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SHADOW SCENT



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CHAPTER 1

RAKEL

Home has always smelled of cooking fires and desert roses that only release their perfume after sunset.

Home has always smelled of the first water for miles.

I lean out of my bedroom window and take a deep breath of night. When you fear you could soon lose something, you take every chance to savor it.

This is the place Father adopted after my mother died. An oasis on the road to nowhere, shaped like two cupped hands holding a pool of water safe from the greedy sand. Fish swim in the pool. Tortoises, too. Rock figs ring the shore, providing all the fresh fruit we can eat in season and enough to dry for the next turn. There are no leftovers. No luxury. But Father left the city and the Aphorain Province army when I was young to give me the chance of a carefree childhood. The simple, clear-aired life I loved.

Until the Rot.

Now home smells of Father dying.

With a sigh, I close the shutters and steal into the next room.

The bronze officer's sword still hangs on the wall. The symbol of the respect Father once commanded. But loved or scorned, once the Rot burrows under your skin, your moons are numbered. There are ways to extend the count, but that takes zigs. Gold zigs. Far more than I'll ever earn concocting village perfumes or salves to soothe sand-stinger bites. More even than what my best flower oils fetch on Aphorai City's black market.

With one skill to my name, I only have one option.

At least that's what I tell myself as I inch open the trunk at the foot of Father's bed. I tuck my prize—his signature seal—inside my robe.

“Rakel?”

My heart lurches. *Calm. He's out the front.*

I lower the trunk lid, ensuring the lock clicks back into place as if I'd never gone near it, and slip outside.

Everyone in the village has found sleep. Everyone except Father. He sits on a high stool against our mudbrick house, built using his own tweaks on military methods to withstand all but the greatest groundshakes. His experiments are the reason our home stands where others have crumbled.

Now his wooden crutch leans within arm's reach, his face lit by the last coals in the fire pit. Bergamot incense curls around him. The insects of dusk it repels have long scattered, but he likes the clean scent. Under normal circumstances, it'd be a waste. But I know I'd go mad if I had to live with the stench of my own flesh decaying.

“Couldn't sleep?” I keep my voice light despite the guilt, breathing as shallowly as possible.

Father draws me into a quick hug, careful to only let me touch his good side. “Ran out of willow bark.”

“I thought we had a moon's worth.”

He shrugs.

This is bad. Really bad. But it only strengthens my resolve and makes my plan easier to justify, easier to conceal.

“I'll pick up some supplies in Aphorai.” At least that part's true.

He shakes his head. “It's fine. Don't worry yourself.”

“In the sixth hell it's fine.”

“Watch your tongue.”

I stick my tongue out and go cross-eyed looking down at it.

Father chuckles. “I couldn't stop you from going if I tried, could I?”

“Not likely. Anyway, I already said I'd give Barden a ride. His leave

is up.” I shoulder my satchel and kiss Father’s stubbled cheek. “Try to get some rest, will you?”

He nods.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Footsteps scuff in the sand behind me. Right on time.

Barden’s sword belt and kilt are so new they still smell of the thyme used to cover the pigeon piss of the tanner’s vats. Behind that there’s familiar sweat, drowned out by the amber oil the Aphorain palace guards are required to wear to ensure they don’t offend any aristocratic noses. And I bet aristocratic eyes aren’t at all troubled by the way the oil gleams off muscle. In the few short months since he was accepted into service, daily training has filled out Barden’s chest, though it had already been broad enough to turn the head of half the people we grew up with in the village; as if he were Ashradinoran descended.

And doesn’t he know it.

“Barden.” Father greets my oldest friend. “Back to the service of our province’s illustrious governor?” There’s a faint note of bitterness in his voice as he struggles to stand—he’d served the Eraz of Aphorai before Barden was born.

Barden moves to offer Father his arm. “Can’t drag my feet if I want to get ahead.” He looks to me. “But nothing’s better than time at home.”

I avoid his eyes, straightening a satchel strap that wasn’t twisted in the first place.

Once upright, Father leans heavily on his crutch, the remains of his left leg—now barely reaching past his knee—hanging useless. I squint in the moonlight. Are his bandages wrapped higher than they were yesterday?

He limps toward the door. “I’ll see you tomorrow night, yes?”

I nod, not trusting my voice to conceal the lie.

When Father has retreated inside, I turn to Barden. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

Barden follows me behind the house. A mare and gelding wait beyond a post-and-rail fence, heads lolling, each resting a hind leg on the tip of a hoof.

Lil is the biggest horse Father has bred, bigger even than her older brother beside her. Father gifted her to me on my twelfth birthday, and we’ve been together for the five turns since. I named her after the lilaria from our village storyteller’s tales, because she’s blacker than the shadow demons of ancient legend, twice as fast, and with a temper to match. Father said the name was bad luck. But by that stage I didn’t give much care to Luck, or its cousin, Fortune—both had turned their backs to me. Lil was a demon, and we were going to suit each other just fine.

Now the demon wakes. Lil’s ears flick back as she moves toward us.

Barden’s steps slow. He eyes my horse. “She ever going to get used to me?”

“How many times have I told you it’s not personal? She doesn’t like anyone.” It’s at that moment that Lil chooses to swing her head over the rail and nuzzle my shoulder.

“Riiight.”

Barden hands me his gear bag, packed to bursting.

“Stenches, Bar. What have you *got* in here?”

He shrugs that off. “You’re still going through with this?”

I don’t trust myself to speak as I fasten his bag and my satchel to Lil’s saddle.

A huge hand stills one of my own. “It’s not too late to settle for an incense-grinder post, you know. It wouldn’t make the moons collide. You might even get used to it.”

Here we go again. Barden thinks things are as they are for a reason. That everyone has their destined place. That it’s written in the starwheel long before anyone is even old enough to know about the stinking starwheel. It’s one of the few things we’ve never agreed

on. I slip his grip and twine my fingers in Lil's mane, pressing my cheek to her neck, breathing warm horsiness as if hiding under a blanket.

"Powder rat wages are barely enough for one person." I look toward the house. "One *healthy* person. It's perfumer or bust. And it's *got* to be now. Father can't wait another turn."

Barden winces at the truth of it, then takes me by the shoulders. "There are other ways, Rakel. I'm climbing the ranks. Already sending half my wages to my sister. Soon I could support you, and your father." He steps closer and wraps his arms around me.

I take comfort from his familiar solidness, even though I can't leave it to him to solve my problems. By the time his ambitions bear fruit, it could be too late.

"And then," he murmurs into my hair, "you wouldn't need to take so many risks."

I tense. I love our village, but out here doing things differently means you've lost your way. The Eraz's perfumers, on the other hand, are rewarded for new creations. Richly rewarded. If I were one of them, I'd never have to worry about the price of the best supplies to slow the Rot and buy Father time. I might even discover new treatments. And I'd be able to make choices about the future on my own two feet, not kneeling in the dust for Barden's charity.

He straightens. "If you won't promise me that, promise me something else?"

Bravado won't fool him at this point, even if I did have the strength to muster it. I tilt my face up, but he's silhouetted against the moons and stars, expression hidden.

"Promise me you'll be careful," he says, voice husky. He lowers his chin and leans almost imperceptibly closer.

I duck away. "It's late, Bar. We should get going." I gather Lil's reins and set my foot in a stirrup.

With a sigh, Barden climbs up behind me. "Here." His voice is soft in my ear. "Lean back."

Despite this growing tension between us, he’s still my best friend. My *only* friend. And he’s always kept my secrets. I let myself relax against his chest. It’s a night-and-day ride to the city. May as well get some shut-eye.

“Lil,” I murmur, closing my eyes. “Keep Barden in his seat, would you?”



At times like this, I wish I had the nose of the next person.

Aphorai isn’t yet in sight when a breeze threads through the dunes, carrying the perfume of the city’s streets. One moment the desert is calm—there’s just Barden, my horse, and the lingering tang of the camel-thorn bush she crushed under her hooves some ways back. The next, I’m hit with a barrage of dried fruit, sour armpits, and everything ripe and rancid in between.

Barden gives my shoulder a reassuring squeeze.

I swallow down the urge to gag and give Lil a light tap of booted heels. I’ve got a meeting to keep.

The first building to appear above the dunes is the temple. The stepped pyramid hulks over Aphorai City like a crouched beast. One of the few structures to survive the centuries of groundshakes that heave and lurch underneath the province, believers say the temple was built by the gods themselves. Only way that theory has a whiff of truth is if your gods are indentured labor and a bottomless purse.

It’s not until Lil whickers and tosses her head that I realize I’ve tensed from shoulder to thigh, my hand straying to the silver locket tucked inside my linen robe. I lean forward to stroke my horse’s neck. “Sorry, girl.”

From this distance, the priestesses really do seem like their namesake—tiny firebirds climbing the temple’s main ramp in their

crimson feathered skirts. As they reach the top, a column of blue smoke snakes from the great altar and into the sky. It's followed by another, white and rare as a summer cloud. Then a spiral of orange, one of dusty green.

Barden nudges me as the final plume rises. Imperial purple.

"What's that about?" I ask over my shoulder.

He huffs. "No idea. Only officers are privy to Empire matters."

"Oh? Thought the garrison sergeant was sweet on you."

"Not *that* sweet."

"You aren't his type after all?"

He pokes me in the ribs. "He expects I'll marry a nice girl."

"It's not like you're the eldest," I scoff. Barden's a lucky younger sibling—free of responsibility to continue the family line. "You can be with whoever you want."

"Can I?"

I sigh. Walked right into that one.

My mind flails for a way to steer the conversation elsewhere, when the ceremonial smoke reaches my nose, stirring up embers of long-held anger.

The temple controls believers' lives with rules and rituals. It starts from your first breath. The richly priced ingredients burned in candle and brazier proclaim to the sky the spokes of the starwheel between which you were born—so that the gods will hear your prayers until death.

But there were no sacred scents burned at my birth. No treasured incense I turn to for prayer.

Mint, leather, rosemary, sweat.

Those were my first scents.

Mint soap, seasoned leather armor, and rosemary beard oil made from the plants that still grow in fired clay urns at our door. Father's unmistakable uniform. All mixed with the work he'd done that day in the garrison's training yards. Those four scents drifted around me as he carried me on his shoulders through the markets when we visited

Aphorai City. Even so young, it was easy for me to single them out: my own personal fortress against an onslaught of tanning yards and camels, sandsquab stew and the cheap incense of a back-alley salon.

But that was before the tiny blister appeared on the arch of his foot. Before the scab that cracked open day after day to reveal a slightly larger wound. Before the pain became too much for him to bear his own weight, let alone mine.

A flock of swallows twirls and dips above us, their chatter interrupting my brooding as they prepare to roost in the archer's holes along Aphorai's walls. *The only city fortifications unbreached across the Empire during the Shadow Wars*, Father used to say. Guess the groundshakes helped our province prepare for another sort of violence.

Today, the walls defend against the sun—hot as a forge as it melts toward the horizon, gilding the desert in molten metal. When we reach the fifteenth gate, Barden slides from Lil's back. A group of ragged children instantly appear from the shade, crowding around us. Barden laughs good-naturedly and opens his gear bag, handing out rock figs. So *that's* why he had it overstuffed.

He gives my knee a squeeze without having to reach up. "See you at the trials, then?"

I nod.

"And, Raket?" he calls over the children's excited voices.

"Yes?"

"Stars keep you."

I nod—Barden knows I've never said a prayer in my life—and ride on.

I leave Lil beside a fountain in a small square. She'd be less out of place if I'd taken her to one of the trade camps outside the walls, but that takes zigs. No matter. If this neighborhood is rich enough to keep a water feature in public, nobody will bother stealing a horse. Especially when most people think her more valuable in spit-roasted

chunks than she's worth alive. And if they did lay a hand on her? They'd probably lose it.

Lil snorts in indignation at being tethered and abandoned.

"What?" I ask, giving her flank a rub. "You hate the night market."

She refuses to look at me.

I rummage in my pockets for a servant-yellow scarf, wrapping it over the dust and tangles in my hair. Nobody from inside these shaded walls dresses for the desert, so I roll the cuffs of my robe to the shoulder in city style. My locket serves as a mirror to check my face isn't smudged with dirt. Then I dab a smear of the locket's contents at my temples, behind my ears, along my wrists. Beeswax imbued with hyacinth and lily, with a hint of clove. It's sickeningly flowery, but it will help me blend in as much as short sleeves and drudge colors.

I give Lil one last scratch behind the ear, then shoulder my satchel—carefully, so as not to jostle its contents. With my starved purse tucked well inside, I set out.

My route takes me at first along broad, palm-lined avenues. Servants in saffron robes pay me no heed as they run late errands. A tiny cat watches me from atop a wall, the scent of ripe persimmons floating from the garden beyond. I stride purposefully, trying to stay alert without looking furtive, all too aware of the moons of work I'm carrying in a few precious jars.

Overhead, the sky bruises to dusk, the last eddies of temple smoke tattered and frayed.

Good riddance.

Closer to the markets, the streets narrow. Spices mingle along them like old friends, undertones of sewer seeping below. Breathing shallowly, I weave through the stalls, swerving chicken sellers and squeezing between tables mounded with dunes of sumac and constellations of star anise.

Then I'm back under open sky. Stalls line the plaza, the wares more

decorative than useful, the air thick with dragon's blood incense. I take a deep gulp of the official scent of Aphorai—produced only by the Eraz's own perfumery. In this part of town, it smells more ambitious than aristocratic.

And behind it all, there's something terrible and familiar.

A man props himself against a nearby wall, a small wooden cart beside him. I squint in the fading light. Is he kneeling? No. His legs end above where his knees should be. Filthy, ulcer-damp bandages hang from the stumps, damp from the ulcers beneath. He hasn't got long.

Every passerby avoids his searching gaze. Servants study the flagstones. Merchants cover their noses with squares of perfumed silk and steer a wide path. When they're ten paces clear, the fabric flutters to the ground. Stall porters rush out to retrieve the scraps with long-handled tongs.

Superstitious fools. You can't catch the Rot just from breathing its stench: I'm living proof of that.

The man struggles to heave himself into the cart, but falters when a porter prods him with the tongs, prattling about calling the city guards.

My fists clench and unclench at my side. I stride over, pushing past the porter to crouch next to the man. "Take my arm."

He grimaces as we work together to settle him in his cart.

I rummage for the near-empty jar of willow in my satchel. It's the last of my personal store, but I'll be picking up supplies soon enough. "Here. It'll ease the pain. Best taken in kormak. But not too much," I warn, eyeing his bandages, "or it'll prevent clotting and you'll bleed."

"Thank you," he says, voice thick.

"Do you have somewhere to go? Can I help you get there?"

"I'll be fine." We both know that's a lie.

"Are you sure?"

He glances across the plaza. A commotion confirms the porter has found a patrol. "You should be on your way."