

Face buried in the soft, cotton sheets, Lisandra groaned in protest at the constant ticking-over of her brain. Connors *stupid* face, standing in a sea of no-good goons for one of the slimiest men in town just wouldn't go away. The *tick, tick, tick* of her pocket watch joined the cacophony of thoughts until she couldn't take it anymore. The timepiece sailed across the room, tumbling into a pile of yet to be laundered clothing strewn over her divan in the far corner and she scrambled into sitting, tossing the bedding aside with a loud huff of air.

"Fine!" her words came out sharp and quick. There was no need for a silky voice with tempered pronunciation when the room was only filled with her. She kicked at the tangled sheet that clung to her leg and scrambled out of bed.

"The one damn night ye lot leave me be, is the one damn night I can't get a wink of sleep anyway!" she seethed into the empty air. Lisandra paused, almost expecting a response, but as the air hung silently she mumbled a few frustrated words beneath her breath. Her hand fumbled around for her nightstand, brushing across a cool surface of metal. "In glory of the bloody King!"

Silence filled the dark room, followed by a frustrated sigh. Clutching her fingers around the RHC badge, the frazzled constable took a breath and tried again, with a tone of measured frustration.

"... in glory of the King."

The badge sprang into light, illuminating the small bedroom and she tossed the bedding aside. No patience for a meticulous updo, her fingers deftly weave her hair into a braid, pinning up out of the way and donning something functional. Badge and rapier in hand, she left her little flat in the corner of Central, storming off towards the Nettles.

The storming didn't last long. By the time she'd spent over half an hour traipsing through the winding dirt roads of the Nettles by badge-light, the flame licking at her gut had petered out into embers and worry settled in. The sun began to rise as she reached a stone building with a sagging thatched roof. The muddy yard held a few discarded childrens toys and painted rocks and the only adornment was a carved pendant of a fish, made from glossy blue stone, that hung from the rickety wooden mailbox. Her finger's fondly brushed over the pendant, nostalgia and guilt catching in her throat.

*I shouldn't have been away for so long... what the hell is going on?*

From the small window in the front, a face appeared. Dark eyes and messy dark hair framed sun-kissed cheeks of a familiar girl. Lisandra offered a sheepish smile and the girl made quick work of shoving the door aside and darting out. Her bare feet hit the mud with a slap as she bounded over and hugged Lisandra tightly.

"Morning, Saph," she hugged the girl back, brushing back her unbrushed hair to look at her better. "Sorry about the party... I would have had a million questions from Ella if she found out I know you."

“Rude!” Saph replied, tightening her grip. She buried her face in the soft fabric of the woman’s dress coat to hide the forgiving grin before tilting her head back up. “Ya don’t gotta talk all fancy here, Ly.”

Lisandra chuckled, and gave the girl another squeeze. “Right. Ol’ habits. Is Connor in? I need to talk to him about somethin’ important...”

The girl finally let go of her grip and shrugged, “Nah. He’s not been around much. Busy with work, he said.”

Lisandra tried to keep her concern from showing, “He got a new job or somethin’?”

Saph shrugged again.

“Right... well, who’s takin’ care of ya while he’s out, then?”

Saph’s chin raised indignantly, or perhaps to stretch her posture a little taller than her ‘of-an-average-twelve-year-old’ height. “Me and Luka, mostly. I can cook good, and sew. Luka helps keep Pop comfy and lifts heavy stuff. Kip’s sleepin’, Allie and Boomer are inside. Everyone else is out runnin’ tricks.”

Lisandra reached out to tousle the girl’s hair, a proud grin slowly creeping into the corners of her mouth. “Alright... and how’s Otis doin’?”

From inside the house, a long string of hacking coughs filtered through the open door.

“... awake,” the girl frowned, and darted off into the back of the house.

Lisandra followed. Her throat clenched as she followed the trail of gasps and phlegm into the back room. Sat on the bed was an old man, hunched over a rag as he cleared his lungs for air. Saph quickly poured a glass of water and mixed a murky liquid into it from a bottle on the nightstand. With a shaky hand, he took the water and carefully sipped down some of the liquid.

“Thanks, darlin’,” he rasped, giving the girl’s hand a squeeze before taking another sip.

“Hey, old man...” Lisandra slipped into the room, her face full of fondness and concern as she sidled up to the bed and tentatively took a seat. He was paler than last time she saw him, and his skin hung a little looser.

Otis lowered the mug and took a wheezing breath through a crooked smile, “Who’s this gorgeous lady payin’ me a visit, hm?”

She scoffed softly, “Yeah, it’s been a while, huh? Ye cough is soundin’ worse than last time. Are the meds not helpin’?”

His wrinkled hand reached out for Lisandra’s and she inched in closer to stop him from stretching.

"I'm old, and I'm sick," he wheezed, attempting to sound dismissive. "The medicine keeps me fairly comfortable."

Lisandra's brows drew together sharply, "... but?"

"But... I'm a little worse for wear," he conceded, giving her hand a squeeze. "More frequent doses. More expensive herbs. Connor has... taken up new work, to pay for them..."

"You mean he's workin' for Kell," she replied flatly.

Otis sighed, leaning back into his pillow with a nod.

"Yes... I tried to talk him out of it," he explained, pausing to take another long sip from his mug and swallow with difficulty. "How did you know?"

"I ran into him last night on an investigation... all standin' in line with a crossbow in hand like the rest of Kell's lackeys..." she frowned. "Otis... he coulda come te me! I could 'ave got ye more money..."

Otis chuckled and evolved into a cough that took him a few moments to recover, before shaking his head.

"No offence, lass... but the way the two of you tried to one-up each other for earnings, I think I would have had an easier time convincing him to rob the King than ask you for help..."

Lisandra's cheek burned.

"It's not gunna end well fer him, Otis..." she squeezed her eyes tight, shutting out the thought of finding his body face down in a Parity Lake alley.

"I know, love... I told him the very same thing. But you know how stubborn he is... and I'm not in any condition to drag him home kicking and screaming..."

Her eyes snapped open, with a hint of that fire that had been burning for most of the night.

"Yeah, well I am..." she scowled. "The bloody idiot is gunna get himself killed. He's no thug, Otis! He's a con man, a card shark, a genius at tricking a man outta his coin. But he ain't no thug. I *will* pull him out of there kickin' and screamin' if I have to..."

Otis clamped his fingers around her wrist, drawing her attention as he inched up a little in the bed.

"Don't do anything rash, Lyrie..." he warned. "I know the two of you were close, and I want him safe too... but Kell is a *dangerous* man."

The fire in her eyes dulled and she tentatively encased his hand with hers.

“Yeah... I know,” she slumped a little at the idea. “He’s even got the cops in his pocket... I won’t be dumb about it, but I can’t leave him in there. With any luck, he hasn’t a clue who I really am. Unless Conner is a bigger ass than I think he is... I might be able to work something out. Carefully. I promise.”

Otis sighed, wheezing softly and nodded. He looked too tired to argue. Lisandra quietly helped him finish the mug of liquid before placing it to the side and letting him catch his breath. She couldn’t help but wonder if his health was so much poorer than before *with* new medicines, how much worse it would be if he wasn’t able to pay for it. He looked so weak.

Lisandra reached into her coin purse and placed a handful of gold coins on the dresser before leaning in and gently kissing his forehead.

“It’s really bad, isn’t it? Yer health, I mean... ” she brushed back his wiry hair with her fingers and gave him a half-hearted smile. “Connor wouldn’t be out playin’ the martyr if it weren’t, right?”

The old man’s brow furrowed heavily and he shifted uncomfortably before nodding. She didn’t really have much to say, so she just held him for a moment.

“I’ll be back te visit again much sooner this time, okay?” she promised, trying not to let the hot pickle in her eyes turn to tears.

“You know we’d love to have you home whenever you can, lass...” he rubbed her back, gently patting it as she leaned back and smiled. “I’ll be here. Send the kids in, would you? We always practice poker before breakfast.”

Lisandra forced a smile, nodding as she headed back out towards the front of the house. In a whirlwind of hugs, she said her goodbyes to Saph, Luka and the rest of the horde, staying just long enough to watch them all bundled into Otis’ room with a large tray and a pack of old cards.

As she quietly slipped out into the morning sun, Lisandra squeezed her eyes shut, feeling hot tears stream down her face.

*You bloody better be here, old man.*

Wiping her face, she made her way across the muddy yard and headed in the direction of the Central district.