

As Sohnes could feel his consciousness slipping away, just before he blacked out, he'd assumed he would be seeing Aenira when he woke. He would be right about that, but he'd wish he wasn't

When he opened his eyes, he expected to see Aenira lording over him with a smirk on her face and a weapon in her hand, waiting for him to wake so she could threaten to make him stop his pursuits. He would have preferred to deal with that image than the one he actually saw.

Across two sets of bars and a narrow hallway, was Aenira, with her back turned to him and a chain locked around her ankle. She still wore the dark green gown she had been wearing the last time he saw her, only now it had become torn on her skirts and at her sleeves. Wherever they were now, she had been there for nearly a week.

Despite the fact that there had been multiple occasions that Aenira came very close to purposefully ending his life several times before, Sohnes found himself wanting to end whoever was responsible for subjecting her to this. He tried reaching out for her, but the chains binding his wrists to the wall stopped him.

Aenira spoke up in a raspy voice, having not been given enough water over the last few days. "Whatever you're thinking, don't try it." She was lying on a crude bed. There were no blankets, or sheets, or pillows, only a thin mattress on a wooden frame. Aenira sat up to face him, wincing as she moved. "What are you doing here?"

Sohnes didn't want to tell her that he had been looking for her when he'd been ambushed. Either she would be pissed that he hadn't given up looking, or she would realize that he had known something was wrong, he had gone looking to help her, and he had failed anyway. "Where are we?" He said in a voice barely loud enough for her to hear.

Aenira pulled her legs close to her chest, the chain rattling as she moved. "I was hoping you knew."

Sohnes wouldn't dare mention it now, but there were bruises covering her arms and legs. He shook his head as a way of answering her question, not wanting to admit out loud that he couldn't help. The last place he remembered being conscious was in the woods around Ancbai, where he'd guess she had been taken from as well. There was no way the building they were in now could have been hidden up there, so they had to be somewhere else. "Is there a way out?" Sohnes had thought about asking her if she were alright, but decided against it when he realized that he probably couldn't have asked a less effective question at that moment.

Aenira pointed to her left. "Up there. It's the only way."

Leaning forward as far as the metal binding his wrists would allow, Sohnes could see a set of stone stairs outside his cell, leading to the door she spoke of. If the door was up, then that meant that they were underground. No wonder it was so dark.

Evidently, their captor cared even less for Sohnes' comfort than they did Aenira's. His cell was bare, leaving him sitting on a damp stone floor, with the joint bolting his chains to the wall just above his head. He could stand, and he did, but once he had, he couldn't get anywhere close to the bars that were ten feet in front of him, much less to Aenira.

He knew that Aenira had told him not to try anything, but he couldn't sit by and let this happen. From the stones near his feet, Sohnes drew up a vine, breathing a sigh of relief that he could still use his magic. Like a snake floating in midair, it moved forward, going straight for the lock on the door.

Aenira's head was back against the wall with her eyes closed, having nothing else to do but sit and think. She couldn't see what Sohnes was trying to do until his vine was about to make contact with the lock. By the time she did notice, it was too late. She screamed his name as she lunged forward.

The second his vine touched the lock, a strong, continuous shock went through Sohnes' body from the shackles at his wrists, knocking him to the ground and forcing a scream from him.

Aenira clutched the bars of her cell, barely able to breathe, pressing herself against them while her ankle was pulled backward by her chain.

With a groan, Sohnes sat himself up again, breathing heavily. While his face was down, he angled his gaze up towards Aenira. Was he seeing concern in those golden eyes of hers? He gave her a lazy smile as he leaned his head back. "Don't worry. My life is still yours to--"

The door flew open above them, banging against the wall repeatedly as footsteps scuffed down the stairs. A man in dark clothing appeared in Sohnes' line of sight- their captor, he would assume. He turned first for Aenira, grabbing the bars of her cell and making her step back. The noise he made sounded almost like a sigh of relief. When he turned to Sohnes, his lip curled into a sick smile as he realized that both of his captives had now fallen for the same trick. "You're awake. Good." He walked forward, letting the light from the candle fixture at the ceiling illuminate his scarred face as he stepped through the bars as if they had never been there. "Then you can tell me what the fuck you thought you were doing looking for her."

"Her?" Sohnes pointed towards Aenira as best as he could with his wrist bolted to the wall. "I have no idea who she is."

The man grabbed Sohnes' left hand, pulling it in front of his face and forcing his right hand towards the joint. "Then explain this." He didn't need to make any gestures to make it clear that he was referring to the gold staining on the inside of his wrist and palm, courtesy of Aenira.

Sohnes had almost forgotten about the physical evidence of Aenira having beaten him in the past. So much for that excuse.

The grip on Sohnes' hand released and was replaced with one hand on his neck, pulling him upward and pushing him against the wall. The man questioned him again, asking who he was, why he had come for Aenira and what he knew about her.

Again, Sohnes gave him no honest answer.

Aenira could see what Sohnes was doing, and it made her sick. How dare he act like her savior now after everything he had done. He didn't get to act noble now to absolve him of all of it. At the same time though, she couldn't stand to see him being hurt like this. She had a guess of what he was going to say to her before, and she would agree with him. His life was still hers to take, and she wouldn't have anyone else stealing that from her. "He came for me because we're in love."

Their captor looked between Aenira and Sohnes with another sick smile on his face. Aenira was beginning to wonder if he could even form any other expression. Once he realized that Aenira wasn't making a joke, he broke out in laughter, walking from Sohnes' cell to Aenira's as though he were made of nothing but air. "Young love," he sighed. "So noble." He grabbed Aenira by the neck, pushing her forward against the bars in front of her. "Look where it got him."

If Sohnes hadn't already made up his mind to kill that man the second he had the chance, that move would have sealed the deal. He stood again, testing the strength of the chains holding him as he forced himself forward, his confusion about Aenira's assertion of his love having dissipated, replaced by anger. "What do you want with her? If it's money you're after, I'll pay it!" While Sohnes was most definitely not in love with the fugitive that wanted him dead, his genuine willingness to pay a ransom wasn't contradictory to what Aenira had said.

Another laugh escaped him as the hand that was at Aenira's neck moved to grab her chin, letting her back from the bars. "Oh, believe me, I have considered how great of a price this rare beauty might fetch me." He moved her silver braid over her shoulder as he got much too close to her face, which Aenira spat at him for, making him drop her. "It'd be even higher if she weren't such a brat." Noticing Aenira was looking anywhere but at him, he pulled her braid back, forcing her neck to strain as she looked up at him. "But alas, she is the property of the crown, and it is my sworn duty to return her; for a price, of course."

Property of the crown? Sohnes had thought he detected an Idrisi accent through all his disgusting laughter. With his pale skin and long features, he certainly looked the part. Sohnes was assured more now than ever that his theory about King Roann was correct. With the amount of resources spent going after one woman, time after time, of course it had to be someone with means near that of royalty.

Sohnes thought again about what Aenira had said. He didn't know what would bring her to lie to save him from pain, especially that lie. The two of them, as evidenced by prior fights, were about as far from in love as two people could be. Sohnes was willing to believe that that had

simply been the first thing that came to mind, and she had blurted it out, but something told him that Aenira was playing at something larger.

The piece of shit holding the two of them captive released Aenira's hair, which caused her to fall into him before he shoved her off, standing and leaving the two of them to their misery as he slammed the door behind him.

"In love?" Sohnes asked with something resembling a smirk on his face.

Aenira shrugged with a similar expression, not helping to answer either of the questions Sohnes had asked himself.

"Property of the crown?" He asked in a more serious tone.

Aenira shrugged again, genuinely having no idea what he had meant by that, but also knowing that it couldn't have been anything good.

Their time alone together would prove to be short lived. The man that both had come to independently refer to as "bastard" returned, carrying with him something that made Aenira shrink back from him. In his right hand, a thick, and oddly ornate pair of bronze cuffs, bound together by a chain only a few inches long. Sohnes had no idea what they were, but for Aenira, they were all too familiar.

The moment she saw them, Aenira's hand went to her mouth, concealing a gasp that was both shocked and scared. Given what he had said to her before, she had her doubts about what or who exactly he served, especially after the comment he had made regarding the crown, but now, she had no doubts. Even then, months after she had escaped, Aenira still bore scars and an uneven complexion where those cuffs had been around her wrists, with only small breaks so far as she could remember, for three years. After a moment Aenira didn't even seem to register, they were back on her wrists again, with the same tight and unyielding feeling she remembered, binding her wrists behind her as the bastard pulled her to her feet and opened the door to her cell. "Wait!"

The bastard looked at her with an amused look, urging her to keep going as if anything she could say or offer him would stop him at that point.

"Let me say goodbye to him." She mumbled, jerking her head in Sohnes' direction as she could no longer use her hands to point.

A noise that was both a scoff and a laugh escaped him as he let one of her wrists free of her cuffs before unlocking the door to Sohnes' cell, taking joy in almost pushing her on top of him.

When Sohnes had heard her request to say goodbye to him, he didn't know exactly what he would have expected her to do if given the chance, but as Aenira's lips connected with his while tears streamed down her face, he knew that hadn't been an outcome he'd been considering. He

was confused, though not confused enough to pull away, until he felt something pass between their lips, from her mouth to his. Something hard, and metal. A key.

She pulled away immediately after she had given it to him, prompting the bastard to grab her by the shoulder and lock up her momentarily free wrist again.

He dragged her out of the cell, careful to close it behind her and watch to make sure it locked. "I hope you savored that," he said to Sohnes. "Because it'll be the last thing you feel in this life until my hands close around your throat. You'll have a long time to think about it while I make a delivery." His attention turned to Aenira. "Count yourself among the fortunate that I'm not making you watch." He didn't take even a moment to relish in his mercy as he pushed her up the stairs and out the door, slamming it behind him.

The second he heard the door close, Sohnes pulled his right wrist down, forcing his left arm to stretch uncomfortably as it was pulled toward the joint above his head. Silently praying that he wouldn't drop it, Sohnes retrieved the key from his mouth with his right hand before it joined his left above him, searching blindly for the lock. He found it, after no small amount of cursing, managing to free both his wrists quickly even while his heart pounded. He jumped up, gripping the bars on the door to his cell. Without the chains around his wrists to subject him to more electricity, Sohnes was able to abuse the door without trepidations, pulling it off of its hinges within a minute.

He rushed up the stairs, throwing the door open without trouble despite the fact that it was locked. Above their prison, was something that nearly resembled a home, it was chilling just how cozy it seemed. Outside, he felt the familiar chill of winter beginning to bloom in the south. He had been right about no longer being in Ancbai then, they were far from it. He didn't see Aenira or the bastard that had taken her anywhere; what he did see, however, were fresh tracks from a wagon wheel in the mud.

Aenira couldn't see anything, but she could tell that they were moving fast. She was laying on her side, blindfolded in the hold of a covered wagon; the sound of her cuffs scraping the floor of her enclosure was barely audible over the thumping hooves of the horses pulling them forward.

Suddenly, she heard something louder than all of it; rumbling through the trees and getting louder as it got closer. She didn't know exactly what it was, but by the time that the wagon came to a screeching halt and the bastard driving it screamed in a mix of terror and pain, she realized exactly what it was.

Pulling open the door of the wagon so forcefully that Aenira could hear wood splintering, Sohnes breathed heavily, helping her to a sitting position.

"Did you kill him?" Aenira asked as Sohnes lifted the blindfold off of her face.

"Yes." He responded as though she shouldn't have even needed to ask the question.

“That’s not fair,” she began, “he hurt me more than you.” Something similar to a laugh punctuated her sentence, remarkable after what she had just gone through.

“Which was exactly why I did it.” There was no similar levity to Sohnes’ response, only pure seriousness.

“You came for me.” The lightness had gone from Aenira’s words as well. Her tone betrayed the surprise she felt at Sohnes making such an effort.

The ability to find humor in the situation went to Sohnes. “After your confession of love?” He lifted her out of the wagon, one arm under her knees, and one under her shoulders. “And that kiss?” He exhaled shortly through his nose as he let her legs down, before vines ensnared her ankles, pinning them in place. “It makes me almost regret doing this.” Another vine wrapped around her forehead, pulling it back as Sohnes pulled out a bottle of poppy distillate from his pocket, which he had taken from the bastard before pulverizing him. Had her hands not still been bound, Sohnes was sure Aenira would have clawed at his face, or tried to, before he poured the liquid down her throat.

Having lost too much of her strength already, it took Aenira less than a minute to succumb to the allergen in her system before she lost consciousness. It was less than another minute before the two of them disappeared from whatever southern forest they had been taken to, leaving behind a massive, twisting run of a tree trunk cutting through the forest, and a body reduced to so little that the horses barely looked at it before they started trotting along again, trailing an empty wagon behind them.

