

# The Devotee

*A side story featuring Danzor's perspective when learning about the MC.*

The heat of the flickering oil lamp dulled as the night wore on. Danzor watched Rana until she had fallen asleep, her fingers clutching tightly to the woven quilt as though afraid it would be ripped away from her. *Like Salyra*. The thought came unbidden and Danzor frowned, forcing it away until all that was in his mind was the listless thoughts of how and when they would talk about what happened.

It had been a trying few months. For a long time, the home that they lived in - mud-baked and small, unlike the large chambers in the temple, had been silent. Salyra had been gone for months and Danzor feared that he would have to raise Rana alone or worse, send her to live in the temple while he searched for the woman he could never bear to lose.

His eyes graced Rana's features once more and he smiled. Danzor liked to think that she inherited the best features of Salyra and him. Rana was sensitive, more than most children her age and that was something that Danzor was proud of. But he was not blind to the looks and whispers she received. Being around Salyra had taught Danzor that no matter where they went, they would always be seen as an extension of her presence. But Rana still did not seem to understand that.

He wondered idly if Salyra's child, *her first child*, shared the same amount of features with Salyra as Rana did. The memory from all those years ago, from a time when Danzor could not call Salyra his and Ahlf, the man who Danzor found too aloof for his liking, slipped over his mind like a mirage. He remembered the wail of the child that Salyra held, her smile beaming as Danzor stared from afar.

Danzor had never been brave enough to speak his thoughts then, afraid that he would only ruin what little was left between him and Salyra. But he remembered the way Ahlf's eyes glistened against the wailing infant's face, a reflection of the man who had sired a babe with Salyra.

“How is Rana?”

Danzor turned, his heartbeat thrumming under his chest in surprise. He had forgotten that Salyra was back and it took him a moment to gather his thoughts. She wore a loose robe, nothing like the one she wore in the temple and her hair was loose and curled slightly at the edges. They had not spoken about the imprisonment, not truly and Danzor feared that pushing the subject would only hurt Salyra more.

“She is asleep at last,” Danzor breathed, glancing at his young daughter. “I think she is afraid that you will leave again.”

There was a tightness in Salyra’s expression, despite the smile she cast him. They had been together long enough that Danzor had learnt how to interpret her feelings. Salyra was masterful at hiding them, but it was in the small ways that her eyebrows creased or the way her fingers twitched that told him that she was upset. His heart twisted and he reached out, grasping her hand in his.

Salyra sighed, her expression softening. “I am sorry, Dan. It has been a lot.”

He searched her face, noting the darkness under her eyes and the way her cheeks seemed hollower than he remembered. There were scars on her skin, bruises too from her time in the prison but Danzor knew that it was the unseen scars that bothered her the most. Gently, he grasped her shoulders, tugging Salyra towards his chest. She sighed, sagging into his hold and Danzor basked in her warmth for a moment.

Danzor breathed in her scent, so familiar and grounding before he let his gaze drop to her face. Salyra’s eyes were not on him but focussed on *Rana*. Once more, the thoughts of Salyra’s first child returned. He had the whispers and see her child in the company of the exiled prince, though calling Salyra’s firstborn a child seemed foolish now.

Two decades had gone past since Salyra last saw her child. Many had not known about Salyra’s past or *Ahlf*, but Danzor had known everything. He was stunned to learn that Salyra had fled Ishari only to return years later, childless and broken. Those in the

temple rejected her and her family had fled when the war had started. Danzor remembered the chiding words of his brother when he brought Salyra to his home.

He remembered the harsh stares and the pointed words from those around him, warning him to stay away from the Ishari woman who bedded a Blood Guard. But Danzor had known Salyra longer than most. They had been childhood friends at first and later, more. But the war kept them apart and when Danzor returned, Salyra had married and the only one who seemed to hold her attention was the child he had seen in passing.

“You have not spoken to...” Danzor began then trailed off, uncertain how to phrase the question.

A breath escaped Salyra and she disentangled from his hold. “I cannot. It is difficult, Dan. It feels as if I am a stranger to my child.”

“You are still a mother,” Danzor responded. “This is something that you must do.”

Salyra went quiet and Danzor stared at her, wondering what she was thinking. He thought about the years of silence and the years where she wept, her letters to Ahlf returning without a word from the child she was forced to leave behind. Once, Danzor had peered into the chest, daring to read a letter from Ahlf but the man’s tone was no less aloof on paper than it had been when they had first met.

“You are right,” Salyra sighed. “But it is no less daunting. Already, people whisper and those who remember are all too eager to spread their lies about what happened.”

“Then you will tell them the truth, Sal,” Danzor responded. He frowned, knowing that most who disfavoured Salyra were those who had held on to the old way of things. “Your child needs you.” He glanced at Rana. “They both do.”

Salyra’s lips pressed together and she turned away from Rana. Her steps were not hurried but Danzor knew that she needed a moment to gather her thoughts. Once, her

silences frustrated him, but he had come to understand that Salyra was like a caged animal who had been prodded with a stick. There were moments when she would lash out, her anger and buried agony, spilling from her like the blaze of a fire.

He followed her figure, noting the way she paced along the small room. She smelt faintly of myrrh and woodsmoke and Danzor was reminded once more of her duties to the temple. Being away from Salyra had been difficult, but now that she was freed and returned to him, Danzor realised that their time together was secondary to her devotion.

“Dan,” Salyra called, pausing. Her expression was filled with sorrow and there was a note of desperation in her voice. “I would like you both to meet each other.”

Danzor swallowed, his eyes slipping over Salyra’s face. She was scared, he realised. He strode towards her, his smile soft as he met her gaze. The only time that he had seen Salyra terrified like this was when she returned to Ishari, alone and lost. His fingers cupped her chin, gently as though she would flee at any moment.

“Of course, Sal,” he murmured. “If that is what you need then I will do it.”

Salyra peered up at him, her lips tugging into a relieved smile. “Thank you, Dan. I do not think that I would be able to do this without you.”

He held her close then, desperate not to let her go this time. Things had been difficult in her absence, but now that Salyra had returned, Danzor was certain everything would be easier.