

Arrow

RAVEN

She pulled the arrow back until her fingers brushed her ear, the bow bent to the limit. She narrowed her eyes and took a small breath.

Release.

The arrow shot forward and buried itself into the target.

Raven looked over at her father who nodded approvingly.

A hand slapped her back and she jumped.

"That was awesome." Omari grinned at her through his long lashes. "Not that we were expecting anything else."

Raven raised an eyebrow but couldn't help but smile back and her eyes widened when Omari leaned in close and whispered in her ear, his breath fluttering her hair. "Come to my tent tonight, I have something to tell you." He leaned back and gave her a wink as he sauntered away to join a group of soldiers who were laughing.

She looked after him wistfully. Raven wished she could be part of the other soldiers, but she couldn't, not when she was the only girl in the army, not with her father being who he was.

"Rashida." *Speak of the devil.*

Raven glanced at her father who beckoned her to him. No one but her father called her by her given name. She had been given the nickname Raven when she was small because of her glossy black hair and sharp, intelligent eyes and it had stuck.

She walked over to her father who gave her one of his rare smiles.

"Well done."

She bowed her head. "Thank you, father."

Raven's father was Lord Kurek Hamada, first general of the Emperor's military and because of Raven was his child, people were careful around her. They never acted real, making themselves perfect and treating her like royalty, afraid that she would report back to her father.

Lady Rashida Hamada felt like a different person. She was Raven, archer, soldier in the first army and a normal. But Raven knew she was far from being a normal girl. She glanced down at the pants she was wearing and ran a hand through her short-cropped hair and sighed.

Her mind wandered back to what Omari had said to her. Omari was her best friend and didn't judge her for being a girl or an aristocrat by birth. He treated her the same way he treated all his other friends and she appreciated that.

"Meet him at his tent, hmm?" She fingered her belt and her fingers wandered to the knife at her hip.

"Rashida." Raven glanced at Lord Kurek. Uh, oh. She had zoned out.

She straightened her back and looked him in the eye. "Yes, sir?"

"I have a job for you. Come with me." He turned and led her into his tent. He gestured at a pile of cushions for her to sit and once they were both seated, he cleared his throat.

"We are at war."

"Yes, sir." She knew that.

"At the moment, we are losing that war." She knew that, too. "If we are to change that," Lord Kurek continued, "We need something that they will do anything to keep safe. Even," He met her eyes, "If that means losing the war."

He picked up a silver dagger inlaid with glittering crystals from the table beside him.

"That's where you come in." He slid the knife towards her.

Later, Raven left her father's tent dazed and went to her tent to prepare.

That night, Omari waited for Raven behind the tent he shared with some other soldiers listening to their soft snores. He waited and waited but she never came. After midnight he went into the tent, dismayed.

SOLEIL

In the glittering palace, in the topmost window of the highest tower, Soleil watched the world go on without him.

Oh, sure, life was great within the palace walls with more food than you could eat in a lifetime, servants waiting on your every need and clothing of the finest materials, but Soleil wanted so much more than that out of life. He had never had to work a day in his sixteen years. He was never allowed outside the walls that contained his universe. His entire life, Soleil had been treated with the utmost respect, being the royalty that he was, but sometimes, he would overhear servants whispering about him.

He had always been small, but now he was sixteen and of marriageable age and yet he was only five feet tall, towered over by even his own sisters.

Soleil sighed and looked down at his delicate hands, he didn't even look like a boy with his wide, fawn brown eyes, smooth skin and full lips.

What if he didn't want to be a boy?

As soon as he thought those words he wanted to take them back. If his father heard those words, he would be livid. Soleil shuddered at the thought and then signed.

"I wish something would happen."

There was a thud at his door and he stepped over and opened it. A tall stranger in black stood holding a katana and looking down at him.

He gasped and stumbled back.

The intruder stepped into his room and grabbed his wrist, pulling him to the door. He started to yell but a hand struck out and covered his mouth. The smell of leather filled his nose. The stranger yanked him out of his room and dragged him down the flight of stairs to the door that let into the courtyard.

Soleil tried to twist his arm away but they only tightened their grip. Pain shot up his arm, bringing tears to his eyes. He silently called for his father.

Ahead of them, a shadow moved and Soleil felt his assailant stiffen. Soleil's eyes widened in terror as his youngest sister, Nanette, stepped around a corner and caught sight of him. Her eyes widened and she let out a squeak. Soleil's heart thudded with panic and his mind screamed at her to run. To his relief, she turned and ran, disappearing down the halls.

He was suddenly yanked towards a window and the stranger opened it, climbing through it and pulling Soleil with him. They fell a couple of feet and then hit a bed of soil.

The gardens. The man holding his arm glanced around and seeing no one, dashed for the arched exit, dragging Soleil with him.

Soleil looked back at his home one more time before he was pulled into the woods beyond the castle and lost sight of his former life.

RAVEN

Raven rode into the camp, a small boy sitting in front of her, his hands bound. The boy's eyes were wide as he took in the tall, crimson tents of the infantry, the majestic stallions that pulled on ropes holding them to wooden poles and the weapons that glinted in the sun. The soldiers that were out stared at she brought the boy to her father's tent.

She dismounted and helped the boy down. His knees buckled when his feet touched the ground and she shot out an arm, steadying him. He looked up, embarrassed.

"Thanks." She nodded and then turned, leading him into the tent.

The tent's interior was decorated with the finest things that you could find. Pillows and cushions of silk and cashmere, goblets of silver inlaid with precious gems, golden figurines of the seven gods sat upon a table of polished birch, its legs and corners coated in gold leaf.

The boy stared at the room with awe and Raven snorted. He looked at her with wide eyes. Then her father walked in.

Lord Kurek was an intimidating presence and immediately filled the room with his power. He looked at the boy and then at Raven. He gave her a small, almost unnoticeable nod.

"Well done, Hamada."

Raven bowed her head. Lord Kurek turned to the boy who had watched their short interaction in terrified silence. Lord Kurek took a step towards the boy and he shrunk back.

"What do you want? What are you going to do to me?"

Lord Kurek regarded him with an even expression. "Hamada." Raven snapped to attention. "Yes, sir." "He will be your responsibility. He will stay with you. Do not tell anyone his true identity." Raven raised her eyebrows. "Yes, sir." Her father turned and looked at her. His expression softened. "You did well." Her chest heated with pride. "Thank you, father."

SOLEIL

That was his father? Great. Just great. That's it, I'm dead. Soleil was passive as he was escorted to a tent and pushed inside. It was stark and plain compared to the one he had just been in. Soleil was in shock and didn't notice the stranger who had stolen him follow him in. He had just seen Lord Kurek, the bloodthirsty killer who led the army of Emperor Kaixin of Shiran. The country his father, Tsar Nicola, was at war with. It was a wonder he hadn't been killed immediately.

The stranger shifted and pulled off their mask. "I'm sorry for the rough treatment. There wasn't really another way."

Soleil stared. Oh my gods. The stranger shook out their black hair and looked at him, his dark eyes glinting intelligently. Soleil couldn't tear his eyes away from this boy. This perfect, beautiful boy.

"Um." The boy said uncertainly. "I'm Raven." Soleil blinked. What was he doing?

"Why did you kidnap me?"

Raven sighed. "Right to the hard questions, huh?" He ran a hand through his hair. "Well, our countries are at war and right now, we are losing."

Soleil's eyes widened. This was news to him.

"Anyway," The boy continued, "We needed something that could give us an edge over Ruminia, your country, and what better than the heir to the throne?" His mouth twisted in a grimace. "I got the job of actually bringing you here because, if you didn't notice, Lord Kurek is my father."

Soleil frowned. "I didn't know Lord Kurek had a son."

"Oh, he doesn't." What's that supposed to mean?

RAVEN

For the first time, Raven had a good look at the boy she had stolen. He was short, at least half a foot shorter than her, and had large eyes the most beautiful shade of brown she had ever seen. She found herself lost in them, sucked into a universe of damp soil and wooded glades. His lips were full and soft. Raven caught herself staring.

"You'll be able to roam the camp, but I will always be with you."

Prince Soleil got a strange expression on his face and answered almost dreamily. "I can live with that." Weird.

They left the tent and wandered around. Raven didn't know what to do with a hostage. She was about to suggest they return to the tent when she heard a familiar voice. She turned and saw Omari waving to her from the archery stands.

She grinned. "Come on." She gestured for Prince Soleil to follow her.

When she reached him, Omari slug an arm around her shoulder. "Who's this?" He was looking at Prince Soleil. Raven was about to answer when she remembered her fathers warning. "Um. He's my cousin."

Omari raised an eyebrow. "How come I never heard about him before?" Raven frantically scanned her mind for an excuse.

"They didn't know I existed before." Raven looked over at Prince Soleil. Had he just covered for her? He gave her a look.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's right. We just found out and I went to go get him because..." She faltered.

"Because my parents died and I didn't have any other living relatives."

Omari looked skeptical but took it. "Alright. Well, do you wanna have a contest?" Raven smirked. "Feeling masochistic today, are we?" Omari stuck his tongue out and she grabbed a bow and notched an arrow but didn't fire.

"You first."

Omari grinned. "Fine."

He cocked his bow and brought it up. He paused and then let go. The arrow hit the target.

“Not bad.” Raven said. “Now my turn.”

She stepped up and pulled back the arrow. Release. It hit dead center.