

Long ago, the world's magic, the very force that allowed it to thrive, was corrupted by the Shadow Users, who poisoned it with violence and darkness. Morana, the last wielder of this ancient power, vanished in a blinding explosion of light, leaving behind a broken world and a history of unresolved mysteries. Now, after a long period of relative peace, the Shadow Users are rising again, their power growing as they prepare for war.

Arya, a trainee at the academy for aspiring soldiers, receives an opportunity that could change everything. After a deadly attack wipes out her entire class, she is chosen for a dangerous mission to locate Morana's lost body and the powerful magic she once wielded. Disguised as a translator, Arya joins a group of young travelers on their own quest, plotting to betray them once they've retrieved the artifact she's seeking. However, as she grows closer to her new companions, Arya uncovers a dark truth: the academy she's trusted for so long is hiding its own malevolent agenda.

Grappling with this betrayal, as well as the revelation of her own heritage- she is Morana's daughter and the vessel containing the suppressed magic- Arya must confront the dark force threatening to consume her. With the fate of the world at stake, Arya must learn to trust her newfound allies, embrace her power, and discover a way to break free from the shadow magic that binds her—before it's too late.

I started my journey towards the castle, only stopping to eat and drink. It was unusually cold, a harsh breeze flowing through the air. I hugged my cloak tighter around me. It would get dark soon; I would need to find a place to spend the night. Shadow Users were strongest at night or any time there was an absence of light. Tomorrow, I would decide my plan for entering the castle. It seemed like going through the underground storage rooms would be the easiest way. The gala was being held in the evening, though, and I was sure the Shadow Users had accounted for that.

One by one, small lights illuminated the village I was approaching. It was smaller than my own but large enough that a newcomer wouldn't be viewed as suspicious. I entered the lodging house, its small size giving it the cozy feel of a cottage. I leaned over the counter towards the woman standing there, making sure my bonding gem was safely tucked underneath my tunic. She looked quite young but had wrinkles at the corners of her eyes and mouth. Her warm gaze and loose bun softened her firm posture. She reminded me of my mom.

"How much for one room?" I asked, hoping it wouldn't be too high. I needed to save my crystals. She eyed me, noting the small bulge in my cloak where my weapons lay against my side. Her mouth pursed in disapproval.

"Is someone giving you a hard time, dear?" Her voice was calm, but her tone was brimming with disapproval.

"No, I'm fine. You can't be too careful when staying someplace new." She nodded, her eyes softening a fraction.

“A one-bedroom, I presume, then?”

“Yes, thank you.” I paid her, wincing at the feel of my pouch getting lighter.

“My husband owns the restaurant next door. Tell him I sent you and he’ll give you a warm meal. You look famished.” I thanked her profusely and made my way next door. I was starving, not to mention freezing. I didn’t bother leaving any of my things in the room. As I had told the lady at the desk, you really could never be too careful.

The restaurant was small but full of people. I took a seat next to a group of kids not much older than I was and waited for someone to take my order. The group beside me was talking animatedly, the girl facing my direction gesturing wildly in the air. Her pink hair shone bright in the light of the restaurant. The girl seated beside her turned to observe her surroundings before leaning in and whispering. I started when I saw her face. She was Valeska Ordin, niece of the king. A royal. That could only mean- I turned slightly so that all four of their faces were in view- yes, seated with their backs facing me were her twin, Davian, and another boy I didn’t recognize. They really were identical, I realized, though they were opposite genders. They both had dark eyes, thick, dark hair, and a smattering of freckles across their cheeks. The only thing that set them apart, aside from the length of their hair and clothing styles, was the scowl on Valeska’s face and the smirk on Davian’s.

What were two royals doing so far from the castle nights before the gala? I leaned in closer to hear their conversation better. “But what happens once we get it?” The girl with the bright pink hair asked. “I’m not sure yet. But the main thing is that we have to get it before anyone else does,” Valeska replied. “The Gala will be the best time to do it. Davian and I will keep the guests entertained while you and Kallias will go to the Records Hall to get it.”

Wait. There was no way I was hearing this correctly. Were they going to try to steal the artifact as well? “This is all well and good, but why does it matter if we won’t even be able to read it?” Asked Davian incredulously. “We can figure that out later,” said Valeska, who I had deemed the leader of the group. “And you’re sure no one else knows about it?” This question came from the other boy, Kallias, I assumed, whose face was concealed by the hood of his cloak. “Well, that I can’t be sure of. We can hope, but if we found out about it, then I’m sure others have, too,” replied Valeska once again.

I was positive now in my earlier assumption. They were looking for the artifact, too, and knew where it was hidden. They even had a way into the castle through The Gala. There was no way I’d be able to get there before them. What if I joined them? I entertained the idea in my mind. I would join them, and once they stole the artifact, I would steal it from them. It was simple and would greatly reduce the chance of me being caught. But how could I convince them that they needed my help? Letting them know of my fighting abilities would be unwise, seeing as I would need to attack them by surprise later.

“Why does it matter if we won’t even be able to read it?” Davian’s question from earlier rang in my mind. Of course. If the artifact was some sort of book or map from the time of Morana, then it would’ve been written in the ancient runes, Gondult, the long-since-dead

language. I was proficient in it, having learned it all four years at The Academy. I would solve their problem, and they would solve mine.

I took a sip of my water and a few deep breaths, trying to calm my nerves. Based on their conversation, I wasn't sure if the king's niece and nephew were loyal to him, but then again, they could be stealing it for him; it was impossible to know. If they found out about my affiliation with the academy, I would be done for. I would have to have my guard up at all times.

Touching my neck to make sure the crystal was still secure, I leaned forward and cleared my throat loudly. "Pardon me," I said to the group. "But I just happened to overhear part of your conversation-" at this, Valeska shot a scowl at the others, "-and noted that you were in need of a translator?"

"No, we're fine," Valeska replied, her voice laced with steel. "The help we need isn't something just anyone will be able to do."

"Yes, but you see, I'm not just any translator. I am well versed in all languages, even the dead ones." At this, Valeska's eyes narrowed in interest.

"Even, say, Gondult?"

"Yes." Valeska glanced quickly at the others.

"And what would your services cost?" I named the basic price of many translators I had encountered before. Valeska and Davian looked at each other, silently communicating with their eyes, while Kallias and the pink-haired girl looked on. Seemingly coming to a decision, Valeska turned to me.

"Your services will be greatly appreciated. However, our job is strictly confidential, and you will be sworn to secrecy."

"I understand."

The pink-haired girl clapped her hands. "Well, now that that's all been settled, let's order some food. I'm starving. Oh, and I'm Adira, by the way"

"Arya," I offered her in return, knowing from past experience that aliases were hard to work with; they, more often than not, were the reason people's identities were revealed.

"Well then, Arya, welcome to the crew. Pull up a chair, and we'll tell you about the job."