

## CHAPTER 1

# LUZ

*Protect the two prizes, all others are expendable.*

The message had arrived in Aphorai City, tucked into the protective lining of a shipment case that had once carried desert rose oil. How terribly apt. Almost on the nose, really. I've long known the Magister is a cool operator, but even I raised an eyebrow.

Alas, retrospection won't get me very far out here.

The edge of the Empire is for doers, not thinkers. Takers, not speculators. Local dreamsmoke fabricators go head-to-head with the Rangers, mercenary gangs battle for what's left over, and everyone else ekes out a living in the cracks between. And here I am, smuggling a weakened prince, an upstart of a girl, and their two burly companions through the fray on the way to the Sanctuary.

Ah, the vicissitudes of dedicated service to the Order.

At the border, a town of tents has been woven out of the worst threads of the Empire's desire for control, combined with the lawlessness of the lands beyond. The most brutal of the supposedly peacekeeping Rangers and the most

nefarious of the allegedly scrupulous trade regulators have drifted here over the preceding turns like dust gathers behind the back door of an otherwise fine establishment.

“Where’s the Aphorain army?” the girl asks, her voice smarting as if the lack of provincial representation is a personal slight.

She’s drawn her horse level with my camel. Hers is a stylish beast, I’ll give her that. Dark and sleek and, by the way it turned its nose up to the inferior chaff at the last trader camp we passed, discerning, too. An equine after my own heart. For now. Only the Primordial knows how it will fare as we get closer to our destination.

The girl had a question, didn’t she?

“I suspect they’ve been redeployed,” I offer.

Thanks be to Asmudtag that Daddy Dearest didn’t insist on coming along for the ride. It’s a rare man who knows his limits. I’d venture that’s why the Magister was drawn to him all those turns ago. He knew his place. He was never going to snuff out her flame. Nor shine brighter. And he is rather handsome. If you’re into the grizzled veteran type.

Oh, it’s going to be a long ride if I cannot still my mind.

Or quiet the girl’s incessant chatter.

“What are they building?”

Dozens of labourers toil under the command of vicious foremen, their deeply tanned backs bending and sweating in the morning heat. Almost half their number have the mark of felons – metal plugs in place of noses. The others sentenced for lesser crimes, then. Or working off debts.

I watch them struggle, schooling my expression to neutral. “A wall.”

On the camel I purchased for him at the Aphorai City stockyards, Nisai, First Prince of Aramtesh, removes the

diaphanous veil of the lapis-blue gown I disguised him in, and runs a silk sleeve across his brow, his eyes narrowed to a squint against the glare and grit. “For what town? I’ve not noticed this settlement on the imperial map updates.”

I smirk inwardly. *Settlement*. That level of reflexive diplomacy could never let you doubt this boy grew up in a palace. Such a polite term for a ragged bunch of tents and slightly sturdier marquees of heavy felt.

“My sources say the Regent gave the order while you were indisposed, my Prince. I believe the decree made special mention of the need to ... how was it put? Ah, yes. The ‘need to protect imperial resources and lives from outside incursion’ and something about ‘restoring Aramtesh to greatness’. Or was it ... leadership through ‘strength and stability’? There’s always something new being squawked by the imperial criers.”

His brow furrows. “But the Seson Territories are on the other side. My role as heir names me caretaker of those lands.”

Caretaker? An empty title. For moons, the Rangers have been doing nothing out here to help the refugees from the unending conflicts beyond the border, deep in the territories where the borderlanders always seem to be at war about one thing: lack.

Lack of resources. Lack of law. Lack of hope.

Many of those fleeing were skilled and could offer value in Aphorai City, more value than moving rocks from one place to the next. Unfortunately for them, province standard practice seems to have been superseded by imperial orders.

I cluck my tongue and my camel ambles on. “I’ll make sure to not be present when you have that discussion

with your dear brother. Now, please, my Prince, re-cover your face.”

The Losian former Ranger, now acting as the Prince’s Shield, moves closer, bringing with her the scent of leather and the coconut oil that keeps her battle braids sleek. She extends an arm sculpted with muscle to help his imperial highness with his veil.

He bats away her hand. “I can do it myself.”

“It’s crooked, my Pr—”

“It may be the first time I’ve worn a dress, but I’m not incompetent,” he huffs.

“And may I compliment you on how well you wear it.” It’s the Aphorain guard – the one who veritably bathes in amber. “The colour suits you.”

It could be my imagination, but the Prince’s dark brown eyes suggest a smile behind his correctly adjusted disguise.

Among the ragtag bunch of traders who cluster around the makeshift settlement like flies on a carcass – and smell about as pretty – I find one who will sell me a troupe of stocky Hagmiri mountain ponies in exchange for our camels and a heavy pouch of silver coin. It’s a blatant gouge, but unfortunately necessary for my present mission.

We make our way towards what will soon be a gateway in the foundations of Regent Iddo Kaidon’s wall. The sun glares down, like it’s chasing us out of the Empire. I bribe the Ranger on the gate more heavily than usual in an effort to stave off pursuit of another kind. “I trust that adequately compensates your discretion?”

He stares blankly ahead. “For what? Can’t recall seeing anything worth reporting.”

Splendid.

“Ponies?” the girl enquires when we’ve barely led the animals out of earshot.

I look to her horse. “I thought you’d approve, petal.”

She looks out to where the first peaks rise from the haze-smudged horizon. “Surely you’re not taking us into the mountains?”

I just tap my nose.

We ride on, out into a landscape that’s more dust than desert. I’ve never enjoyed this part. The filth finds its way into every crease.

At least there’s precious silence.

“A while since you’ve been this way?” the girl starts up again as if I provoked her with my thoughts.

I don’t reply.

Her brow wrinkles at my lack of acknowledgement. How exhausting it must be to take everything as a personal insult.

“Or maybe,” she draws the word out, clearly thinking she’s about to follow it with something clever, “you’ve never actually been where we’re going. That’s it, isn’t it? You have no idea if we’re on the right path. If there even is a right path.”

If she thinks that’s going to provoke, she’s not as sharp as I thought. I beam a beatific smile upon her. “You’ll just have to wait and see, won’t you?”

She fixes her fierce eyes even tighter on me. “You’re enjoying this, aren’t you? Getting a thrill out of sniffing your own mysteries, is that it? You’re as bad as Sephine.”

I suppress a flinch at hearing the name of the woman I served for turns and instead blink at the girl mildly, letting silence do the work. Silence undoes most people when

wielded correctly. I've already learned it sends this one writhing in her own skin.

"I mean, as mysterious as Sephine ... or at least as mysterious as..." The girl must realize she's stumbled into uncouth territory. She looks away, and I think that's going to be that. But then her whisper is brought back to me on the wind. "Who even *are* you?"

"Unless you'd like to discuss the ontological intricacies of the existentialist philosophy of the Great Bloom, petal, you'll have to be more specific in your line of questioning."

"For a start, are you really Luz, or Zakkurus?"

I study her, but for once her eyes are innocent of spite, and her tone had been matter of fact. It's a genuine question, not a taunt. "Has it never crossed your mind that I could be both? I'm Luz when I'm Luz. As the Chief Perfumer of Aphorai, it was helpful for me to differentiate by using my family name."

"But Zakkurus is ... he's a ..." She has the decency to blush.

I give a slow shrug. "You want to know the words to refer to me with. While many read Zakkurus as he, for me, the closest would be they. She, they – I'm comfortable with fluidity. And in the eyes of divine Asmutdag, both are simply part of the all."

She ponders my words, then nods. As if that is that.

Which is a good thing, given the road ahead.



North, we journey.

Ever north.

By the second day after we'd crossed the border, the terrain begins to slope upward. I wouldn't normally ascend into the foothills this early in the journey; swifter passage is to follow the dust plains until the mountains spread further west, forcing one to climb or retreat. Such a direct route is minimal risk when I travel alone or with only a single charge – tracks are easily obscured, finding cover is less challenging. A group this size is something else entirely.

My instructions mentioned nothing of speed, so it's best we take the more difficult path where there's not another soul to lay eyes on.

The Order will simply have to be patient.

I'm hardly surprised we haven't come across anyone else. Nobody who didn't know our destination would have any reason to venture this way. None of the borderlanders come here, there's little to no resources. With no borderlanders, and so far from the edge of the Empire, there's nothing for a Ranger, either.

Potentially there are valued metals beneath the ground – it's striated with bands of sickly green and wan grey. Extraction would be a major operation, however. No caravan guard would be in their right mind unless they demanded triple the wages they'd warrant within the Empire. It's simply not worth setting up a supply chain this way, praise the Primordial.

We climb slopes that are bald of vegetation. Even the resilient camelthorn bush that thrives without moisture or care in Aphorai declines to sink its roots here. The lack of flora means dust puffs from the earth with each step of the ponies; choking clouds billow around us every time the wind deigns to make itself known. When we strike camp, the faces of my charges are streaked with green-grey

mud made of grime and sweat, while it would not be an understatement to say we all verge on the malodourous.

It's high sun the following day when we reach a ridge. My nose twitches. Another scent beyond our pungent selves has begun to thread through the otherwise monochrome landscape.

It's time.

I hold up my hand, calling a halt.

As if on reflex, the big Aphorain guard holds out a water-skin to the girl. She waves it away.

"Drink," he says.

She sighs and puts the spout to her lips.

I retrieve several cloths from my saddlebag. "Fold these over thrice, then tie them over your face and mouth. Ensure the ties are secure, and the fit is snug."

Rather predictably, the girl plants her hands on her hips. "Or what?"

"Or you can discover for yourself what I'm attempting to protect you from. Your prerogative, petal."

I pass the cloths out. The Losian Shield glowers at the square of fabric but does as I say. Splendid. She may be recalcitrant. But she's not stupid.

When they've all got their masks in place, I fix my own and lead them up over the ridge.

I'd usually bind any cargo I bring this way, but the Magister will want more than their safe delivery to the Sanctuary. She'll want that commodity even more precious than dahkai: information. Finesse over force it is.

I pass the Prince a pair of thick leather cuffs, linked by chain. "My Prince, please affix these."

The Losian steps between us. "Not going to happen."

I allow myself a melodramatic sigh. "Sorry, Pik, is it?" I know full well it's not.

"Kip," she grates.

"To *me*, Kip. I want him to use them to bind *me*. Unless you'd like to tie me up instead?" I give her a long, slow wink.

She returns it with a flat stare. "Ask nicely."

I hold her gaze. Those near-black eyes of hers really are rather lovely.

Behind her, the Prince coughs politely.

Flashing a smile at the Losian, I peer around her bulk and hold out a small scroll. "If I start to act strangely towards you, my Prince, you must show me this. I must read it in full and respond appropriately to any manner of question you ask of me before you remove the cuffs. If I still fail to convince you of my lucidity, you must have me knocked out. Otherwise I'll be a danger to you."

He blinks his big brown eyes. "Sorry?"

"The next valley is the only accessible pass towards our destination for hundreds of miles. It's burgeoning with sultis vines. You'll know the leaf is chewed by those who wish to forget, yes? Breathing their flowers or the fumes from their sap is even more potent. Too much, and it meddles more seriously with one's faculties. Given I'm, shall we say, *suspicious* of others at the best of times, should something untoward happen and the valley overwhelms me to the point where I'm not entirely myself, I'd not want to do anything regretful. When we're above the cloud line, it will be safe to remove them."

The Prince holds out a hand. Is that a tremble I see? Just the slightest? Excellent. He needs to keep his wits about him. A touch of doubt wards off complacency.

I grace him with another smile, this one reassuring. “I would never cause *you* harm, my Prince – short-term memory is the first to succumb to sultis, and you’ve been known to me for more of my turns than not. Alas, I cannot say the same for what I would do to any of these others. Even if my motto has always been to give every soul one chance.”

The Losian harrumphs, spits in the dirt.

“Filthy habit,” I snap.

She folds her arms across her chest. “That my chance gone, then?”

She doesn’t move, but there’s something in her eyes that alerts me. Failed Ranger or otherwise, the Losian can handle herself, and she’s ready to. I expect there’s enough up my sleeve to deal with her if it becomes an issue, but perhaps not without breaking a sweat. And I do so despise sweating.

We’re hardly a half mile into the valley, the vines draping from the rock walls, spidering in tangled tendrils across the ground, when the girl begins coughing behind the fabric over her face. She reaches up to her mask.

“Leave it.” My voice carries until the echoes are swallowed by the creeping vegetation.

Her gaze flicks to the Aphorain palace guard. “Bar? Where are we? Who are these people?”

By the grace of the Primordial, I knew she was sensitive. But this soon? And this acute? She truly *is* her mother’s daughter. Alas, she already doesn’t recognize anyone but him.

She jerks on her horse’s reins – such an uncharacteristic move – and angles the mare’s head back the way we came,

riding in a wary circle that crushes more of the sultis, milky sap splattering across hoofs.

“Rakel.” The Aphorain guard’s voice is muffled through his own mask. “Wait.”

“Not until you tell me what’s going on here.” The next thing she’s sliding from her horse, tearing the cloth from her face. She starts to back away, eyes wild, like she might turn and bolt in the next breath.

“Boy.” The word lashes out despite the cloth over my face. “Now’s the time to earn your keep. Be a hero and fetch your friend, would you?”

The girl takes another step back. Three more. “You’re not seriously going to take orders from a stranger, are you?”

The guard looks between me and the girl, his usually handsome – albeit still puppylike – face betraying his uncertainty. He swallows audibly. “Is that entirely necessary?”

I could *die* of tedium. “It’s not star-charting, boy. Simply pick her up and tie her to her horse.”

Now he holds up his hands. “I’m not. . . It can’t be me... You don’t understand. We have history.”

“I understand more than you know.”

But all the great lump does is stand there, dopey as a sleepy toddler.

Then the Losian steps past him. In a few long strides she reaches the girl, lifts her from her feet and swings her over her shoulder as unceremoniously as a sack of barley.

A lady who gets the job done. Commendable.

“Hey!” the girl squawks. “Get your stinking paws off me!”

“Here.” I hold up a vial of lilac-coloured liquid. “I’ll throw it to you.”

The Losian snatches it out of the air with her free hand and eyes the Aphorain guard. “You too gutless to hold the horse, too?”

The mare is skittish, forcing him to jog to catch her bridle in hand. The horse fights him, pawing the ground beneath her, only sending up more and more pungent sultis sap. “Calm, girl, this is for her own good.”

I’d think that beast had more brain than any of them, as she settles enough for the Losian to swing the girl over the saddle.

“Open the vial and wave it under her nose for a few breaths.”

She does as instructed. Swift. Proficient. I’m beginning to like this one, despite her rough edges.

“Keep going,” I urge. “It will kick in soon.”

As expected, a dreamy look washes over the girl’s features.

I allow myself a satisfied smirk. Didn’t even have to uncuff myself.

With the girl subdued, the Losian recaps the vial. She looks askance out over the sultis vines. “What would happen if you got lost in here?”

“You’d wander until your body could wander no more. As many have done.”

“And then?”

“You’ve seen what’s beneath. Rock and nothing much else. How do you think the vines get the nutrients they need for survival?”

It’s the first time I’ve seen her formidable frame shudder.



I recognize sorrow when I see it.

The return of the girl’s memories seems particularly cruel. As is the usual way, she recalled things in sequence, oldest to newest. At the outset, she looked suspicious of all of us but the Aphorain. Then she relaxed towards the Prince. Then she began to talk animatedly of the Prince’s Shield, asking where he was, why he wasn’t with us.

They all look stricken. I figure I may as well be the person to tell her the truth. She was never going to feel endeared towards me. This won’t render that any different. And it would be harsher to leave her chattering obliviously away about the Shield until the realization crept up on her.

“He’s dead,” I say. No point in framing it differently. Even the finest perfumer cannot make rancid ingredients into a soothing balm. “He died at the palace.”

She squints at me, in that same way she’s always done, as she tries to work out who I am and whether I can be trusted. “I don’t believe you.”

Come sunset, the girl crumples forward in her saddle and gives a bone-chilling wail.

*Now she’s remembered.*

And for all I can tell, it’s the blow that finally breaks her.

She rides silently in the middle of our group. Through unspoken agreement the others have positioned themselves around her, as if she were going try to bolt again at any moment. I almost tell them not to bother – anyone can see that her fire has been extinguished. But if their care helps us make good time, then so be it.

The amber-drenched Aphorain rides beside her. He had draped a blanket around her shoulders when the cool of the foothills turned to the chill of the mountains. Every

now and then he draws his mount in close and reaches out to straighten it.

She doesn't seem to notice.

Or care.

The moons both rise early, lighting the way, so we ride through the early part of the night. The weather isn't kind, the clear sky brings a frigid chill and the wind forbids conversation. Which is good. I need to think. Whatever the Order is going to have me do once the Prince is delivered to safety, I must be ready. One step ahead. Always at least one step ahead. That was Sephine's failing. She was too focused on the now, while other players manoeuvred around her.

Just shy of midnight, we make camp in a depression between the rocky tors. The Losian sets about scraping a fire together, well-shielded in the ground lest the seemingly deserted mountains have eyes. The Aphorain helps me with the horses – the girl usually would, but she hasn't moved an inch since dismounting. The Prince must be positively famished – for once he dishes out the trail rations of dried fruit and meat and roasted nuts rather than waiting to be served.

We eat in silence, before each clearing enough of the pebbles away to hopefully get some kind of sleep. The girl wraps herself in her blanket and lies down, facing away from the fire. The others tried to talk to her, but they can't reach her, not in grief like that.

My words least of all could offer comfort, so I watch and wait for each of them to find their sleeping rolls. They've stopped asking questions of me each night, about where we're going and how long it will take, too cold and bone-tired for curiosity.

When the fire needs more fuel, I take up a stick of mourning incense along with the last of the peat bricks from my pack. We're going to have to make it to our destination tomorrow, or it's going to be a freezing night beyond.

Only the Losian stirs when I rearrange the glowing embers to achieve the slowest burn. She opens one eye, but doesn't otherwise move.

Nobody else sees me lay the mourning incense beside the girl's sleeping face.