You were the girl outside the ballroom."

"I didn't see her," the other man said, folding his thick arms over his chest and looking down at Ashani.

"You'd already gone, Tavish," Bijan said. "It was when Alma found me. Before the last blasts."

His gaze dropped to Ashani's missing arm and his expression softened further.

"It doesn't matter!" Ashani said, almost yelling, trying to hear herself above the hot pounding of blood in her ears. "If you were both there, then you are both under arrest. You will come with me immediately to the fortress. You will be held for your crimes. You will confess. You will be punished."

The man called Tavish was shaking his head, but Bijan spoke.

"We didn't do it," he said, again. "We were invited."

Ashani almost choked. "Invited?"

“An upper city girl found us in the market,” Tavish explained. “Said if we fancied some free food and drink, we need only come to the upper gate and give the guards a password.”

“She said we could take as much as we could carry,” Bijan added.

Ashani covered her face with her hand and then rubbed at her cheeks. The story was ridiculous. No one would have invited people from the lower city to her engagement party as guests.

“You’re lying,” she said.

“We’re not,” Tavish said. “The guards heard the word, and let us in. No one stopped us.”

“Why would we just walk in to blow ourselves up?” Bijan asked. “We lost friends up there. Good friends.”

Feeling like someone had punched her in the gut, Ashani looked up into Bijan’s blue eyes. He seemed so earnest and his point so valid.

“The girl with pink hair?” she asked.

“Alma,” Tavish said. “She’s still in a lot of pain. There were others who didn’t make it.”

Others. Other attackers. Other innocent people killed in the fortress. Ashani lowered her head and closed her eyes. She felt light headed, a bit like she might be sick. She wanted to believe that none of what they were saying made any sense. But, somehow, it didn’t seem completely illogical. She felt herself sway.

“Woah,” Tavish said, reaching out for her even as Bijan took her arm, keeping her from falling once more. “Bijan, look at her leg. She’s wounded.”

“Help me sit her down,” Bijan said. “Over there, in the shade.”

They lowered her onto the sand and, before Ashani could object, Bijan tore a strip of cloth from the bottom of his shirt exposing some of his stomach. He began to bind the cut on her leg. Startled by the sudden act of kindness, Ashani simply stared at him.

Trying to distract herself, Ashani looked over at the man who had attacked her, the man Tavish and Bijan had fought. He was still lying facedown on the ground. For a second, in her mind, he was Reyan on the marble floor of the ballroom. Her stomach turned, rejecting the memory. She averted her eyes, staring instead at her boots.

“Is he...?” She couldn’t bring herself to ask the question.

“Ah, well. He won’t be bothering you anymore,” she heard Tavish answer. “Which reminds me. He had this on him.”

“Who was he?” Ashani asked, looking up as Tavish handed Bijan a piece of paper.

“No idea,” Bijan said, handing her the paper. “But, it looks like he was after you.”

Ashani’s hand began to shake. She took a single shaky breath, and then another.

“What was the password?” she asked, unable to take her eyes off the image on the paper.

“The one you gave to get into the fortress.”

“Something about the sky,” Tavish said. “Sunny. Starry. Cloudy.”

“Sunlight,” Bijan said. “It was sunlight.”

Ashani curled her fist, crushing the portrait. Inaya had done it again. She had captured Ashani’s perfect likeness, down to the blazing fury in her eyes.

Ashani opened the door to Inaya’s room without knocking and limped inside.

The pretty blonde was laying on her bed, discolored paper and charcoal in her hands. Drawings of Baig and Reyan in various stages of completion were scattered around her. She began to gather them as Ashani approached.

“You’re back!” Inaya said, a too-bright smile on her face. “Any news?”

Ashani snatched a half-shaded picture of Reyan from the bed. His kind expression, so perfectly rendered, almost caused her resolve to falter. He would have never understood the consuming rage in her heart. He would have cautioned her to compassion and warned her against the confrontation. He had been a good man. Ashani wiped the tears from her cheeks with her forearm. She set the drawing down.

“You can keep that one, if you like,” Inaya said as she climbed off the bed and set the other pictures on a small side table. With her back to Ashani, she checked her hair in a tall, dark mirror, the twin to Ashani’s own.

“Why did you do it?” Ashani asked, watching her sister in the mirror.

Inaya’s reflection frowned, her brow furrowing in confusion. She turned around. “Excuse me? Do what?”

“Why did you kill them?”

Inaya’s eyes widened slightly, but her surprise was quickly replaced by an expression of concern. “Killed who? I think the radiation has gotten to you, sister. Please, lay down here. I’m going to go get a medic.”

“No!” Ashani stepped into her sister’s path, blocking Inaya from her exit. “No. I talked to them, your lower city scapegoats. I know you let them into the fortress. Why did you do it?”

Taking several steps back, Inaya raised her hands as if to protect herself. “Ashani, you’re scaring me.”

Ashani reached into her pocket, pulling out the portrait Tavish had taken from the assassin. She thrust the paper at Inaya.

“A man tried to murder me,” she said. “He had this on him.”

Looking at the picture, Inaya lowered her hands. She pressed her lips together, and then she smiled.

“I knew I should have paid for two killers,” she said. “But how did you get rid of one? You’re so...” Inaya waved her hands, gesturing to the whole of Ashani. “...banged up. Though I guess it doesn’t really matter.” Her voice took on a melancholy tone and her expression became sympathetic. “Since you’ve contracted radiation poisoning on your little excursion. Oh, my poor sister. Such a terrible way to go.”

“What do you mean? I don’t have radiation poisoning.” Even as she spoke, Ashani understood. An overdose of anti-radiation pills would cause similar symptoms to the beginning of radiation sickness. Inaya had more than enough in her secret medical kit. “You’re planning to murder me? I’m right here!”

Inaya shrugged and approached Ashani, a sickly-sweet smile on her face. “Third time is the charm.”

It was Ashani’s turn to back away. She bumped into the larger table in Inaya’s room, the one her sister used as a vanity. Closely set glass bottles clinked together and a small tin of loose powder fell, spilling across the floor.

“Did you know you were all father could ever talk about?” Inaya asked, ignoring the wasted cosmetics. “Ashani, so beautiful. Ashani, so smart. Ashani, with the best marks in training. Ashani, catching the eye of handsome, talented Reyan. Ashani, the new commander. You had EVERYTHING!”

“You’ve hurt so many people, Inaya,” Ashani said, reaching back until her hand came in contact with something heavy. It felt like a small metal block.

“You made me do this!” Inaya screamed, grabbing Ashani’s shirt and jerking her forward. “All you had to do was share *something*.”

Ashani swung, driving the small jewelry box into the side of her sister’s face. Blood splattered across Ashani’s hand. An image of Baig from the night of the attack flashed

through her mind. His face was covered in blood, his eyes already sightless. Ashani's felt herself go cold. She screamed and hit Inaya again and again, driving her sister back.

Reining in her wrath, Ashani lowered her arm, gasping for the air she didn't know she needed. Inaya stood with her head down, holding her shredded cheek. She began to laugh.

"Really, Ashani?" She asked without looking up. "You're going to beat me to death?"

Inaya looked up, her eyes wide, but not in pain. Though her face was torn and blood dripped from her jaw, hers was the wild gaze of the deranged. She grinned.

"Do it," she said. "Ashani, so perfect. Ashani, one-armed. Ashani, sister killer! Do it!"

Ashani struck her once more.

Inaya fell back into the dark mirror, shattering the thick glass. She slid to the floor, amongst the glittering shards, her arms and upper body spotted and striped in red. Some fragments remained lodged in her skin. One, no larger than Ashani's thumb, had pierced Inaya's forearm, near the wrist. It sparkled in the dim light as blood pulsed from the wound. It would be only minutes before she was dead.

Ashani dropped the jewelry box. The metal clang of it striking the concrete floor sounded as if it were very far away. Her anger, too, felt distant, though not dissipated. This act of vengeance would not bring her the satisfaction she desired.

"You have taken everything from me," Ashani said, heading toward the door. She would summon the medics and save her sister's life. Then, she would confess her actions to the guard, and reveal her sister's loathsome crimes. They would both be imprisoned for their offenses. "Turns out, that is something I am very willing to share."

The End