

Phoenix

Daccari Buchelli

Copyright

All rights reserved. © 2017 Daccari Buchelli

No part of this publication may be copied, reproduced in any format, by any means, electronic or otherwise, without prior consent from the copyright owner of this book.

Published in the United Kingdom
by Buchelli Books.

ISBN 13: 978-0-9957683-1-4

ISBN 10: 0-9957683-14

Lady Arsonist

To some, she is a symbol of danger:
A Demoness of the flames.
Her touch, so fierce,
Turning all she sees to ash.

With hair like untamed wildfire,
Eyes of crackling embers.
Lips of hot branding Iron,
And perfume of burning indulgence.

To some, she is a symbol of hope:
A Goddess of the light.
Her touch, full of warmth,
Embracing the cold hearts of men.

But she has a weakness:
Her flames of Fire,
Will extinguish to Desire,
Until her heart is needed again.

-Alex Scrine, 2017.



A Brief History of Peradon

Peradon. Once a united land with four ruling families, now four Realms separated for the good of all. The two main religions: The Purists & The United Sect, waged war against one another, leading to violent disputes. While The United Sect wanted to exist in unity, allowed to worship their separate elemental deities, The Purists were disgusted by anyone different and decreed that only one God could bring them eternal light.

Desperate to stop their people from warring, the Four High Mages of the time constructed a grand tower to stand as a monument to peace. When even this could not slake the people's blood lust, it is said that a powerful Air Mage was tasked with blanketing the whole of Peradon in an all consuming storm. While the High Mages forged a new plan, those that dared to venture

outside forfeited their lives to the very elements they worshipped.

Growing desperate, each High Mage named a successor, before infusing their magic into four separate discs. Each was placed in a secure location and acted to split Peradon into four separate Realms, which would forever belong to one of the four seasons and house citizens who shared in the matching elemental power.

So it was that the citizens of Peradon abandoned their faiths and were forced to start over in their segregated lands. To bar these newly created Realms from attack are the borders; dark and insidious lands, like long barren graveyards, housing nothing but the bones of wandering vermin. People rarely pay a visit unless travelling between Realms and even then, it is no passing comfort. Four specially constructed bridges were formed to allow safe passage. However, should a citizen wonder too far, they would collide with magical barriers, which have been known to crush every bone in one's body.

With the great storm having abated, the four High Mages gave the last of their life force to protect the four discs and surrendered themselves to the world of the dead. Since the separation of the Realms many eras past, no-one dares to discuss religion. At long last, there was peace in Peradon. Or so it was thought.

Chapter One

YEAR C-4 Month 1/10

Arlas

Emperor Jugan had stared into the jaws of death before, this Arlas knew. They had both awaited today's meeting with something he would have described as akin to joy and yet he could not shake the panic that coursed through his veins. If the Seer's foretelling was correct, then Arlas would soon be put to work.

The oppressive walls of the throne room made Arlas quiver. He watched as Emperor Jugan nestled into the grooves of his white gold throne. Jugan was the power of the grand Frost Realm and this was the seat from which he governed his land. His eldest son Ryore was due to turn sixteen. This was a good time to consider marriage for most, but Arlas knew that Jugan had other plans. He wanted Ryore dead.

To see his plans through, Jugan had enlisted the help of a powerful young woman. Reiza. Peradon's latest Seer apprentice was said to be one of the most enchanting young women one could lay eyes on. Enchanting, but deadly.

The emperor grinned when two of his most trusted guards approached the doors to the throne room and allowed the little creature to enter. Arlas gasped at the sight of her. The young girl shuffled toward the throne, her body shaking from head to toe. Her white hair and fair eyes lent her an innocent appearance. In truth, her beauty was nothing to be fooled by, yet it still had Arlas captivated.

'Welcome Reiza,' boomed Jugan, 'Tell me, are you certain about the visions you sent word of? Your scroll was rather specific.'

Jugan's lips drew tight as he studied the child. It was strange how one so young could wield such power. She still looked but a novice. Nowadays, even that marked her as a precious commodity as most Seers were long dead, leaving the few that were born to fend for themselves.

'I am certain, your Grace. Your eldest son is destined to marry the enemy. If that happens, then there is no doubt that he will have secured your throne for future generations and doomed his beloved home realm.'

Fear crept into the emperor's eyes. His Eldest son, Ryore, was his crowning disappointment. Jugan had recanted his flaws to Arlas on numerous occasions, from his lack of reasoning, to a mind that seemed to be plagued by emotion, as no emperor should be.

Jugan eyed the young Seer, with her stark white locks and vexing beauty. The last of her kind. Her eyes roved about the glittering room, seeming to memorize every detail, from its cold blue walls to the harsh glare of the light orb above. *All that power, and all you do is stand there, shaking*, thought Arlas.

Reiza's visions had brought shocking details to light for both Arlas and Jugan. While they knew she was conveying the truth of what she'd seen, there were certain details that had caused Jugan's mind to rage. His eldest was never to ascend his throne. Ryore made a weak prince and would only make a more pitiful ruler. No. Jugan would plot his own son's demise and Arlas was prepared to help.

Jugan stared Reiza down.

'Have you told anyone else of these visions?' he asked.

'No Sire.'

'Good.'

Her honesty was to be admired.

'Step forward!'

Jugan's words were like ice, cutting across the blinding space.

When Reiza prepared to take a step, the emperor held up his palm.

'Not you child. Him.'

The emperor pointed directly at Arlas. Before now, Arlas had been content to wait in the shadows. He took a sharp breath and stepped out of his hiding place, cutting a towering figure in his stark black robes. He grinned at the way Reiza stared, in awe. Like a night-time shadow, Arlas glided along the cool stone floor, intent on reaching the waiting emperor. With him came the powerful sensation of Air Magic; a tingling that Jugan said started within the toes and gradually worked up the rest of the body. When the brilliant light hit Arlas' skin, every one of his solemn features was revealed.

Jugan chuckled at Reiza's stifled gasp. 'Do not fear him.' The emperor held his stomach from the raucous laughter. 'He is no more a thing of shadow than you.' As usual, Jugan was correct. Arlas stood before the child, his pale flesh reflecting the light of the room. What caught the girl's attention, or anyone's for that matter, were his eyes. Reiza gazed into them with a silent fear that Arlas had grown accustomed to. His irises were blood red. Like shimmering rubies, they stared others down, piercing into the deepest depths of their souls.

'Emperor Jugan, a pleasure.'

Arlas' deep voice reverberated off the walls. He performed a low bow before the emperor, his mane of silvery hair trailing down his neck.

'Welcome, Prince Arlas. You may rise.'

Arlas immediately straightened. He looked to Jugan as a servant would its master. He could feel his eyes glowing their fearsome red.

'Still dressed as the stealthiest of shadows, I see.'

Arlas grinned at the emperor's joke, a set of pointed fangs protruding from the base of his gums.

'I suppose you're wondering why I summoned you, Arlas.'
'The thought had crossed my mind, Sire.'

Arlas gave the emperor a good-natured wink.

'Young Reiza here is quite certain of the visions she's been having of late. She believes that the daughter of our greatest enemy is

destined to become Ryore's wife. As you can imagine, this presents a problem for me.'

Emperor Jugan worked his fingers into the soft flesh of his chin. 'If that were to happen, then Ryore would gain a firm grasp on my throne, particularly if he is able to produce a strong male heir. As such, I will be needing you to do me a favour.'

He shot Arlas a serious look, which would have stricken terror into any mortal man. But Arlas was no mortal. Despite his youthful appearance, he was an Air Mage; an individual known to live well into their hundreds, as long as they were willing to make the occasional sacrifice.

Arlas gave the emperor a polite nod, wondering what such a favour could entail.

'My price, Sire, for carrying out this *favour*'?

Jugan's gaze passed from the Mage to the young Seer beside him. Arlas followed the direction of his gaze. If Reiza's predictions were in fact true, then he would need to act swiftly. But, what could Jugan offer him? He was already immortal.

'Power,' came Jugan's answer. 'I can grant you access to magic that you've only heard of in your wildest dreams, provided you do not fail me, of course.'

Arlas considered the offer in silence. He scratched at a mess of stubble on his chin, nodding once to agree to the bargain.

'Good. As you know, I would like my youngest, Prince Fadius, to take my throne once I am gone. In order to make sure he becomes my successor, I need you to dispose of the girl who is destined to become Ryore's wife.'

'Sire, if I may?'

Jugan signalled for Arlas to speak.

'Why not simply do away with Ryore? After all, who would suspect a father of murdering his own son?'

Jugan's lips curved into a sneer.

'Alas Arlas, my eldest has quite the few tricks up his sleeve. He will be hard to take out. No, impossible. It would be better to break his soul and ensure that he cannot gain future claims to the

throne.'

Arlas nodded his understanding.

'And then, I can have Ryore for myself?'

Reiza's small voice had surprised him. It chimed out through the room, filled to the brim with desperation. Jugan waved his hand in the girl's direction.

'I suppose, so long as you are still pure when the time comes for him to wed.'

Jugan's guards, having seen the dismissive gesture, began to approach the elaborate throne. They were beefy men, with more muscle than any one man should have.

'Sire?' They gave brief bows, their eyes focused upon the Seer.

'Are we to escort the young Miss out?'

Reiza glanced up, clearly horrified. Tears had begun to form in her eyes as the large brutes pressed in at either side of her, waiting for the emperor's command.

'Please do. I've had enough of her visions for one day.'

'Yes, Sire.'

Arlas watched as each guard seized one of Reiza's arms, hauling her toward a pair of grand double doors.

'Sire. Wait!'

Her wilful protests echoed along the halls. Before long, they were no more.

'You know Arlas, I think this might actually work.' Jugan beckoned the prince towards the throne. 'Young Reiza named a Miss Violetta Flame as Ryore's future bride. She is the one I would like taken care of.'

'Is there any particular way you'd like her dealt with?' asked Arlas.

The emperor rose up, out of his icy throne. His eyes locked onto the Mage.

'I would like you to put an end to Miss Flame.'

Arlas frowned. He understood what was expected of him. This was his chance to prove himself to the emperor.

'Arlas, you look troubled. Tell me, does this task displease you?' asked Jugan.

'It seems like a bit of a gamble, Sire.'

'Life is a gamble! All we can do is play the cards that we are dealt and make a little extra of ourselves if given the chance. I'm offering you the cards that lead to power and influence. Play them!'

Arlas contemplated his choice of actions. Immortality was lonely without a partner and he did despise being seen as inferior to his brother, Jork. Perhaps Jugan could offer the power he sought.

'Now, I'll ask again,' called Jugan, 'Does this task displease you?'

Arlas stared into his master's eyes.

'No Sire. The task is mine to carry out.'

Jugan relaxed back into his throne.

'Good.'

He dismissed the boy with a wave of his hand.

'Oh, and Arlas?'

The Air Mage glanced across his shoulder.

'Do you think your brother will suspect?'

'No Sire. He will not suspect a thing.'

Chapter Two

Violetta

'Keep up, Darius!' Violetta cried.

The moat islands were her favourite place to play, with no shortage of hiding spots and with trees as thick and as tall as the palace towers that shadowed them. The gentle trickling of water warned Violetta away from the edges of the bank, where the moat would eventually curve into the Aum River.

Her brother, Darius, hurtled toward her. The ball they'd been chasing rolled down the incline, gathering speed.

'Oh, no you don't.'

Darius was still some distance away when Violetta pelted forward, after the gift. She strained to keep an eye on the stunning patterns. They had never failed to bring a smile to her delicate features. Even amid the excitement of the game, she could recall Lord Jork's words when he'd presented it to her.

'Violetta, dear child. Let this always aid you in your troubles. Let it heal any holes in body or spirit.'

'Hey!'

Violetta was pulled out of her reverie by Darius' call. He was gaining on her now and made no attempt to slow his pace.

'Keep up, slowcoach!'

Violetta met his gaze and grinned. There may have been three years between the pair, but Violetta could still outpace him.

Despite his exhaustion, she saw Darius smile. It was a rare smile that her brother only gave her. There was a hint of playfulness at its edges, that showed every bit of his love for his sister.

'You know, I will beat you one day, even if I die trying.'

Violetta could feel blood rushing to her ears. She heaved in

several short breaths as she tried to maintain her focus on the ball. It was hurtling down the banks now, with little intention of coasting to a stop. Her brother's heavy footfalls vibrated against the packed earth, like the thrumming heartbeat of the world itself.

'Getting close!'

Violetta weaved past her favourite tree, where it was said her mother had given birth to her. She spied the ball rolling past its roots.

'Hey! You're going to kill yourself at the pace you're going!'

Violetta jolted. She hadn't realized just how fast she'd been sprinting. Darius had drawn up alongside her, his arms, which had begun to pack on muscle, stretched out in a vain attempt to steady her.

Violetta giggled and chanced a sideways dodge, intent on trapping the ball beneath her skirts when her legs buckled. Time passed in a prolonged wave. She could feel her heart beat in her ears as she watched the ground rush up to meet her.

'Violetta?'

With a throbbing head, she blinked her eyes open. Darius knelt over her, his face framed by a glowing mass of stars. Wait. Stars? Was it really that late? Violetta studied the look on her brother's face. Concern etched his every feature, one arm extended toward her, glistening with traces of sweat.

'Here.'

Violetta watched her body respond. Her hand met his, the skin oddly cold to the touch. It almost seemed to vibrate. No, not his hand. Something else.

Darius pulled her to her feet. Once Violetta had regained her balance, she felt the sensation grow stronger.

'Darius, can you feel that?'

A tingling sensation seeped into her bones. It pulsed through her, prickling the hairs on the back of her neck.

'Darius, something feels wrong.'

Violetta turned and was surprised to find Darius facing away. His tall frame appeared to have frozen beside her much loved tree,

his face turned up toward the sky.

'Brother? What's wrong? Tell me.'

Violetta followed her brother's gaze.

Darkness stole over her. Violetta could see the storm a mile off and it showed no signs of letting up. She flinched as she felt something hit her face. Water? Darius began to stir, but Violetta's eyes remained fixed on the sky. She had heard of rain. It was said that the Air Realm was frequently visited by such cool showers, but never had she heard of a storm in the Flame Realm. At least, not since the Almighty Storm of the Ancients.

Violetta felt her courage flee her. She let out a high-pitched squeal; a reaction to the hands that had forced themselves around her arms.

'Shh, it's just me.' Darius stroked the golden waves of her hair. 'We must get inside. Understand?'

Violetta gazed into her brother's dark eyes. She nodded.

'Yes.'

'Good, we haven't got long before the storm hits.'

Violetta dove toward Jork's ball. She trapped it between her wrinkled skirts, gathering it up in her slender arms. The rain gathered speed.

'Darius, I've got it!' she squealed. Silence greeted her. 'Darius? Where are you?'

Violetta could hear raised voices in the distance. They were muffled, likely from inside the secret passage they had used to get down here.

'Darius?' She spotted a limp shape stretched across the lap of her tree. 'DARIUS!'

Something struck Violetta hard in the shoulder, lifting her clean off the ground. Her mouth formed a silent scream as she flew through the air, clinging tight to Jork's ball. To Violetta's surprise, she landed on her feet.

Violetta's vision swam, her shoulder screaming in agony at a chunk of ice that had pierced the flesh. She glanced about, searching for Darius when something else zipped past her ear.

Violetta tried to put thoughts of the pain aside. She gazed above her, where the sky had become a blinding white.

Violetta's fingernails dug into her ball and the agony she felt appeared to diminish. Her eyes snapped down to her shoulder, which only moments ago had been spiking with pain.

'That's not possible,' she gasped.

Violetta's skin was pale and smooth, not a cut or scratch anywhere in sight. Her eyes wandered down to Jork's ball, before flocking back to the pale skies above. This had to be a dream. The sky here wasn't white. It was a bright and beautiful blue, always.

Remembering how Darius had been struck, Violetta returned her gaze to her tree.

'Darius?'

Her legs carried her over to him, aching with the sudden chill.

Violetta was unsure of what she was going to find. She drew close and saw the tree's tangled roots embracing Darius. His mop of dark hair was slick with the rain, his eyes only just glazing over.

'No.'

Violetta knelt down and gasped at the sight of her brother's chest. A large needle of ice had speared his flesh, spilling ruby liquid around its edges. A banshee's wail exploded from her. All sound escaped Violetta's world. The edges of her vision darkened, leaving her only with eyes for her brother.

'Good Lord, Prince Darius!'

Clarisse's harsh voice cut through the silence. The elderly nursemaid sprinted past, her cold stare fixed on the limp form of their Realm's heir. She bent down to examine the prince's wounds, shooting an angry scowl Violetta's way.

'Just what did you think you were doing?' she snarled.

The veins in her forehead began to rise, as though attempting to escape from their fleshy prison.

Violetta's face was devoid of emotion. She could do little more than stare when a startled scream sounded nearby.

'My boy!'

'Mother?' Violetta got back to her feet. 'Mother, ice is coming down from the sky. We must go. Darius said-'

Violetta locked eyes with her parent. Tears ran afresh down Queen Isobel's face as she raced through the rain to reach her child. Her golden curls, which were usually pinned atop her head, now hung loose and trailed limply down her back.

No-one noticed the shards of ice soaring past. Violetta wanted to run. She wanted to warn her mother before it was too late, but her body felt like it had frozen in place. She strained against her fear with all her might.

'Mother, we must go! Now!'

The queen darted across to the great oak tree. She scooped up the body of her only son, wailing against his dark mop of hair. 'Darius!'

The despair in her voice matched the feelings that stirred within Violetta.

Queen Isobel refused to part from her son. He lay there, still as stone, his flesh growing colder by the moment. Violetta would remember this day for the rest of her life. She clung tight to Jork's gift and prepared to race, to grasp hold of her mother, when another shard shot out of the darkness. A struggling scream filled the air. It was a scream that would haunt her forever.



Violetta swallowed her fear. Her heart thundered within her chest as she thought of what her father would say. She and Clarisse stepped over the sopping thresh-hold, lowering their burden for the briefest of moments. They knelt down, panting with the effort of the bodies they'd carried. Both were exhausted and in no fit state to venture on.

Violetta's skirts were bundled and soaked, her body trembling as she raised her head. When the colossal doors

permitted them entry, the sodden entourage were gazed upon with fear.

'Goodness!'

Waiting guards clapped eyes on the unconscious forms of the queen and her son and rushed forward to unburden the women of their still forms.

Violetta's lips trembled as her mother and Darius were laid, quite unceremoniously, upon the grand hall's floor. She heard maids being called to fetch warm towels as tears slipped down her pale cheeks. She stared at the bodies that lay on the floor. *It was my fault. If Darius and I hadn't gone down to the Moat Islands...*

King Eagan appeared from around a bend, having been summoned by the senior staff. As soon as he saw the bodies, he froze. Violetta stood there, bedraggled and carrying Lord Jork's ball. She tried to blink. Her head felt too heavy for her shoulders to carry. She could feel that same weird energy from before, as though it were calling to her, mocking the unfortunate situation.

Violetta looked to her father, who hadn't yet spoken a single word. He was gazing down at his wife and son. Both looked so frail, their bodies frozen in an eternal embrace as Queen Isobel cradled her first born child. Her mother's energy, her very essence, seemed to have fled from her stiffening form. Even her familiar fragrance; the jasmine and lilies Violetta had adored, was no more. She could do nothing but stand there, powerless. Even her father; a mighty king, could neither move nor speak with the pain that held him. He bent over his precious wife, knowing that it was too late to do anything but arrange a burial.

It was late into the night when her father sent for her. The ice storm lingered, rain joining to lick at the palace windows. The servants had done all they could until the royal bodies could be taken away. There was, after all, a limit to one's duties as far as death was concerned.

Violetta stood at her chamber window, her figure pale in the moonlight as she digested her father's news. *Dead?* Part of her didn't want to believe it, yet how could she not? She had seen it

with her own eyes. She felt her world growing distant; her surroundings like some grand illusion given to her by a merciless god. Sounds grew fainter, moments dragging out as though stretched by some elaborate machinery. Even the rare sight of the twin moons in her realm could not save her.

The undertaker had arrived not long ago. Violetta watched, helpless as the funeral carriage drove away from the palace; away with her beloved mother and brother in tow. Her nails gripped the edge of the window frame. She was convinced that they could have been saved.

'Why?' She whispered into the night.

She felt so helpless, staring out of her bedroom window. She could still feel her father's pain when he'd arrived to find his wife and son lying cold on the sodden floor. And here she was, in the room that had only last night housed the sleeping form of her brother.

Violetta leant forward, watching the rain spatter against the window. Its furious pounding imitated her heart as tears began to pour down her face. Her broken sobs restored the sound to her world, her body quivering with each uneasy breath. If only the storm would envelop her. She wanted to be with her mother once more, to hear her soothing voice as she drifted off to sleep.

Violetta sucked in a breath and stared down at the ball she held in her hands. She shuddered to think of what it represented. She longed to be rid of the wretched thing, to simply send it out of existence so she could go and reclaim the family she'd lost. Her eyes zipped between the rain strewn window and the tiny sphere. What use was it now when the very object she held was the source of her family's demise.

Violetta struggled against the free flow of emotion. She could feel her body heating, but paid her growing rage no heed. Her body tensed, veins bulging with the effort of her slight form containing such raw power. She screamed into the darkness and her anger gave birth to flame.

Fire sprung from Violetta's tear-streaked palms, gorging

itself on her delicate flesh. The beauty of the flames danced in her eyes.

'Violetta!'

The princess whipped round, her face contorted in the throes of rage. King Eagan appeared, his face stern.

'What in the name of Peradon do you think you are you doing?' The ends of his hair shimmered, igniting at the tips. Violetta could see him searching for restraint, his eyes focused on the flames she wielded.

'Well? Do you think magic is a game? It was rogue magic that killed your mother, and Darius!'

Violetta didn't trust herself to speak. Instead she aimed one hand in the air and allowed her power to consume her. Crimson flames ignited about her, enveloping her from head to toe. She turned back to the window, peering through the heavy downpour that was no match her tears, for her worst nightmares had been realized.

'Enough child.'

A sigh escaped her father's lips as he drew close, resting a large hand upon her shoulder. Her roiling flames immediately extinguished.

'Father, I—'

'You must not be so careless, child.'

Violetta could see the pain in his eyes. She reached out to take her father's arm, but he drew back, keeping her at bay.

'Magic is dangerous and such power requires extreme caution. Do you understand?'

With a stifled sob, Violetta nodded.

'Here.'

Violetta felt herself being embraced, allowed to nuzzle into her father's side. He stroked her golden fall of hair; the same coppery shade as her mother's had been.

Violetta withdrew from her father's arms and pulled him to sit by the rain-flecked window. Together they strained to see the under-taker's carriage as it disappeared into the pouring rain. There

they sat, Violetta with her knees pulled up to her heaving chest, in the company of her only family.

Chapter Three

Month 2/10

Arlas

'Arlas, my boy. How goes the plan?'

The forlorn prince stepped into the throne room, his body weary from his strenuous task. A month had passed since he'd been charged with Jugan's favour and the emperor looked just as happy to see him. How could Arlas tell him that he'd failed in his task? He peered through the harsh light of the throne room, his stomach roiling the closer he got to his master. The emperor wore a sly smile and stood up to welcome the Mage.

Arlas stopped short of the glistening throne, his eyes fixed on the stone floor.

'Arlas?'

The prince refused to speak even a word. He heard Emperor Jugan sink into his throne, his bulbous fingers drumming on the arm, restless.

'Come now, Arlas, why so silent?'

The emperor's words only made him more nervous. Arlas couldn't bring himself to gaze up at him, for fear that he would be struck to the ground.

'The thing is, Sire, we may have run into some complications.'

'We?'

Arlas faltered.

'Forgive me, Sire. I meant *I* have run into complications, of course.'

He bowed low, ignoring the trails of sweat that coursed down his back.

Silence stretched on between the pair. The emperor appeared to

digest his news slowly.

'I...see.'

Arlas was glad of the broken silence. His eyes raised up, to find Jugan's face pursed in a look that spoke of tart lemons. That one glimpse was enough to make him stare back at the floor, when a foreign sound commanded his attention.

Jugan's eyes snapped down to him.

A harsh sneer bent his lips as he began to draw magic from his core. Violent waves of frost rippled into life before Arlas. They surrounded Jugan's clenched fists, threatening to storm the Mage's space. Arlas bit his lip. His eyes scanned the room for some means of escape. He felt his lip tear open, oozing the familiar tang of blood.

The Frost surrounding the emperor's fists grew thick. Tall waves of it appeared before him, promising to deliver Arlas into a world of pain.

'Are you sure there's nothing you'd like to add, Arlas, before I accidentally lose control of my powers?'

Arlas stared into the voids that were Jugan's eyes.

'I will try again, Sire. You have my word.'

A low crunch sounded overhead. Emperor Jugan was withdrawing his powers. Arlas watched in awe as tiers of frost magic zipped back into flesh and bone.

'Very well.' Jugan reached up to his face with one large hand, scratching at a patch of dark stubble. 'But, you'd do well to understand that you are not out of the woods yet.'

The emperor continued to stroke his chin in thought, as though considering all that Arlas had told him thus far.

'My youngest, Fadius, shall accompany you on your Quest. Better yet, so will Reiza. You shall remove Ryore from the throne by any means necessary and ensure that Fadius serves as his replacement.'

Emperor Jugan rose from his throne, frost forming back around his palms.

'Do you think Reiza would agree to such a thing?' Asked Arlas.

'She appears to be quite taken with Ryore.'

Jugan waved his frosted palm, as if he could dismiss the issue with a mere show of magic.

'Let me deal with her if need be.'

Arlas sucked the blood from his lower lip.

'Of course, Sire. And the princess?'

Jugan's fingers danced through the glistening air, creating symbols that would appear foreign to most.

'Forget her. It is Ryore you must focus your efforts on now.'

Arlas gave a weak nod.

'Yes, Sire.'

'Good.' Jugan brandished his hands in the Mage's direction. 'But heed my warning. You and your new accomplices shall complete your task by the end of year C-8. By then, my eldest son will have reached the age of twenty. You cannot allow him, at any cost, to produce an heir.'

Jugan's hands continued to spin of their own accord, sending coils of frost to shoot in Arlas' direction. He grinned as Arlas was accosted by a sharp stab of pain. It wormed it's way into the depths of the Mage's heart, where it would continue to pulse, now as much a part of him as his heart or lungs. Arlas glanced up at his better to find that Jugan's sneer had returned.

'That curse will not lift until your task is complete. Fail me again and even my youngest son's life shall be forfeit!'

Chapter Four

Violetta

Violetta lay in the folds of her bed-sheets. She thought of all the mornings she'd awoken, knowing that she had been blessed with such a caring mother who would hug her as soon as they'd meet in the hallway. Knowing how her brother would scold her if she hurt herself, then help to soothe her troubles away.

It had been a month since she had lost mother and Darius. Violetta found herself thinking back to their funeral. It had been a quaint affair, hosted by their neighbouring Realm, yet it now served as little more than a hazy recollection of coloured shapes and raw emotion.



Violetta loved travelling by carriage. The sights, the smells. Everything was new to her and that was the way she liked it. Today, things were different. There would be no joy or excitement; just a sight that would cause her heart to weep.

Her father had no need for guards to accompany them. King Eagan's magical abilities were legendary and were more than enough to obliterate even the most formidable of foes, should they be so bold as to attack their transport.

It hadn't been long before the landscape had changed, the heat little more than a whisper on the wind. As the carriage rumbled up to their destination, Violetta caught sight of the Earth Realm's Palace. The mighty building headed a slight incline and looked to be constructed from a towering rise of golden wood.

The funeral was to be held in the palace's private gardens. The carriage had passed marble fountains aplenty, each with water spouting from its top when the driver heaved back on the reins. The horses drawing the carriage slowed to a stop. 'Come, Violetta.'

King Eagan 's arms propelled his daughter out of the carriage, signalling for both driver and horses to take a well-earned break.

Violetta followed her father through a set of wrought iron gates. She could still feel his lingering anger from when she'd recently summoned her powers. She trailed her father's glittering form, noting the drooping heads of bluebells nearby.

Her father stopped short. Violetta glanced up and froze at the sight of twin coffins. They were perched side by side atop a ceremonial altar of polished wood. She felt her stomach drop. Here they were. Her lost kin.

As a child, Violetta had longed for the tales of the other Realms; of the breath-taking landscapes and strange delicacies that existed elsewhere. Now that she was here, she felt nothing. Her mind was numb to the beauty around her. From the apple and daisy scented air, to the shifting colours within the sunset sky. Nothing could penetrate the sorrow that bound her heart.

Standing there seemed like a cruel dream, designed to torment the weak of mind. Violetta saw her hand reach out toward the caskets when a fierce rustling sounded from the hedges behind. A tall gentleman emerged from the bushes, his brown hair softened by the light of a thousand candles, which seemed to have appeared alongside him. His floor-length robes, the colour of gold, glistened with every one of his steps.

'If it isn't the mighty Eagan himself.'

The newcomer extended his arm, his dark eyes passing between Violetta and her father. Violetta noted how her father reluctantly reached out an arm.

'Aemon, good to see you.'

The two rulers placed their palms together in greeting. Despite her father's warm smile, there was something about the

interaction that felt, to Violetta, somewhat forced.

'Violetta, this is King Aemon. Our host.'

Violetta brushed the skin on her arm as she took in the dark eyes of their host.

'It is good to meet you,' she said with practised grace.

The tension between her father and their host had not abated by the time the funeral was in progress. While King Aemon gave a touching speech, Eagan merely sat and stared. Rows of redwood chairs had been laid out before the caskets, seating all manner of exquisite beings.

Elves with flawless skin sat to the left, while pale humanoid figures ringed their right. A boy with corpse-like flesh and ruby eyes was just one of the few that had caught her attention. His piercing gaze passed over her, his tongue running the length of a set of fangs, as though contemplating whether to drink her blood.

A shiver ran the full length of Violetta's spine. Those eyes were hypnotic, born from the likes of hell below. She found her lungs suddenly gasping for air. The boy's eyes fuelled a rage within her, one that needed to be released.

'And that's why,' called Aemon, 'we shall forever remember Queen Isobel and Prince Darius.'

The silent guests had begun to applaud when they noticed Aemon's mouth fall open. Violetta flailed about as vicious flames sprang to life around her. She was powerless to stop them as they began to swirl about her form, extending out from her fingertips.

People screamed and began to flee from the grove as several bushes caught alight.

'Eagan!' Their host summoned Violetta's father to his side, all too aware that her power could kill countless members of his clan. 'We need to stop her! Her powers are out of control!'

Sure enough, the flames that had previously been restricted to Violetta's form, had begun to engulf the entire funeral arrangement. Violetta felt nothing, save for the emotional turmoil that rampaged through her. She thought she registered a glint of emerald green, before the blur of flames in her vision departed. A

sudden onrush of air overtook her, before her body crumpled to a heap on the ground.

'Violetta?'

Violetta's eyes attempted to open, but her eyelids were stiff and crusted with dirt.

'Violetta, can you hear me child?'

Lord Jork's familiar voice filtered through her subconscious.

Violetta blinked her eyes once more and slowly found them beginning to open.

The first thing that greeted her was a fierce pain as light pierced her eyes. She felt arms beneath her, hauling her up by her slender waist.

'My lord?' she asked.

'No, it's me.'

'Xyhoni?'

A pair of emerald eyes shimmered before her as King Aemon's honorary son pulled her to her feet.

'Yes.'

Violetta clenched her arms around him.

'Xi!' The tears were instantaneous. 'What happened? How did I—'

'Shh.' Xyhoni held her close, running his fingers through her golden hair. 'Don't fret, everything is under control now.'

He was so calm. Violetta glanced around the side of him, where the remnants of bushes trailed smoke into the air.

'I-I'm so sorry.'

She pulled herself back from the boy's grip and gazed upon his familiar form. Xyhoni stood before her, his warm copper hair swaying in the breeze. His eyes locked onto her, an opalescent emerald green. In other circumstances, Violetta could have lost herself in them forever.

'I didn't mean to,' she wept.

Xyhoni noticed her eyes darting around the grove.

'Don't worry about it. You couldn't have foreseen what would happen.'

Xyhoni had always found a way to lighten her grief. Violetta felt a warmth spreading through her veins. Unlike her power, it worked to soothe her. She wondered if she ought to smile. She didn't feel like it, but as she gazed into those beautiful eyes, she found the corners of her mouth beginning to curve.

'Xi, thank you and your father- Aemon, for this.'

She gestured around at the once enchanting service, its surrounding foliage now charred beyond recognition.

Xyhoni show her a half smile and Violetta felt her cheeks heat up. She peered up at him, while her fingertips brushed the side of her arm.

'I'm sorry for your loss.' Xyhoni's emerald eyes seemed to darken. 'Perhaps this will help to brighten your day.'

He clicked his fingers and a burst of leaves appeared out of nowhere, twisting around his outstretched palms.

Violetta gasped. As the flurry of leaves cleared her vision, she saw what Xyhoni had cupped in his hands. Stark against his olive skin was a single red rose, the signature flower of the Flame Realm. Violetta was at a loss for words, but graciously accepted it. 'T-thank you,' she stammered.

The tendrils of sorrow that strangled her heart began to unravel the slightest amount. Xyhoni's half smile made a re-appearance.

'May this rose brighten your darkest days.'



Violetta dragged herself out of her daze. Her vision cleared, leaving the image of the crimson rose Xyhoni had made her, entwined with a protective spell that would see it forever preserved.

There came a sudden knock on her chamber door. Violetta bolted upright.

'Violetta?'

Her father's voice cut through the wood of the door. Failing to answer him, she heard the click of the door's lock, undone by her father's magic. There was a brief pause, before his unruly beard appeared round the corner.

'Awaken daughter, for I have a grand surprise for you.'

Her father's voice echoed round her tired mind. He threw open her curtains, the harsh light streaming into her face.

'There. That's much better.' He strode over to his daughter's bed, seating himself upon its edge. 'Violetta, are you all right?'

His daughter's face was tear-streaked as usual. Violetta scabbled to hide her face in her hands, but her father gently pulled them back.

'It would be a shame to hide such a beautiful face.'

He traced slow semi-circles under her eyes, where the last vestiges of her tears clung to life. While his face didn't appear much better, he had accepted that some things could not be changed.

'Come now, as I said, I've a surprise for you.'

Violetta groaned. She squinted through the blinding light to where her father now stood by her dresser. She hated it when the curtains were opened. It always felt as though the light would burn her. Some days she wished it would, or that her powers would finally seek to consume her in their fiery rage. She revelled in the idea of being allowed to simply melt away, therefore escaping this miserable life.

Eagan returned to his daughter's bedside. His eyes were puffy and devoid of what little emotion he had to spare.

'Come now, Violetta.'

Violetta resisted her father's attempt to haul her out of her bed, thankful to have chosen a modest night-dress. She eventually managed to kick him away, dropping to the floor like a frightened pup.

'Perhaps I'll just wait outside,' he suggested.

With the door closed behind him, Violetta was left to her own devices. In her own time, she got to her feet, covering her

body as she made for the door. She may only have been twelve years of age, but she would go without a fight.

A thought struck Violetta as she reached for her chamber door. What sort of surprise could her father have planned? Suddenly, the idea of leaving her chambers made her blanch.

A knock upon her chamber door. *Again?* Violetta prepared to usher her father out, should he have returned when a young maid appeared in the open doorway. She approached the princess with due caution, her frail arms burdened with the weight of a beautiful dress, which Violetta was no doubt expected to wear.

Once the surprise of her unexpected guest had worn off, Violetta couldn't help but admire the garment that the maid held out for her to inspect. It was old-fashioned and far darker in colour than she had expected. Nevertheless, something about it resonated with her. She reached out to stroke the soft folds of fabric that would soon adorn her meagre frame.

Violetta sucked in a deep breath as the last burgundy layer was thrust over her head. It was stifling beneath so many layers, or *stages* as her mother had called them, yet the temperature appeared to calm her. Violetta shot a weak smile at the lurking maid, before stealing a look at herself in the dresser mirror. For once in her life, she felt beautiful. Flared sleeves tapered off at her wrists, with a gold tie hugging her slender waist. She made for the door, glancing back at that damned ball on her dresser. What it made her feel now was too shameful to contemplate.

Violetta tiptoed into the grand throne room. Its gold furnishings glared at her approach. She was fiddling with the waves of golden hair at her neck when she halted beside a towering figure. The face of a stranger stared back at her. A more beautiful woman surely didn't exist, for the stranger looked to be carved from the smoothest of marble. Violetta memorised her form from head to toe. She was the epitome of grace, her lips full, with eyes of a glistening green that beamed at the onlooker. She held herself like a true lady, forming a friendly smile as she gazed at the princess.

Silence stretched out between the pair, the air crackling with the tension of the moment. Violetta let out a grateful sigh when her father came into view. He wore a dazzling smile, which would have warmed her heart had he not have been so miserable a moment prior.

King Eagan took three long strides until he reached them. He gazed at his daughter in all of her finery, appearing to glow with pride.

'Father.'

Violetta bowed, prompting an unexpected chuckle from the king.

'There's no need to bow to me, my child.'

He brought his daughter's fingers up to his lips, where he pressed a tender kiss upon them. Violetta savoured the sweet moment.

'Do you approve father?'

She avoided looking up at the stranger.

'I do.'

Eagan's smile was warm and genuine. It was the steel which entered his eyes that caused Violetta to worry. She risked another glance at the stranger. Both tall and slender, they were certainly not what Violetta had been expecting. As they closed the distance, she felt herself shrink back. She looked to her father, seeking his guidance.

Noticing his daughter's worried expression, Eagan gently squeezed her hand.

'Worry not, child. All will be well.'

He guided Violetta along, stopping the customary three feet from their mysterious guest. Violetta was reluctant to move, but at her father's urging, she stepped forward.

The young woman stared down at Violetta with the same full smile. The princess took note of the ferocious waves of red hair tumbling down the stranger's form. They reminded her of curved snakes, with the colour of fire set into their skin, stark against the stranger's milky flesh.

'Violetta, may I introduce Jermise.'

King Eagan gestured to the lovely maiden, who looked all

too embarrassed to be in his presence. She dipped into a graceful bow, her fiery locks spilling across her face.

'Your Highnesses.'

Violetta watched as she drew herself back up. The maiden's bright eyes moved in her direction, making her pale before the porcelain beauty. She couldn't help but wonder why her father had summoned such a maiden here.

'Jermise, thank you for coming so promptly.'

King Eagan stepped forward, guiding the maiden's soft hand to his lips.

Violetta's mind burst aflame. For her father to kiss any maiden, even by the hand, showed great disrespect to his departed wife. She glared at him, her eyes like daggers as he began to circle young Jermise. *How dare you?* she thought. Violetta could feel her powers boiling within. They lay just beneath the surface of her skin, her mind begging with her to release them.

'Jermise will be taking over for Clarisse from now on. Be sure to treat her well.'

Violetta gulped. So this had been his plan all along. Replace the help with someone new; younger, prettier. Violetta could feel her sorrow returning when a light flashed on in her mind.

'Father, will you please show me the fire lion?'

Her eyes couldn't help but light up at the prospect of him disappointing this guest. Surprisingly, her father smiled.

'I'm not sure.'

'Please?'

Violetta batted her lashes at him. Her father sighed, his eyes briefly zipping to the newcomer.

'Oh, alright.'

King Eagan closed his eyes to the outside world and began to slow his breathing until it was little more than a low hum.

'Fierce beast, I call upon thee!'

He blew out a steady breath and forced his eyes open. A burst of flame shot out from his palms, coiling itself into translucent

shapes, before transforming into a mighty beast.

Standing before them was a majestic lion, a genuine work of art that burned brightly in mid-air.

'Enough!'

Eagan withdrew his power, leaving the lion to disappear in a brilliant flash. Violetta smiled. For a moment her father's eyes had appeared hopeful, like they had always been before his family's passing.

The king's eyes soon returned to their cool steel; the look of a storm when it first starts to brew.

'Jermise shall not act as nurse maid. You're too old for one now. She will be your confidant. Tell her anything you wish and she will do her best to advise you.'

Violetta was startled to find her father's thick arms closing round her shoulders. The inexplicable feeling of home soothed her. 'Some day,' he whispered, 'You may come to learn why people do certain things. Often, it is with the best of intentions. Until then, I thought it about time you had a friend.'

Chapter Five

YEAR C-7 Month 5/10

Violetta

Violetta hauled an ancient tome between her arms while reciting passages of Peradonian history. Three years had brought the pair closer and Violetta no longer saw Jermise as her mother's replacement, but as a role model to be admired.

They strolled through the Royal Gardens at their leisure, sampling rose flavoured Dal berries from the pockets of their crimson robes. It was no secret that Violetta had blossomed into a dazzling beauty. She knew, having recently turned Fifteen, that she would soon be expected to take a husband, yet the princess' desires lay elsewhere.

Violetta lowered the book from her gaze. When the light hit the plants just right, a scintillating explosion of colours burst forth. She shot a quick glance around the gardens, drinking in the sight before the dust-riddled tome rose back to her face.

'Highness?'

Violetta teetered over with the weight of the book, almost knocking Jermise from her feet.

'S-sorry,' she whined, and righted herself.

Jermise simply rolled her eyes, a playful smile beginning to form.

'Tell me princess, how did Peradon come to be separated?'

Jermise had been quick to fire questions her way all morning. A pair of hazelnut eyes peered up from the tome.

'When hatred emerged between those with different Gods, the four Arch Mages decided it would be best to split up Peradon's people.'

'Correct.'

Jermise led them to a peaceful enclosure, where a shaded

bench provided them a brief respite from the sun. Here, they were free to gaze at the plants, every colour of the rainbow reflecting the sunlight.

Violetta settled her skirts about her knees, resting the book there with its pages propped open. Her eyes remained fixed on the yellowing parchment of Peradon's history.

Thoughts of her coming responsibilities raced around Violetta's brain. She took a deep breath, preparing to go on with her lesson when a hand caught her arm.

'Princess, what's wrong?'

Violetta turned her back to her new-found friend, opting for a view of some lilies nearby.

Jermise peered out from beneath the protection of the shade. 'It's a beautiful day. It would be a shame not to walk a little more, don't you think?'

Violetta stared into the distance. A single tear traced her cheek.

'Perhaps I should give you some time alone.'

Jermise seemed about to stretch her legs when Violetta snatched up her hands.

'Wait!'

She stole her gaze away from the flowers. Her eyes now fixed onto Jermise, pleading with her to remain seated.

Jermise settled herself back onto the bench. Violetta wondered if she should tell her confidant about her deepest desire. She saw no way to obtain freedom from her approaching duties. Nonetheless, she regarded Jermise once more, her lips trembling. Eyes like dazzling emeralds stared back.

When Violetta's words failed her, Jermise squeezed her hands in hers.

'Vi, what is it that causes you such pain?' she asked.

The princess shuddered at the pet-name, having been given it soon after they'd met. It was a friendly, yet patronizing reminder of her youth.

'I don't—' Violetta bit back tears. Her tongue ran across her ruby lips as she forced deep breaths into her lungs. 'I don't think I can

be a princess.'

A weight seemed to lift off her shoulders, floating up into the warm summer breeze. Jermise blinked, her face blank.

'And why not?'

Violetta could feel the roots of her sorrow taking hold once more.

She gazed across at Jermise, her eyes ringed by crimson circles.

'I just want to be free.'

Breath blasted out from Jermise's lips. Violetta noted a look of hurt cross her face, which was quick to be replaced by another blank mask.

'You wish to be free? How more so? To glide on the air like the birds do, to swim in the lakes like the fish?'

Jermise held her arms out to the sky, as though beseeching some all-powerful creator to strike some sense into the young princess.

'Jermise, please!'

Violetta's lips were beginning to tremble. She wondered if she had said too much. It wouldn't be long before her father heard of this and then he too would voice his objections.

'I just want to live my own life, to not be bound by duties I did not choose. You know what my father shall expect of me now.'

'Expect?' cried Jermise. 'Like every princess of your age come before you? Like your mother?'

Violetta cradled her head to her chest. Her eyes closed as she gave a weak nod.

'Yes.'

Violetta could see that this conversation was leading nowhere and so returned her attention to the indigenous plant-life, hoping to be spared the daggers in her confidant's eyes. A moment of silence existed between them. Just one moment, but it was that moment alone that saw Violetta's mood transform.

'Jermise?'

'My lady?'

Jermise's voice still held some tension, but on glancing round, her face became a blank sheet once more. Violetta's eyes were focused on something in the distance.

'Who is that man over there?' she asked.

Jermise spun round to where the princess was pointing. Her slim finger was raised towards the Northern gate, where a familiar figure could be seen approaching.

A young man with copper hair and an aura of confidence was striding past the king's guards. His tall frame exceeded them both, his muscles having grown some of late, making him almost unrecognisable.

'That's Xyhoni, my lady. Your father says you used to be rather close.'

Violetta felt her face light up. *Of course. Xyhoni.* She thought back to her grim appearance in the Earth realm, where he had gifted her with a preserved red rose. She envisioned the sweet young man he had been back then. Because of him she'd felt her sorrows lessen, something akin to affection replacing the loss that had shadowed her heart.

Without thinking, Violetta raced for the garden gates, toward the boy who'd made her feel alive.

'Princess?'

Jermise bent down to retrieve the ancient book, setting it back on the bench when she noticed the direction of the path she was taking.

'Princess!'

Violetta daren't stop. She had often thought of Xyhoni and his kind words. Now, fate had brought them together. Her mind raced with the excitement of her thoughts as she halted before him, panting for breath.

'X-Xyhoni?'

The young man turned. His emerald eyes locked onto hers, confusion soon replaced with joy. Xyhoni grinned back, noticing the slight flush to her cheeks.

'Do you always run when there are guests?'

His smile turned playful as Jermise caught up, her breathing heavy from exertion.

Xyhoni immediately averted his gaze from her charge.

'Jermise, a pleasure.'

'Y-your Grace.'

Jermise bowed low to acknowledge the boy, her breaths coming in ragged bursts. Xyhoni was polite enough to incline his head before bowing down to the young princess.

'It is wonderful to see you, but if you'll excuse me ladies, I'm actually here to relay a message to the king.'

Xyhoni reached a hand down to a dark satchel which swung from his hip, producing a rather battered-looking scroll.

'This matter is of some urgency so I must be leaving you.' His eyes paused to linger on Violetta. 'Regrettably so.'

He inclined his head once more, before striding off to tend to business.

'Well, that was—' Jermise paused. 'Violetta?'

The princess gazed down, her lips trembling. *An urgent matter?*

That's what Xyhoni had said. The dark thoughts that had plagued her every day since the death of her kin had come crashing back against the shore of her mind. Without realizing, she'd grasped Jermise's arm, pulling her into their first ever hug.

It took a moment for Jermise to register what was happening. Violetta was drawn into her confidant's arms where she began to sob, clutching the young woman's robes.

'My lady, what's wrong?'

Jermise rested a hand against the princess' head, stroking the golden waves of her hair.

'You really don't wish to be queen, do you?'

Violetta's reply came amongst fitful sobs.

'No.'

As Jermise cradled her sobbing form, Violetta thought back to her mother and everything she had been to her. More than anything, she thought about the pressure she had faced as a queen; the endless tasks which sapped her strength, the sacrifices she had to make in order to achieve peace.

'There, there,' cooed Jermise. 'You know, freedom is not all it

seems.'

Violetta's sobs died down a little. She leant back, blinking away tears that still longed to be freed.

'How can you say that? Would you revel at being a prisoner, to have only duty as your constant companion?'

Violetta thought of the day she had turned fifteen; how her father had begun to instruct her on the matter of suitors.

Jermise gripped the princess' chin between her thumb and forefinger.

'Violetta, pay heed to what I'm about to tell you.' She lifted the girl's face, gazing into her eyes with a wistful expression. 'You are only a prisoner if you believe you are.'



Her father's throne room had always felt like it had its own agenda. It was inviting and yet overwhelming. Everywhere you looked, gold. Blinding. Jermise had brought Violetta straight in from the gardens, intent to find out what urgent matter had arisen.

King Eagan rested within his throne, his dark eyes once again turned to steel. Violetta followed her confidant down the narrow room. She felt a squeeze of reassurance offered by Jermise's hand and inhaled until her lungs were full.

It wasn't long before King Eagan noted his daughter's presence and afforded Jermise a quick glance, to which she gestured for him to continue his business. Violetta glanced up at him. He looked so large and imposing as he sat there; a true leader of men, strong and wise. His gaze returned to regard Xyhoni, who stood but three paces from the throne.

The king's well-travelled face held a look of concern, which spoke volumes of some hidden trouble; trouble Violetta would likely uncover soon.

'Your Majesty, this message was delivered to Lord Jork. He sent for me personally, to bring it to you.'

The king arched an eyebrow at the boy.

'The source?'

'Unknown, Sire. The parchment is generic, with no royal seal of any kind.'

King Eagan reached up a hand to begin stroking his beard.

'Are you saying this message was not meant for Jork?'

Xyhoni gulped.

'I am, Highness. It was most definitely meant for you.'

All eyes were on the flustered king. Violetta watched as dark images pooled within her father's eyes, making his handsome features age decades in a glance.

'Why send a message meant for another, to a different realm? And why request that you deliver it? Has Jork a shortage of staff?'

Violetta saw Xyhoni glance at his feet.

'Who knows Sire. Perhaps our mystery informant has a flare for the dramatic.'

His eyes passed across Violetta's face, sending a feeling of warmth rushing through her.

'Perhaps.'

Xyhoni raised an olive hand, signalling that there was still more to be said.

'Highness, as decreed by Lord Jork of the Air Realm, you are to depart for his Castle at your earliest convenience.'

Eagan considered the young man before him.

'Very well. Next week, when the High Council meets.'

Chapter Six

Ryore

In the cool reaches of his tower room, Emperor Ryore lay sleeping. Dreaming. Since his ascension to the Frost Realm's throne, he'd had visions of such illustrious beauty; visions of *her*. At scarcely nineteen years of age, Ryore had inherited many responsibilities, most of which he considered unfavourable.

Tonight's dreams proved more troublesome than most. Ryore tossed and turned, pestered by dark images and crude phantoms. It was always she who managed to save him. Princess Violetta of the Flame Realm. Ryore remembered how beautiful she'd been, even at first sight.

He envisaged hair like fine-spun gold, falling down past the nape of her neck. Her eyes, like miniature suns within chocolate pools, stared into the deepest reaches of his soul. He felt such a powerful longing for her; an intense savagery that could not be quenched. If only he could have her. They would produce the perfect heir, from her supple young body and his brilliant mind.

Ryore's eyes flashed open. Beads of sweat licked his lean frame, his hands shaking as he adjusted to the darkness. He felt the usual layer of frost roll over his limbs, familiar and cool, and raised a finger to trace the crooked scar on his cheek. *If she saw me, what would she think of me now?* His father's dying words called out to him through the lonely night. *Arlas will lead you to your destiny.* Ryore had never known what those words meant.

He shot up, turning to glance out of the small arch that served as the tower's window. The early hours of dawn greeted Ryore like an old friend. As usual, the Frost estate's grounds were draped in a glistening blanket of snow. There was a time when Ryore thought it looked like a dream world; the sort of place that

children long to frequent, playing for hours until finally forced to retire. There had been few such occasions for him and his brother. Sadly, no longer. Since their childhood, Fadius had grown to be deceptively cunning, finding any way he could to spite Ryore's plans.

Presented with such a magnificent view, Ryore found himself reminded of Violetta's beauty. She had recently turned fifteen, a mere four years his junior. He had awaited this year with relish, for now the young lady could be properly courted. If only he could learn of her desires. He was certain that he could make her love him.

Ryore's eyes lit up. There was a way he could learn of the princess' plans; a way to uncover her heart's desires. He recalled, from his younger years, the day he'd obtained his greatest treasure; an artefact which could locate whatever a person sought. He had named it *The All Seeing Lense*.



Five Years Prior

The cave smelt something ghastly. Ryore lurked outside in the bitter cold with nothing but an old sword he'd swiped from a guard. His father had sent him on an important quest, to slay the ancient beast within. He had commanded Ryore not to use magic, for this was an ancient creature immune to such power. It was one to be killed by blade alone. Ryore had named it *Lure*, for it was thought to have been a thing of myth, until it developed the nasty habit of luring lost citizens to their grizzly deaths.

Ryore peered into an entrance as dark as pitch. He did his best to remember the quest's importance. His father had entrusted

this task to him and he alone had to see it through.

The first step into his future had been one of pained surprise. Ryore felt his ankle smart as what was likely a jutting outcrop of rock scraped along his tender flesh. Wishing to avoid a repeat of this mishap, Ryore ran his free hand along the cave walls. All around him, sand fell in clusters, no small amusement in a darkness that threatened to consume his soul.

Ryore had barely taken five steps when a low growl sounded from the depths of the cave. His muscles tightened, sweat forming along his palms and running rivulets down his back. His fingers tightened on the hilt of his sword as the sound grew into a shriek worse than any he'd ever heard.

Ryore's mind reeled with the pain of it. He breathed in the scent of the darkness, summoning his strength.

'Aeos liptus lumnos,' he whispered.

A cold blue flame sparked into life across Ryore's right palm. He was lucky to have learned to conjure Frost-Fire. It was rare for anyone but Seers to be able to call on the *gift of the gods*.

Ryore held his palm up at chest height, illuminating a small sphere of the cave before him. Seeing only darkness, Ryore formed the light into an orb, motioning for it to hover just above his head when a low grunt sounded behind him. Ryore stilled himself. He strained his ears against the dying echoes, waiting for the same guttural growl to come again.

A rush of cool air sped towards him as something huge struck out from the darkness. Ryore dove to one side, all too aware of bits of cave ceiling beginning to shake themselves free. He struggled forward, gaining a few measly inches when three sharp prongs caught hold of his leg. Ryore felt the air wheeze out of his lungs. His sword lay just out of reach. He grasped for it, nails scraping in a pitiful attempt to reach the hilt. The sound of ragged breathing accompanied his own as something hot and fluid seeped onto his thighs.

Ryore knew his adversary would be fast. He just needed to be faster. Swallowing all fear, Ryore turned, his mid-section bent

at an awkward angle and felt the searing sting of something slicing up through his cheek. His head swung back, sweat dripping down the centre of his garb. Ryore reached a finger up to glide along the point of his tattered flesh, only for it to come away with the stench of blood. He glanced up, determined to get a good look at the beast that had dealt such damage.

A monstrous creature howled before him, towering just below the expansive ceiling. He cringed as its muscles began to tense, knowing the beast could easily out-pace him. This was it. It had already sliced his cheek apart and now it would crush him. The feeling of his eyes watering ashamed Ryore. A man was supposed to accept his death with dignity.

Ryore summoned what little strength he had left when a sudden thought struck him as odd. Why hadn't the beast attacked yet? His eyes roamed across its rippling form. He knew better than to make any sudden movements, but couldn't resist another attempt at reaching his sword.

Blood mingled with the sweat and dirt that now coated Ryore's arms as he stretched toward the one thing that could bring his salvation. He heard the guttural growl just as his fingers brushed cold metal. He inched forward, fighting for a grip on the ornate weapon when three familiar claws ripped a hole in his tunic. With ease, the creature began to drag him away. *Weakling*, came a voice in his head. Ryore's hands began to clench. Delving deep into his reserves of energy, he threw his arm out, into the darkness before him.

A dull clang signalled Ryore's fingers having caught steel. He gripped the hilt of his sword in one hand, noting that the pressure on his leg was suddenly less than before.

It was at the last moment that Ryore heard the beast swing. With all of his strength he rolled to the side, stabbing the sword point into the beast's leg. A deafening howl told him that it had done its job. Feeling the creature release hold of his legs, Ryore leaped up and increased the distance between them. The beast roared.

Ryore was forced to dip down as the creature slashed at the air where his head had been only moments before. The blade swung up to meet its attack. The clash of metal against claw rang through his head. Ryore arced his blade up once more, just as the beast attempted another lunge. The swing failed and the creature, roaring, knocked him back into a bed of rock. Pointed spines bit into Ryore's delicate flesh. He could smell blood; his blood, dripping down his face and spewing from the gash in his arm.

Wiping a trickle of it away from his sleeve, Ryore tightened his hold on the forged steel. He felt frost glide up the hilt of the blade, but remembered his father's warning that only mortal weapons could vanquish this creature. With his gaze fixed on the beast, Ryore counted numbers down in his head and waited for the ice to withdraw from his blade.

As the creature lunged toward him, Ryore thrust his blade out once more, squinting his eyes closed and praying that he was shown mercy this day. An almighty squelch signalled the blade meeting its target. Ryore's eyes blinked open. The blade had plunged deep into the creature's head, prompting a high-pitched squeal as it pierced its brain. The ground vibrated below his feet as the beast's enormous form began to shudder. Ryore could already feel it falling and was lucky enough to dodge its corpse.

Ryore took a moment to catch his breath. His limbs ached from exertion, making it a struggle to keep himself upright. Feeling strength flow back into his being, he turned. A gargantuan body greeted him, its tusked snout facing forward. Using the walls as his crutch, Ryore edged forward. The flickering blue orb floated above him, illuminating the motionless beast.

It didn't look at all of this world. Ryore knelt beside it, yanking his weapon from the depths of its forehead. He'd gotten lucky. The blade had passed into the creature's brain stem. Its head, similar to that of a boar's, had been left with a death snarl, a wicked tusk jutting out from each side. Its body didn't match at all, resembling a large feline, with claws springing out from four furred paws. Ryore thought for a moment that it must have been

stitched together, two exotic creatures bound to one miserable existence. He prepared to stand, when a second source of light caught his eye.

A green glow lit up the beast's vast maw. Ryore couldn't recall noticing it before and shuffled closer to part the beast's lips. A foul odour expelled from the orifice, causing Ryore to gag. Feeling brave, he plunged in both hands. The beast's gelatinous insides curled round his palms as he dug into the creature's throat.

Ryore refrained from breathing in the stench, feeling for anything sharp amongst the foulness of the thing's dying flesh. He was starting to consider retracting his arms when his hand closed around a solid lump. With a vicious tug, he heaved it out, bits of skin tearing away from their host.

Ryore gasped. Between his palms rested a glass sphere, the source of the green glow. His hands shook as he held it close, examining its surface, which was still partially covered by a crimson film. Ryore gazed at his treasure in adoration. Countless thoughts overrode his recent terror. What was this strange artefact and what did it do? A small smile spread onto his lips, faltering when another thought jolted to the front of his mind. His father would be expecting him back.

Ryore took one last look at the monstrous beast and stored the orb safely in the crook of one arm. With the other he gripped the coarse rock of the wall, using it as an anchor to find his way out. He'd won. He'd travelled into the depths of this cave and prevailed. His new-found treasure was but a delightful bonus.

Ryore paused as he reached the moonlit entrance of the cave. There was only one reason his father could have sent him to slay such a beast. Jagan wanted his son dead.



Present Day

Ryore banished the memories of his ordeal as he scoured the dungeon from top to toe, impatient to meet his love once more. She was the one thing that drove him on. He needed to know of her upcoming plans and whether he could form a part of them. His hand went to the scar embedded into the core of his cheek. *Perhaps she could find the inner beauty in me.*

Having stumbled into a shabby excuse for a room, Ryore immediately spotted a black chest. It lay forgotten in a far corner, covered with a layer of dust so thick that he almost mistook it for a grime-ridden cloth.

He rushed forward, noting a faded skull and crossbones which were etched deep into the metal lid. Ryore bit his lip and flung it open. Relief glowed upon his face. There in the chest was the familiar green light, winking back.

'Ah, Sire, there you are!'

Ryore shuddered at the sudden infiltration into his privacy.

'What is it?' he snarled.

'They're requesting your presence in the throne room.'

Ryore stepped into the icy throne room. He grit his teeth, allowing his breathing to level out before his anger could bring his powers to surface. He could smell fear on the counsellors before him and grinned as they cringed away from his throne. Ryore had seen that look many times before. It was a look he'd encountered a lot in his youth whilst his father had reigned on the great Frost throne. It was a fear like no other; fear that even a few words of courage may have you locked up or worse hanged, buzzards given the privilege to pick you clean just hours later.

Every pair of eyes in the room turned on him. Ryore felt their collective glare, condemning him as usual for his so-called frittering of the royal coin. He stared them down, one by one as he seated himself in his rightful place.

'State your concerns,' he commanded.

His voice possessed a bored tone, a sort of cold drawl that made skin slither. He sat studying every man, woman and creature between, delighting in the way their eyes flitted about or their lips creased into thin lines.

It wasn't long before an elderly man sought courage and took a few tentative steps in Ryore's direction.

'Sire, we are somewhat worried about your priorities as far as the realm's wealth is concerned.'

Ryore sneered.

'My priorities are the realm's priorities,' he offered in a most modest tone. 'I am sorry if certain areas of my expenditure offend you, but what do you then suggest?'

Nobody had the courage to speak. Ryore sighed. *No suggestions of their own, yet they complain all day and night to me.* He paused for thought before standing from his glittering throne.

'First, I declare that we are to stop our yearly pilgrimage around the four Realms and are to raise taxes by fifteen percent!'

Many of the counsellors flushed crimson. Ryore watched as the same white-haired gentleman took a deep breath, raising his voice to be sure he was heard.

'Raise taxes for whom, Sire?'

He shied away from the emperor's shadow, worried that maybe he'd spoken too soon.

'Everyone!'

Ryore took to his throne once more, stroking the fine stubble that lined his chin.

The old man let out a gasp. The counsellors behind him halted to stare, sweat lining their furrowed brows.

'Sire!' he pleaded, 'The poor can't pay as is!'

Ryore felt his eyes roll. He longed for this meeting to come to an end. He grew tired of their nonsense and this wretched room.

'Ah, Albius!'

Ryore Spied the high-priest lurking in the shadows. He shot him a

broad grin, signalling his readiness for departure. These people had asked for his guidance and now they had it. If they refused to accept his compromises, then the blame would simply fall to them. Now they would listen to his top advisor.

Ryore strode away from the throng of people, whipping his dark robe about himself. He met with Albius half way down the shimmering room and motioned him close at the risk of being overheard.

'Albius, take over for me. I have business elsewhere that I need to attend to.'

'Sire.'

Albius swept his robes away to perform a bow, his master giving the scene one final glance before he swept out through the throne room doors.

Ryore knew that today was a day for business, but already it had dragged him down. The room's harsh choice of lamps had blinded him to the counsellor's pleas. He'd been ready to accept reasonable demands, but he was a far cry from understanding business. Ryore knew well enough that what they truly sought was the guidance they'd received from his late father. Emperor Jugan had been an avid businessman; highly educated, well-travelled, and with a good mind for monetary gain. Emperor Ryore was none of these things.

The young flame princess still hung on his mind, haunting his thoughts like a mocking spectre. Ryore needed to see her again and no manner of duties would preoccupy him. He wanted to get back to the lense.

The tower remained dusty and derelict, hardly a room Ryore's father would have approved of. He strode over to where a stone pedestal waited with the lense. His usual seat was warm to the touch. *Strange*, he thought. He sat down and let his eyes drift shut, searching the surrounding passages for his brother's presence. When Ryore was certain that he was alone, he began tuning into his more private thoughts.

Ryore knew that it would take time and good concentration

to find his love. He breathed in the stale air and re-imagined her gorgeous smile. All other thoughts became obsolete, slipping away as he touched his forehead to the lense's cool glass.

A sudden whirring enveloped Ryore. His cold eyes snapped open to glimpse a blue light twinkling back from the lense. It spread out from its centre, an elusive form of mental energy. Ryore listened as the faintest tinkling strained through the chaos. It grew sharp, morphing into the beginnings of a quiet conversation. He pressed his ear against the lense, able to pick out the voices of King Eagan and his sublime daughter.

'You summoned me, father?'

'Yes, my dearest. As you are aware, you are my soul heir, but as a woman you will not be allowed to succeed me unless you find yourself a suitor first.'

So it was true. Violetta had finally come of age. A short silence hung between the voices before Ryore heard King Eagan sigh.

'You are fifteen now. Tradition urges you to find a suitor.'

'But father—'

'There are many fine choices available to you, but our citizens would benefit much more if it were someone of power and integrity. Do you understand?'

Another bout of silence. Ryore licked his lips, eager to hear the rest in case there were some part he could play.

'You could use someone who can help you to rule after I have come to...rest.'

Ryore noted that the last word had been added rather delicately.

'Father, I don't want to take the throne!'

Ryore's breathing hastened. No. This couldn't be right.

'Excuse me? Just what do you mean by this?'

'Father, I want to live my life free from these duties. I was never meant to be heir, and I—'

'No! No, you weren't, but sadly this is the situation we're in. As much as it pains me, you're my only choice.'

His only choice? A low blow if ever there was one, thought Ryore.

'Then I refuse. When I turn Sixteen, I shall renounce my title. I don't want to end up like Mother!'

Violetta's footsteps echoed through the lense.

'Stop right there, young lady! You will be queen whether you like it or not! You will find a suitor and that will be that!'

Ryore thought he heard a faint sob, before the sound of flames sprang into life.

'You would do well to respect your Elders, daughter. Who knows, you may change your mind about this freedom nonsense.'

'Yes father.'

She was defeated far easier than Ryore would have liked.

'Now, what of your first Season Council meeting? I trust that you shall be in attendance?'

Ryore's ears pricked up. The council meeting? How could he have been so stupid as to forget. This could be his big chance.

'It is in two days, my lady.'

Ryore's eyebrows arched as a third voice chimed out through the lense. It was higher. Sweeter. Of course. Violetta's confidant. Ryore had heard rumours about Jermise. She was said to be surprisingly beautiful, with hair the colour of roaring flames. Still, no matter how stunning, none could hold a candle to Ryore's love.

'Who knows highness, perhaps a potential suitor shall reveal themselves there.'

Ryore's heart pounded like a steel drum.

'Then it is settled. Violetta, in two days you shall attend your first Season Council meeting and I expect you to be well-behaved by then. You are dismissed.'

Ryore parted from the shimmering orb, having been satisfied with what he'd learnt. He rubbed at his aching temples, an irritating side effect of using the lense. The next council meeting was but two days away, to be held within the haunting Air Realm.

Though Ryore knew he needed to ready himself, he could not shake the uneasy feeling that he always got from thoughts of that Realm. *Arlas will lead you to your destiny*, cooed the voice in his head.

We hope that you enjoyed this sample
of PHOENIX (2nd Edition.)

Coming to Amazon
April 30th 2017

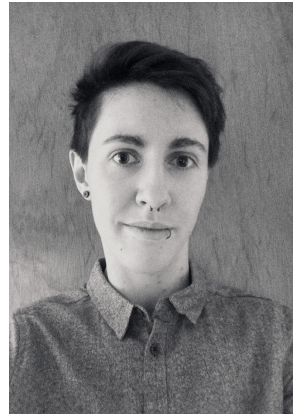
Daccari Buchelli

Biography

Born in 1993, British Fantasy Novelist Daccari Buchelli quickly developed a love of reading. He found himself drawn to fantasy genre, with its magical worlds and mythical beings.

Having Asperger's Syndrome made it difficult for him to identify with his peers at school, thus Daccari often felt lonely until he picked up a book. Fantasy novels brought him into a sublime world of colour and creation, where he remains caught up to this day.

When away from his trusty ball point pen, Daccari enjoys art, as well as horror films, and curling up with a good book and a rich coffee.



Want to be the first to receive updates on new releases?

Sign up to the Buchelli Books Reading List.

<http://eepurl.com/cwo6Ur>