

Chapter 13

"The river," Del explained as the front rank of Fighters set foot on the wooden decking of the stone bridge, "is called Serena's Lament."

"Who was Serena?" Kit asked.

"And what's a Lament?" Z'rus added.

"Serena was the name of a woman who died here, pining away after a man she wanted to be with," Bree's voice went dark and ominous.

"That's the story, anyway," Del said. "No telling if it's true or just a sort of legend that got attached to the place."

With no oncoming caravan, the horses and carts were free to move straight down the centre of the bridge where the decking looked strongest and most stable. Still, the horses resisted slightly and the Merchant Master had to coax them.

"You didn't tell me what a Lament is," Z'rus reminded them.

"It's a sad song or a poem," Bree told him. "Usually about someone who died or something like that."

Tara's gone quiet, Zhair'lo said. Ever since that experiment after we left Gellick. Everyone else has recovered from the shock of Secret Talla Upgrades, but she's still really, really cold.

Has she Served you since? Talla asked.

No, I think I'll have her tonight.

Maybe you'll figure out what's up, then.

"So this Serena got really attached to one guy?" Kit asked.

"It's a sort of life lesson," Bree explained. "We get told this story when we're really young, about how monogamy is really harmful. You guys never hear it?"

The four male Fighters, walking in the front rank, turned around and walked backwards.

"Okay," Del said. "So this young girl, Serena, she had really strong feelings for this boy, slightly older than her. It was a thing back then that people lived in houses with their mothers and fathers, right? So, Serena likes this guy, and she's pursuing him."

"He was pursuing her," Tara corrected.

"Maybe in your version," Bree said. "I heard it the other way."

"Anyway," Del interrupted with a roll of her eyes. "Pursuit took place."

Del glared at the other two Fighter girls in turn before continuing.

"But the boy's mother and father decided he should be attached to a different girl."

"Fine," Tara said.

"Serena harassed her parents, harassed his parents," Del went on with a sigh. "She really put up a big fight about it, disturbing everyone around her. It's really a long and archaic story involving lots of spying and bribing."

"But the upshot is," Tara made a spinning hand motion like she wanted the wheels of the story to speed up, "that she tries to prove this guy really belongs with her by leading him to this river."

"In our version, there are some ruins downriver," Bree corrected, pointing to the north.

"They are supposedly the site of this guy's family home, where Serena came to visit while they were having a feast of some kind."

"A feast celebrating the monogamous union of the man that Serena wanted and some *other woman* his family had chosen," Del went on, frowning at the repeated interruptions. "And she decided the best way to prove her man's true feelings was to throw herself in the river and await his rescue."

"And she drowned instead," Tara finished, making a satisfied double clap-and-wipe gesture with her hands. "Because that's what happens to stupid monogamous people. Wonderful lesson learned by all."

Zhair'lo gave her a wry tilt of his head to which she replied with a glaring, sarcastic smile.

"No one thinks this actually happened," Del pointed out.

"I totally do," Tara put in.

"Me, too," Zia said.

Del inhaled and exhaled.

"The fact that we all have different versions of the story should tell you how unreliable it is," Del went on, ignoring the girls and focusing on the boys. "It's an object lesson, like any play they put on in Form during a Festival."

"Or it shows that there was a real woman named Serena," Tara went on. "And she died down river doing something stupid because of a man. And we can learn from her stupidity."

"Sure," Del rolled her eyes.

They reached the end of the bridge and stepped back on the solid ground of the cart path.

"At this pace, we won't be in Salicia by tomorrow night," Zhair'lo said, looking ahead and thinking about how much he preferred the ground over the decking of the bridge. "It'll be the day after, instead. And then we have to go on a boat, I guess."

"I guess," Del said.

Before breakfast, Talla caught up with Zhair'lo at the edge of the encampment, capturing his hand to bleed off their pent up energy, the glow racing off their bodies well hidden by the morning fog.

"Learn anything last night?" Talla asked.

"Tara plays it close," Zhair'lo shook his head. "She was worried about something in Turiksa, then in Gellick and now, whatever it is, she thinks it's going to be in Salicia."

"This boy, we're thinking?" Talla asked.

"It's a person," Zhair'lo said. "Maybe a boy she liked - or got caught with - I don't know. She's really fuzzy inside the mesh. Her mind has it buried deep and doesn't want to think about it, but she's really eager to find it underneath. I can just barely detect her real feelings. But there's also a bit of - it's almost like *hatred* honestly. Like maybe it's the way we feel about Sonja."

"Some kind of revenge plot?" Talla's voice dipped into worry.

"I don't think so," Zhair'lo said. "Not like us. It's more a kind of resentment. Maybe. She's been chasing it this whole trip."

"Ugh," Talla grunted. "She'll probably just push it out to Prima and beyond. I mean, how can you search a whole city anyway? How do we know she didn't just miss whoever it was? It's

not like she can just go ask at the Records Office, 'Where did the boy named such-and-such go?' That would be way too obvious and get her in so much trouble if they have a record of her crime."

Zhair'lo shrugged, trying to mentally show Talla how certain Tara had felt. They started walking towards the campfires and the scent of the morning's food.

"She wasn't willing to talk about it," Zhair'lo said. "No matter how I pushed, she just changed the subject. Seemed pretty happy, though."

"Everyone's happy," Talla rolled her eyes. "We're headed to Salacia and then our first ride on a ferry."

"True."

They made to join the others at a large outdoor table, but didn't have time to sit down as the cooks chose that moment to call everyone over to get their bowls of oatmeal.

"Another day of travel until we hit the bridge to Salacia," Del commented as she lined up.

"Another bridge?" Kit asked. "I thought *that* was the river back there."

"Nine hells, no," Zhair'lo put in. "The river between here and Salacia is way, way wider. I've seen the maps."

"The next river was actually useful, defensively I mean, in the old days when there were still barbarians between the river and mountains," Del added. "You'll see."

They took their oatmeal and Del nudged Zhair'lo aside from the others as they walked back to their table. The fog, still billowing about, gave them a stitch of privacy.

"Are you prepared to try again?" Del asked. "Tonight?"

"Try what?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"An upgrade," she said. "Out in the forest somewhere."

"Won't that piss off Tara and-"

Del interrupted him with a hiss and a wave of her hand.

"Tina is willing to be the target," Del said. "She's already got one Abundance so no one will notice if she gets a little bump."

Zhair'lo looked at Del in shock.

"What?" she asked.

"You're willing to break a rule like this?" he asked. "You?"

"First of all," Del somehow pitched her voice to sound stern without actually raising its volume. "No one's ever actually told me a rule about this. Stealing Synergist? Sure. Messing with the schedule by switching assignments? Sure. All kinds of rules in the Augmentation Chamber. But rubbing up against somebody's breasts and coming on somebody else? Weird, sure. Not the way we do things, sure. But there's no *rule* that says two women can't Serve one man and use their bodies for him any way they want."

"Uh-huh," Zhair'lo glared at her with scepticism. "And second?"

"Second," Del looked around. "We need to know. I need to know. Talla and you are breaking every expectation and limit I was ever taught about and I have to know what's going on."

"Still not buying it, Del," Zhair'lo folded his arms.

He watched the emotions playing across her face. The first expression, indignation, tried to push Zhair'lo to obey. As a woman, intent on taking Within upgrades and becoming a leader, she hadn't ever thought about having to justify her behaviour to a man. He ought to be simply

obeying her orders and collapsing before her stern countenance.

Her attempt to intimidate him faded as she realised Zhair'lo had long past the point where fear of women could push him around. She couldn't *make* him perform for her.

Del pursed her lips and looked around in the fog, watching her squad mates pass them by with suspicious looks.

"You really wanna know?" her eyes widened with an alarming shine.

"Yes."

Del sniffed the air and glared at him.

"They tried to kill you, Zhai," she spat out.

"What?"

"The Goddess of Beshenna tried to kill you," Del said. "She looked at you - *she looked at the hero they sent on a suicide mission* - and she said to herself, 'let him fucking die because he's so dangerous'."

Zhair'lo found his vocal cords paralyzed and suddenly dehydrated in the blinding glare of Del's pain.

When have I ever heard her curse?

"It was bad enough everyone - every single senior person in Gern - seemed to know it was a suicide mission but they sent you anyway," Del pointed out. "But you survived. Talla saved you, probably, but you *survived*. And that Goddess meant to let you die anyway. Not just *let* you, but *make* you die."

"Del-"

"I *will* know why," Del said. "I *will* find out what in the nine hells is so dangerous about an eighteen year old boy with a funny telepathic link to an eighteen year old girl that we would rather kill him than reward him for his willingness to sacrifice himself."

Zhair'lo inhaled, feeling more than seeing Del's devotion.

Should I tell her? Zhair'lo wondered, feeling Talla listening in. *Tell her what the Goddess saw in us?*

Not here, Talla replied. *Not yet*.

"You really want to know that badly?" Zhair'lo asked. He jerked a nod toward their squad. "What about the others, though?"

"We don't tell them for now," Del said. "Tina is ready and Talla is okay with it. That's all we need."

We'll have to tell her, Zhair'lo beamed at Talla.

"And once we figure that out," Del added, turning to walk alongside Zhair'lo as they took their bowls off to join the others. She pitched her voice louder, as if carrying on a conversation they'd had the whole walk over to the table. "I want to know how good this communication link is between you and Talla. How far does it reach? How clearly can you send words or numbers? Pictures, maybe?"

Del prattled on eagerly, covering her strange outburst of moments before, as she approached the table. Tara wrinkled her nose at all the talk of telepathy but said nothing.

Zhair'lo sat on soft grass, facing the waning fire, leaning back on an appropriately

shaped log, Talla and Tina snuggled up closely on either side of him.

"How exactly is this not going to be suspicious?" Zhair'lo asked, basking in the warmth of the two girls.

They had just watched the rest of his squad pair off and head to the tents for a night of Service.

"I rigged the schedule," Del said.

"What?" Zhair'lo tried to sit up, but only succeeded in irritating the girls leaning on him.

"You know that I make up the schedule, right?" Del glared at him. "For who Serves whom?"

Tina and Talla rolled their eyes and turned their heads to eye Zhair'lo.

"How did you think it got done?" Talla asked.

"I don't know," Zhair'lo protested, putting his hands up defensively. "That's all decided by some mysterious bunch of women inside the Temple, so I figured you just - I don't know..."

"Do you see a Temple here?" Del asked.

"I figured you got assignments before we left or something," Zhair'lo said.

Tina sighed and snuggled back into Zhair'lo's arms.

"We actually take a class on this," Del explained. "At least in Form. You're given a party and a journey time and you have to work out a fair and mixed Service schedule."

"Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Dispositions," Talla chimed in, indicating that Endowment gave similar lessons.

"Asymmetrical?" Zhair'lo asked.

"Unequal numbers of men and women," Del said. "Weird age groupings. Then you have to plan out the nights of Service so everyone gets a turn as fairly as possible."

"Anyway," Tina groused, sitting up and facing Zhair'lo.

"Anyway," Del said. "Everyone trusts me to do the schedule, so I made sure all the right people are busy right now. Then I made it so Tina was assigned to Serve you, and Talla and I were free."

"And they've all gone to bed," Tina said, her neck twitching with an impatient tilt. "So?"

"I wanted to give them a bit of time," Del held up her hands defensively. "Make sure they've forgotten about us. Tara and Zia are really touchy about this whole thing."

"And you aren't?" Tina asked.

"No," Del told her. She looked at Talla. "You got the blanket?"

"Yes," Talla said. She pointed down the slope at one of the farther tents. "And I left a bucket of soapy water in that one down there."

"Let's get going, then."

"I mean," Zhair'lo said, looking down at Tina with her mouth full of his erection. "I'm not the one who gets in trouble for this."

"Assuming we're actually breaking a rule?" Talla asked. "True. It'd be our dumb asses getting whipping when we reached Salacia."

"Assuming my own squad would report me," Del shrugged. "They'd probably have to make a rule up, though. Or really dig through some old book to find something totally unrelated they could charge us with."

Tina gently stroked the base of Zhair'lo's erection, waiting for some signal from him.

"You still think this is normal?" Zhair'lo asked.

"Normal? Nine hells, no," Del said. "But they can't whip us if we're not breaking a rule. We're inside a tent. Tina was assigned to Serve you. Tina *is* Serving you."

"We're trying to violate the Temple's control of Upgrades," Zhair'lo said. "They're not going to like that."

"Then they have to write a *rule*," Del said impatiently. "The Temple doesn't punish people for intentions and - I don't know - *illegal desires*? You get punished for acting on it. The fact that two girls want to give each other orgasms doesn't mean they get punished. They get in trouble if they *act* on it."

Tina slid her mouth off of Zhair'lo's erection and frowned.

"Yeah," she said. "Enforcement on that one is pretty rare, though."

"*Not in Form it isn't*," Del emphasised.

"Not in *Iron and Tight*, you mean," Talla reminded her. "The Facial girls..."

"Don't get me started," Del waved her off. She looked over to Zhair'lo and asked, "Are you ready?"

"Looks like," Zhair'lo waved down at his genitals.

Tina nodded in satisfaction and moved aside to sit with her legs curled up beside her as Talla sat down at Zhair'lo's feet.

As Talla unlatched the sashes of her top from her skirt, Tina made a little gasping sound.

"You okay?" Zhair'lo asked her.

"Yeah," Tina said, never taking her eyes off Talla's breasts. "I'm hoping I can have a bit of that today."

"Hopefully not too much," Del said. "This is just a test."

"I don't know how to control it," Talla said as she laid on her back. "No one's trained me to do Upgrades."

"Do your best," Del replied as she knelt behind Talla's head.

While Zhair'lo moved into position straddling Talla's stomach, Del dipped her hands in the bucket of water and then rubbed her warm, soapy hands over Talla's breasts. She took a second double handful of water and poured that over Talla's breastbone and then generously massaged Talla's breasts until they glistened.

"You do realise," Zhair'lo prodded. "That *I* can tell how much I'm being charged with?"

"Oh, really?" Del asked.

"I've literally done dozens of upgrades," Zhair'lo pointed out. "Talla's quadruple, a slew of doubles and a bunch of singles."

"Oh," Del looked shocked as she took in this new information. "Boys can *tell*."

"It almost *killed him*, Del," Talla said. "I'm sure he can feel it."

"Right, okay," Del nodded and then looked up at Zhair'lo. "So then you decide when she's put at least one upgrade into and then-"

"And then bring it over here!" Tina interrupted triumphantly, taking off her own sashes and laying down on her side next to Talla.

Zhair'lo took a breath and lowered himself onto Talla's chest, leaning over so his erection could lay directly on Talla's breastbone. As before, Talla shrugged and tucked in her elbows to help contain her slippery breasts. Del scooped her breasts from the outside and compressed

them to form a tunnel around Zhair'lo's erection.

"I guess we don't have to worry about Seizing wrong, do we?" Zhair'lo asked as he started thrusting against Talla's breasts.

"No," Del said.

She grimaced as she lost her grip on Talla's breasts and set them jiggling back into place.

"Tough to hold onto," she said as she tried again.

"Let me help," Tina said, "You do the right, I'll hold the left."

Using one hand at a time Tina pushed inward on Talla's left breast. As her hand slipped up and over, she brought the other hand in and kept the pressure up.

"Nice," Del said, emulating the procedure on Talla's other breast.

"This really shouldn't take three people," Talla said with a frown, a mild disapproval in the glare she alternately beamed at one girl and the other.

"Synergist doesn't slip like this," Del pointed out.

Zhair'lo wobbled a bit and stopped thrusting. He shook his head and his body became sure again.

"Seized," he announced quietly and returned to shoving his erection through the soapy tunnel the three girls had created for him.

"Tell us when," Del said, continuing her massage. "We don't need Tina's boobs *too* obviously big."

"Take all the time you need," Tina said, her enthusiasm for her task palpable.

"It's a lot," Zhair'lo's voice stayed quiet as he concentrated. "I mean, It's coming pretty fast."

"Don't hurt yourself," Talla's voice filled instantly with concern. "I don't know how to control how much I'm giving you."

"There's training for that," Del explained, clutching Talla's breast firmly as she thought about it. "But I haven't had it either."

"Ow?" Talla stared at Del.

"Huh?"

Talla nodded at the death grip Del held on her breast.

"Oh, sorry!" Del jerked her hands back and returned to her gentle massage.

Zhair'lo continued to bump against the underside of Talla's soapy breasts very slowly.

"I think... I think we're good," he said, feeling the sweat beading on his forehead. "That's at least one. Yeah. At least one."

Tina and Del released Talla's breasts as Zhair'lo sat back.

"Do I need soap?" Tina asked as she sat facing Zhair'lo.

"May as well," Del said. "If it works, we'll try it again without soap. But-" she frowned at Zhair'lo "-he can probably only do one attempt per night."

Tina unlatched her skirt and set it aside before dipping her hands in the bucket of warm water. She splashed the soapy lather over her chest, the water running over her naked body and making a wet spot on the blanket between her thighs.

"The Temple has never had me do two in one night, that's for sure," Zhair'lo said as he turned to point his erection at Tina. "But they could be wrong about that, too."

Tina wiped her hands off on the blanket, leaving them both a little wet, and took Zhair'lo

in hand.

"I guess we'll do it like this?" she asked the other two girls. "It's not like we have an altar."

"That would seem to make it more illegal," Del said.

"What?" Tina asked, absently stroking Zhair'lo.

"I mean, we'd have trouble pretending we didn't know what we were doing," Del explained.

"Why?" Tina asked.

"Tina," Talla rolled her eyes. "Right now, you're just jerking a guy off on your tits. You were assigned to Serve Zhair'lo tonight. You're doing your duty and we're here because we're so, so, so excited to help you Serve the Great Hero of Beshenna and make this fun for him."

"Oh," Tina nodded, turning to Zhair'lo to declare. "This is fun for you."

"Totally," Zhair'lo agreed.

"Alright," Tina nodded and started jerking more fervently. "Let's get this come out of you."

Tina rose up on her knees and pointed Zhair'lo at her breastbone. A strange silence fell over them, Talla biting her lip while Del watched on clinically.

"It feels ready," Tina whispered as her eyes widened.

"It *is* ready," Zhair'lo muttered back.

"We don't really have to be quiet, do we?" Talla asked. "I mean, there aren't any Enforcers around to jam rules down our throats?"

"I don't need Tara and Zia finding out," Del told her.

Talla grimaced.

"Here it comes," Zhair'lo sucked in a breath of air as he looked down into Tina's eyes.

"Yes!" she hissed at him. "C'mon. I want Talla's magic in me."

"My magic?" Talla asked, looking around the tent with an eye roll. "I'm sure I got it from Atreya."

"This is all the 'Temple' I need," Tina retorted back. "Your magic. Your bodies."

Zhair'lo moaned, trying to hold off his orgasm.

"Yes, yes, yes," Tina's voice syncopated to her jerking. "Yes!"

Tina squealed as Zhair'lo's erection twitched in her hand and expelled a stream of white fluid into the centre of her chest, splattering across both of her breasts.

"More, more, more," she muttered, jerking harder to match the pace of Zhair'lo's muscle spasm. "That. A. Boy."

With her right hand continuing to stroke, Tina rubbed Zhair'lo's semen into the frothy, soapy mixture of liquid over her chest, rubbing it carelessly and roughly over her hardened nipples, letting nothing go to waste, letting nothing wear out with time.

Tina leaned in close, milking out the last drop of his semen.

"Madra Zen," she squeaked. "I feel it! I feel it!"

"Burning?" Del asked.

"Warm, yes," Tina nodded.

She released Zhair'lo's erection and used both of her hands to massage her breasts and thoroughly soak the magic into her flesh.

"Working, working," she muttered.

"Glowing," Zhair'lo remarked, taking a weary breath.

"Swelling," Tina added. "Puffing up. Ow. I can feel my skin stretching."

Talla and Del looked worried.

"If they get too big, we can't hide it," Talla spoke their concern.

"Not too bad yet," Del winced.

"It's stopping," Tina sighed. "It's... it's stopped. I don't feel it stretching anymore."

Del blew out a breath and everyone relaxed, including Zhair'lo who took a seat in the circle of women.

"How do they look?" Tina asked, turning her upper body side to side for his evaluation.

Zhair'lo tilted his head and reached out his hands tentatively, raising his eyebrows.

"Go ahead," Tina told him, pushing her chest out in his direction.

With a couple squeezes and a lift, Zhair'lo gave her a nod.

"It feels like two and a half right now," he told her. "But I think... it has this weird puffiness that you get right after the upgrade. Like it's irritated. I bet, once it settles down, it'll look just like a normal two."

"So I only put one upgrade into you?" Talla asked. "You said it felt like more."

"It felt like *two*," Zhair'lo said. "I've done doubles, right? It felt like that."

"Maybe it was just slightly less than two?" Talla asked. "So you just kinda lose the fractions or something?"

"No," Del shook her head. "We should trust Zhai, right? He knows what two feels like. I think you gave him two, but Tina already had one. I'd have to go into a library and read about this, but I think you just gave Tina something she *already had*, and then some more."

Talla raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, it's weird," Del shrugged. "I've only heard things and the books on this sort of thing are restricted."

"But!" Tina exclaimed, her eyes fiercely alive with delight. "I've got a little bit of Talla's boobs in me now."

"I got them from Atreya," Talla pointed out.

"Still," Tina sniffed the air, refusing to be dissuaded from the triumph of her acquisition. "I got it from Talla."