

CHAPTER 16

Ever since the attack on Hal, the Kinslayers had been on edge. Hirash, still adopting that ridiculous persona was even more on edge. Something was wrong with him, but Trystal didn't dare weave even an ounce of magic near him.

Everyone was on high alert. The native that was guiding them had brought them deeper than she would have ever thought they could get without alerting the new Founder's defenses.

If not for the incredible density of the Shiverglades' flora, they would have been able to see the place called Brightsong from where they camped. Their guide assured them that there were so many warrens and hidden alcoves among the icy swamp that there was no way anybody but a true son of the Shiverglades could find them.

Trystal believed him. There were rustlings around them, people talking in hushed voices that came impossibly close to their hideout and yet never actually found them.

They didn't pose any threat that Trystal could see. She could deal with Hal's people on her own, her spectral servants likely could do the task if needed. And that was without rousing the two Kinslayers.

The smaller one was out of commission. Something had happened to them that even Hirash wasn't allowed to know. He kept asking when they would be ready to attack, but the big guy always delayed and even snarled once or twice like a rabid dog.

After that Hirash began muttering to himself with increasing frequency.

It was unsettling to say the least, but it was a crack in the man's façade that she could exploit. If there was anything Trystal was good at, it was using her proverbial crowbar to pry away another's armor so she could get at who they were deep inside.

Once she was there, she could pull and push all the little levers and buttons to make them do what she needed.

The fact that she knew he was Hirash was immaterial. He didn't know that, and she had no intention of ever letting him find out. But what she wanted, more than anything, was for some way to get him out in front of Hal.

She was *so close* to the boy, and yet so far. Due to the nature of their little hideout, anybody coming or going would be immediately seen. Even Trystal's magic wouldn't keep her hidden.

Of course, that worked both ways. She—and her spectral servants—were able to keep track of everybody's movements. Unfortunately, that was relegated to their native guide who was more than happy to sit where they were.

It was clear that Hal was sending out patrols to look for them. The attack on him had been an idiotic one. Rash. It spoke of a personal grudge, and while she had heard the awe and wide-eyed respect that the Kinslayers now possessed for Hal, none of that mattered to Hirash.

And she doubted that any of that respect mattered if the Archmage gave them the order to attack him again. They were, after all, simply soldiers. If incredibly unsettling and disturbing ones.

How the Archmage had come to hate the man so much, Trystal would very much like to know. She could use it to great effect. Try as she might—and she had to be immensely careful, one misstep would spell her doom—Hirash was a closed book.

Sure, he muttered and mumbled to himself, but that was a sign of a breaking mind, not one that was conducive to discussion and gentle prying. Not yet, in any case.

He was getting stir-crazy, in a way that she recognized in herself. They were both so close to their goals and yet they could not act.

But where Hirash wanted his satisfaction *yesterday*, Trystal was used to waiting. Patience had ever been a virtue of hers. Now, saddled with the infinitely long life of a Founder, patience had become something of a super power.

Hirash was so on edge he might just walk right up to this fledgling settlement and maybe he'd kill Hal, maybe he'd take out half the people there, but then he'd surely die as well. Even Archmages are not immortal, and though Hirash was considered brash and reckless, he was smart enough to

know that you can't storm an enemy's stronghold. No matter how talented he was rumored to be.

Especially when their guide had reported that there were no easy points of ingress. Tristal had sent one of her spectral servants out to see this Brightsong for itself but couldn't get near its opening valley.

There was a barrier that prevented any sort of magic from getting in, and she was certain it had grown since the battle with the Kinslayers. That proved to be a problem for Hirash as well, who no doubt possessed some sort of magic to whisk them into the settlement while Tristal wasn't looking.

Day by day the original lies were breaking down and Tristal knew it was only a matter of time before it was obvious she knew too much. Even her acting abilities could only go so far.

She was supposed to be a stupid rich girl with more money than sense and Hirash's alias was something similar. An explorer or some such nonsense, he honestly hadn't put that much work into the cover and now that they were alone and all the power rested with Hirash... he didn't really need to anymore.

Tristal had tried acting concerned, wanting to go see more of the Shiverglades just for the sake of playing the part. Hirash didn't care. He made flimsy excuses that she had to accept or otherwise risk blowing her cover.

The only benefit—if it could be called such—was that the Kinslayers were growing more and more rebellious. The small one was constantly going in and out of consciousness, Hal had done a number on that one, and the big guy refused to leave their side even for a moment.

They had originally been the perfect obedient slaves, but now? It was hard to tell where their loyalties were. With each other, was Tristal's guess.

Dressed in their clothing, Tristal's spectral servants waited on her and did what they could to keep her comfortable in this damp green—and yet somehow freezing—hell, but she could feel her window closing.

She had helped Hal, yes, but did *he* know it?

Furthermore, she was still with his enemies. If the native was wrong, and they were discovered, then what? She would have to try and cower and pretend she didn't know anything, but the moment Hal heard her voice he'd know, wouldn't he?

And so, her thoughts continued to spin as she tried, desperately, to work out a plan to get out of there.

Ideally, she'd have Hirash up front with her so she could betray him at the last moment and deliver him into Hal's hands. That should be enough to buy an audience with the man, especially if he thought himself a King.

Every Founder had a big ego. It was practically part of the job description. But even so, she didn't know enough about Hal to guess at his temperament, much less what he would do if she offered him Hirash's head on a platter.

Maybe she'd be labeled untrustworthy for betraying him.

So many variables and all of them had gotten entirely out of her control. This was not like her at all to be worrying so much, but there was little else to do in this horrid place now that they weren't moving anymore.

She could try to make a break for it.

With her Silver Founder's Mark, she could likely get into Brightsong itself. But then she'd have no chips to play, no bargains to make, and no goodwill beyond what Hal chose to remember.

If he even could. She wasn't sure which would be better, if he was somehow wounded from the fight and unable to recall much of what she did, or if he remembered and thought she was working with the Kinslayers.

What a mess, she thought to herself, looking up at the clumps of glowing moss in her section of the hideout. A spectral servant knelt beside her while the other stood guard. It pretended to whisper to her, though in truth they couldn't speak, and it was odd how few people seemed bothered by that.

They were bothered by the servants themselves plenty, but somehow not their lack of speech. It seemed proper to most people that she had such well-trained guards.

It was sickening.

Almost as disturbing as the cultists who worshipped her like some sort of living goddess. You could only do so much about that sort of thing without turning them against you, and in any case, they had generally proved to be useful, if incredibly unsettling.

Eventually, and much sooner than Trystal would want, she was going to have to force the issue with Hirash. She needed to go, and they weren't going

anywhere soon. Staying put and keeping her mouth shut would only work so long until Hirash began to wonder.

She could play the frightened damsel in distress, but it wouldn't work on Hirash, she knew that much. It might on the Kinslayers, especially if she could further pry the two apart from Hirash, but the big guy was as taciturn as they got.

The stricken Kinslayer suddenly wailed, followed immediately by the larger one curling up in a ball beside them. The silent one, however, simply stood and didn't bother looking. Tristal still couldn't tell if he was a Kinslayer or not, but judging from his massive horns he was a lamora... so likely not.

The other two were clearly human and in a great deal of pain.

What's going on?

Hirash was on his feet and asking questions and berating them in turn, often without pausing. "What has he done now? When I return in glory and honor to your master, I will tell him of your disrespect and uselessness, what is happening? Answer me!"

Spittle foamed at the edges of his mouth, he ranted and raved about everything and nothing all at once.

The man was clearly losing it.

Tristal put a gentle hand on Hirash's arm and the man spun about, nearly striking her. Her spectral servants rushed to her side, reminding him of his place and it took every ounce of her restraint to cringe with fear instead of readying a counterattack.

"My... apologies, my lady," Hirash said somewhat smoothly. "I do believe my hired help is injured. Do you know any healing?"

"I am afraid only a little," she lied, motioning toward the two. "May I? There may yet be something I *could* do, but only if I know what is going on."

Hirash waved dismissively. "Your guards stay here, however. I will not risk harm coming to them."

Once again, Tristal thanked the heavens for her spectral servants. They were always the ones that people watched instead of her. They were large, burly, and intimidating. Plus, many people were just plain unsettled by them even if they didn't know why and that always worked to keep eyes glued to them instead of her.

Curtsying as best as she could, Trystal picked her way carefully to the Kinslayers. She knelt beside the big one, bracing for any sort of rabid, feral response to the gentle touch she laid on its arm.

Instead, the creature flinched. Then when nothing more happened, he appeared to relax ever-so-slightly.

It broke Trystal's heart.

Though this person could no doubt kill her where she stood with some hideous eldritch power, he acted more like a wounded and abused animal than a man. The simple act of touching him without malice or discomfort seemed alien.

"It's okay," she crooned softly. "Tell me what I can do. Please. Let me help you both."

The big Kinslayer turned to look at her, his brown eyes were piercing but he motioned slowly to the smaller one. As Trystal was allowed to roll the slight thing over, she was shocked at what she saw.

Though Trystal had always seen the Kinslayers in cowls or hoods of some sort, she had assumed that the rumors were true, and they all looked similar to Rinbast. The big Kinslayer looked like a more weathered, tired, body-builder version of Rinbast, stripped away of all his style and guile.

This person however... she didn't even know it was possible.

Trystal stared into the young face of a woman. Her eyes were burning purple pits of fire and she was sweating profusely, shaking, and trying to curl up into a ball of agony without making further noise and often failing at that.

She's a woman! A woman Kinslayer? How is... how is that possible?

Outwardly, Trystal was all business. She did have some training in healing, but her Silver Founder's Mark was limited in what it could do. If she had Gold, perhaps, or even Mythril as that was often associated with repair. But, alas, her powers were elsewhere.

She could certainly make it *seem* like she was healing her, but the effect would be short-lived, and she would need an exit strategy ready before she even started.

Something she most definitely did not have.

But she knew enough from her life on Earth, and after all, the Kinslayers were human, weren't they? At least... physically.

Taking the woman's sweating face in both hands, she tried to steady her. "Look at me," she whispered while checking her pulse. She turned back over her shoulder to look at the others. "Give us some space. A little more, *please*. Thank you."

There was a faint recognition in the Kinslayer's eyes, but also so much pain. And yet... she reacted much like the other did. Fear, surprise, guarded relaxation. She was not used to being treated kindly, or at all really.

No doubt they were barked at for orders, used like tools to do whatever bidding Rinbast had in mind, then shelved and left in the care of other Kinslayers.

The two clearly cared for each other, that much was evident.

Nobody cares about you quite like yourself, Trystal couldn't help but think.

Nothing was going to plan. Hirash could stay here indefinitely so long as the blasted native hung around. And the Kinslayers, even as they were, posed a serious threat to her and any plans she might be able to make.

It was time for a gamble.

She leaned closer to the woman Kinslayer and said, very softly, "I know you do not wish to be here. I know you do not want to kill Hal. Help me, and I will free you from Hirash."

The look of pain and fear in the purple-glowing eyes of the woman vanished. She looked at Trystal with an unreadable gaze.

Trystal braced herself. There was no going back now. If she was wrong here, they would kill her without a thought.

But if she was right....