

5 - A Different Type of Training

Raidho spoke of something very strange today. It had the idea of trying to upgrade or alter the structure of its nanite body in order to achieve some form of symbiosis with an organic lifeform.

I was intrigued, to say the least, but thought the idea ludicrous.

“You would cease to exist, Raidho. Whatever creature you integrated with would have millions of years of evolution on its side. You would most likely be absorbed, or attacked by the creature’s immune system,” I said.

Yet, I do not think my words put Raidho off. If anything, I may have somehow encouraged its flight of fancy.

- Journal of Robert Mannford, Day 244 Year 33

Adel

Fellow Callahan’s Private Garden - The Academy, New Toeron, Bauffin

Adel rushed through the small archway to find Fellow Callahan feeding his fish in the central pond of his garden.

“Bright and early. Good.” Fellow Callahan’s friendly green eyes twinkled in the morning light.

Adel bowed slightly, just as she would to her father during the start of their training sessions.

“I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve taken the liberty of changing your basic self-defence classes with these private sessions. I have assured the Doyenne you are already very well versed in the basics of hand-to-hand combat.” Fellow Callahan stood up from his seat and took an instructor’s stance, hands behind his back, in front of her. “I have an invited a friend to observe these sessions. This is Lady Buika, First in the Order of Presence within the Hafaza, though if you ask her, she should also be first in the Order of the Blade, as well.”

“The Paladine holds that position, as you well know, Fellow Callahan.” Lady Buika gave a cool diplomatic smile to the older teacher. “I’ve been very eager to meet you, Adel. We are very excited about your potential.”

Adel smiled back, not quite sure to respond. She had only arrived yesterday after all. Lady Buika stood tall and had the dark complexion of those from the south, though which country or what region in the south she would have no idea. The First of the Order of Presence, Adel tried to remember what those titles meant. “Presence focuses on the Hafaza’s ability to enhance syphoning around them, and to strengthen the powers of others around them.” Her father’s voice spoke in her mind. There was something else about how the Hafaza found the resonant notes to match, but Adel had not understood much of that particular lesson at the time, and the one test she had taken for Singing aptitude had gone very poorly. Lessons about how the Hafaza did things had stopped rather quickly after that. Though Adel knew enough to know that to be First in a Hafaza order was quite an accomplishment. Her Singing ability must be very strong indeed, but she could also challenge for First in the Order of the Blade, meaning this pristine and elegant courtly lady was also deadly with a sword, bladed spear

and glaive.

It was then Adel realised Lady Buika was staring at her and awaiting a response. Adel's tongue felt clumsy but she managed to spit out, "Thank you, Lady Buika. I shall try not to disappoint you."

"So modest," Lady Buika crooned, "I'm sure you will not. Please, continue with your lesson." She held a hand out to Fellow Callahan. "As your teacher has said, I am merely an observer today."

Adel bowed, but couldn't help thinking, and what might you be the next day?

Fellow Callahan tapped the stone bracelet on Adel's wrist. "How is the bracelet holding up?" His eye's darted the scabbarded sword at Adel's hip. "I see you've brought your father's sword with you."

Adel touched the sword, only now remembering she had decided to take it. "I..." She wondered why she had done that. "No, not yet sir. I ... thought I might need it." Adel didn't quite trust the bracelet just yet, whereas the sword had channelled the power surging through her before. "I'm still not quite sure what is happening to me."

"I shall try to explain." Fellow Callahan nodded to Adel and graciously bade Lady Buika take a seat on one of the wooden benches at the perimeter of the garden's central square. She flicked out a paper fan and watched them with a keen eye.

"The ability to syphon energy from the world around us has many factors. The size of the syphoner is a very small part of it. There are very practical elements of course, like the syphoner's tolerance for the tingling pain, created, the shape of their body, what contact points the syphoner prefers, even the levels of different salts, nutrients and water within their body can affect the rate and flow of the energy within the Syphoner. Yet, there are factors far beyond that which is purely physical."

Fellow Callahan picked up two metal rings, one with a much larger diameter than the other. "If we were to say these two metal rings were both Syphoners, which would you naturally assume could pull in more energy?"

"The larger one," Adel wondered if this were some sort of trick question.

"Yes, the larger one." Fellow Callahan nodded his head. "And in most cases, yes, this is true. The more energy one can pull in, or the larger tolerance for the energy coursing through your body, the more potent the syphoner, in general."

He began to play with the rings around his wrists and hands, making them spin and loop around each other. The old man's arms flowed in hypnotic sinuous waves and the rings rolled from one forearm to the other, across his shoulders, across his chest and then back up on the tops of his hands and back again in a continuous circuit.

"Now, the High King has used this natural ability to his advantage and most Syklans still understand Syphoning on only the basic level. Yet, what if the smaller ring had a higher understanding of its own form, was more efficient in moving the energy through and around itself? Could snap energy from one place to the next with almost no loss of potency and with little resistance?"

The smaller ring jumped up off Callahan's wrist and began to circle on the inner circumference of the larger ring. A faint metallic ringing began to sing around the old man.

"And what if the smaller ring had a higher awareness not only of itself but also of the environment around it? An awareness that allowed it to pull in energy from further away, deeper into the earth, and

higher into the heavens?”

The inner and smaller ring began to glow a soft orange while the outer ring it spun within began to frost over with a thin layer of ice. The smaller ring then began to cycle through fits of sparking blue light to glowing orange in rapid succession.

“How are you doing that?” Adel gasped. That should be impossible. Callahan’s body was never physically in contact with the smaller, inner circle of metal. The outer ring must be his conduit, but he was controlling the flow of energy within the inner ring with such precision and speed that Adel expected the small ring to fly apart at any moment under the strain.

“And what if this idea needing a metal cage around yourself to syphon, was akin to crawling before you could run?” Fellow Callahan’s hands danced like a set of whipping snakeheads before they grasped the larger ring and began to spin the smaller ring at such a speed it began to sing as it travelled faster and faster within the larger.

“And that in reality, what is known is only the tip of an iceberg?” Fellow Callahan’s hands snapped forward, one high at shoulder height, the other directly below it at hip height, and between them spun the larger ring, suspended in the field of flashing blue energy shot between those hands. A deep hum began to resonate through the garden as the larger ring began to glow orange and spark all at once. The smaller ring stopped spinning along the inside of the larger and crept upwards against the pull of the earth to hang in the middle of a dancing purple sheet of energy within the larger ring.

Adel’s mouth hung open in wonder. The strain was evident on Fellow Callahan’s face but between those old hands hung two metal rings in the air with nothing to hold them up but the pure will and flow of syphoned energy coursing through the old man’s body. It should be impossible, it should have killed him a hundred times over, but there it was, right in front of Adel’s eyes.

The humming slowed and Fellow Callahan slowed the spinning rings, the once glowing hot outer ring cooling before her very eyes. The dance of the metal rings resumed around his arms and then, just as wonderfully as it all began, the energy and the movement faded back to stasis.

“Where-how?” Adel didn’t even know where to begin. Fellow Callahan had somehow dispersed the massive amount of energy he had syphoned just as smoothly and carefully as he had pulled it in.

“The Syklans and the instructors they have sent into the world to swell their order know a very effective technique of using brute power to pull in energy to let it explode through their bodies and their weapons. While it has been used to devastating effect, what they know is but a tiny fraction of what is possible.” Fellow Callahan tossed the larger ring to Adel. “And you, my young student, need to know more or what is possible.”

Adel caught the ring easily. “Yes, sir. I want to learn.”

“Good.” Fellow Callahan’s eyes sparkled with the smile he wore. “We will start you with the larger ring. Place it on your wrist. Syphon a small amount into the ring to heat it, and then discharge it the way you already know how. Get a feel for the metal and how the energy flows through it.”

Adel reached for the energy flowing around her. The air was always her first choice, and her skin raised in goosebumps as the air cooled and the energy flowed into her. The ring began to heat and she felt its resistance and the slight push back against the flow she diverted into the ring.

She bent and discharged the energy into the ground, the giant well which absorbed whatever

touched it. The earth's thirst for a syphoner's flow was never quenched.

Adel began spinning the ring on her wrist before she knew what she was doing. It was instinctive as if she had done it thousands of times before, and as the metal ring spun the more familiar it began to feel.

She caught herself and gave a slightly confused shake of her head. "Sorry," she said and stopped the ring spinning. She snapped her heels back to attention and admonished herself for her daydreaming.

"Not at all." Fellow Callahan's eyes squinted as he studied her. "May I ask what you were just thinking?"

Adel's cheeks warmed. Caught daydreaming already. She wasn't even through her first lesson. "I..." Adel didn't know what to say, so she just spoke the truth, "I was just thinking how familiar this felt."

"Yet, you have not had a lesson with the rings before, correct?" Fellow Callahan asked. He did not seem surprised by her admission.

"No, sir. I have not," Adel answered.

Fellow Callahan nodded. "Alright, this time I want you to do what comes naturally. The goal is to spin the ring as you just were and to create a continuously moving conduit point with your body. Instead of syphoning into just one point, like through your hands, you are to syphon continuously through the point where the ring touches your body. Like so." He slowly moved the ring around her forearm. "Here, and here, and here." He pointed to the different points the ring was touching as it spun around her arm. "Move it around if you like or try to keep it spinning in one place at first. Let the feel of it guide you."

Adel gave a sharp bow of acknowledgement. "Sir."

"Begin." Callahan clapped his hands and stepped back.

Adel let the ring spin slowly as she could around her wrist and then onto her forearm. The familiarity of the exercise returned to her tenfold. She syphoned in and the energy leapt into her. She guided its tingling feeling into the rotating contact point around her forearm.

"Good, keep going, let the ring travel where it wants, let the energy dance with it." Callahan's voice floated to Adel but she was so absorbed in the feel of it his words sounded as if they were spoken underwater.

The ring spun faster, and somehow Adel knew what to do. She let her other hand dive into the spinning circle, and let the ring jump from one wrist to another as effortlessly as if she were breathing. The energy danced through her skin, keeping time to the beats of the ring. She closed her eyes and focused on the feeling of it.

Her skin buzzed and tingled, the pressure of the metal ring touched her again and again, cooling the tingling skin and pulling the energy into itself. On instinct she let the ring roll to the top of her hand and she let her arms mimic what she had seen Fellow Callahan do. Slowly and almost awkwardly this new phase of the dance started, like a baby taking its first steps, but the sinuous motion began to flow through her and the ring rolled around the circle of her arms and shoulders carrying the energy with it. Adel felt the flow dance through her and it was wonderful. Her body felt strong and powerful

yet at the same time flexible and yielding, her muscles tingled with the energy and cooling touch of the metal ring danced upon her skin.

She let the wonderful sensation take her, let the ring roll down her spine, across her hips and she flowed and contorted to keep the ring moving, to keep it upright and rolling. It was wonderful and somehow as natural as breathing.

“Very good.” Fellow Callahan’s voice swam to her ears through the dance of energy. “Now back onto your wrists.”

Adel complied let the ring spin off her ankle, which she only now realised was above her head, and as she lowered her leg the ring ran along her shin, then thigh, and back onto her hand as she reached for it.

Her entire body tingled with the sensation of it.

“Look at the ring, Adel,” Lady Buika said in awe.

Adel only then remembered she had an audience. Her eyes once again focused on what she was doing. The euphoria of her strange dance wore off quickly as the shower of electric sparks spinning off the white hot ring came into focus.

Panic replaced the wonderful dreamlike fuzziness which had been flowing through her body. “What do I do!” Adel cried.

“You are fine, keep it spinning-” Fellow Callahan began.

It was then she saw the stone bracelet in his hand. He had taken it off her somehow.

“No!” Adel lost her focus. The heat of the ring hit her as if she had touched a boiling cauldron. She felt her skin burn, and then knew it wasn’t just her skin burning. Her whole body felt aflame.

“It’s fine-” Fellow Callahan stepped forward. Somehow his face was still calm.

Calm! She was burning!

The sword. It was still at her hip.

Adel reached for the sword and with her other hand, the one which had the scorching ring spinning at her wrist, slam into the ground.

As her fingers touched the sword and her hand hit the ground the air around her exploded in a shower of dirt and grass. The ground cracked and heaved beneath her, and the leather scabbard exploded away from the black blade of the sword like a burst whale bladder.

Adel dared not move and waited. This was only the calm before the storm of searing pain about to slam into her. Adel closed her eyes and clamped her jaw trying to prepare.

Yet the pain never came.

“Here.” A pair of gentle hands took her wrist of the grounded hand and slid the cool stone bracelet back onto it. “You are fine, child. Look.”

Fellow Callahan stood beside her and Adel shook as she opened her eyes.

Her arm was not burnt.

It wasn’t possible.

“But I felt it. I was burning,” Adel’s voice was shaky, and she looked into Callahan’s calm eyes for answers.

“Your father waited too long to send you to me, perhaps.” Fellow Callahan grimaced slightly as he

watched her other hand still holding the hilt of the black blade. "You should not have interrupted her, Lady Buika." The old man's voice snapped.

"But it was wonderful, beautiful." Lady Buika had stood and walked to them. "Adel, that was amazing. More than we could have hoped for."

Adel checked herself for any sign of burns, but there was no pain and no marks of any kind. As the feel of what had just happened faded, her mind started to catch up. She had never tried the rings before, yet as she had gone through the movements it felt as if she had practised this for years upon years. "I don't understand," Adel said. She was so confused and those words were the only coherent ones she could form.

"You are the heir, Adel. Don't you see? Her skill and essence flows within you, through your veins and soul," Lady Buika said as if it should explain everything, yet it explained nothing.

"The heir? Whose essence. What are you talking about?" Adel felt herself losing control, she didn't know what was happening. Tears formed in her eyes and she wiped them away angrily. "What is happening to me? Why did you take the bracelet off? I don't understand!" Adel whipped her hand away from Callahan and stepped away from them.

It was Lady Buika's turn to look confused now, and a frown twisted her lips.

The two of them looked at her in bewilderment, as if she were some strange creature which had just stepped out of the woods and fouled their lovely garden.

This was a mistake, she told herself. Somehow all of this was a mistake. She wanted to go home. She wanted her father to wrap his big arms around her, she wanted to stop feeling as if she were about to explode, she wanted to feel safe. I just want to go home and for none of this to ever have happened. She felt as if she couldn't breathe. Her legs felt weak and she flopped down onto the grass ungracefully. She grabbed her knees and tried to breathe.

"Adel, my child," Fellow Callahan's voice was soft and gentle. "We want to help. You are safe now. I'm sorry for taking the bracelet. It was too soon. I see now you have been dealing with this problem for far longer than you should have." He carefully stepped forward and patted her knee. "The lesson is over for this morning. Come on, on your feet, we will go have a cup of tea."

He helped Adel to her feet with a kind smile, and Adel took a deep shuddering breath.

"He never told you." Lady Buika said. The heat of anger hid behind that simple statement, and Adel saw danger as Lady Buika's jaw tightened and fists clenched.

Adel then saw the long, hard lines of the warrior's body beneath Lady Buika's silk dress. The stance of the Lady's feet, the calluses not completely hidden upon manicured knuckles, and the sharp, raptor-like focus which mixed with the anger in her eyes. Lady Buika was the first of the Order of Presence and in that moment Adel knew why.

"Yes, but give her a minute please," Fellow Callahan said calmly but he stared very pointedly at Lady Buika. "What we need to say must be explained carefully and in full, wouldn't you agree?"

Lady Buika took a deep calming breath. "You are right of course. You can, however, appreciate how this news is quite unexpected."

Fellow Callahan was leading her towards his quaint wooden house at the end of the garden, but Adel had had enough. "Tell me what?" Adel held out a hand to show she was fine as Fellow Callahan

was about to protest. "Tell me what?" She demanded of Lady Buika.

Lady Buika hesitated, but Fellow Callahan nodded. They could see Adel wasn't going anywhere until someone started giving her some answers.

"He should have told you who you are, and what your lineage is," Lady Buika said steepling her hands.

"And who am I?" Adel asked with more anger than she had intended.

"Why, you are a descendant of Anastasia Quinn, the true messiah. You are the Arbiter and the purest born in generations to the Heirs of Quinn," Lady Buika said the words reverently. "You are the hope of the faith, the anointed one who is destined to lead the Singer's back to Halom's path of righteousness and glory, the one who will cleanse the land of His enemies."

Adel couldn't believe the words spilling out before her. Anastasia Quinn was the name of her doll when she was a child, the name of the heroine in all the bedtime stories and myths her father had told her. Memories of running through the corn field with a toy wooden sword swam through her mind. She and Naira had taken turns pretending to be Anastasia as they fought off hordes of imaginary monsters. "For Halom and country!" She remembered shouting as they ran down the hill and swatted old corn stalks with their toy swords. "Anastasia has judged you wanting!" She yelled in her memory, Adel thought she might have been five, before swinging with all her might. An affronted and forgotten old cob had thumped onto her head as her little wooden sword bowed the middle of the cornstalk. "Ah! It's got me, Naira! Save me!" Adel remembered her dramatic death as she flopped onto the warm black soil. Naira had giggled and cried, "I'll save you!" Her friend ran over and hacked at the dastardly stalk until it finally flopped over and Naira decapitated the offending cob.

It had been one of the hundreds of play acted scenarios they had thought up with Anastasia Quinn as the heroine.

"She's not real," Adel said, but as the words crossed her lips, deep down, she knew them to be a lie. "She was just a story."

Adel looked up at Lady Buika and saw the sad and slightly patronising gaze thrown her way.

No, Adel wouldn't believe it.

"She is telling you the truth," Fellow Callahan said. "Please, there is much to tell, and despite the apparent privacy and seclusion of my garden, there may still be ears listening." He looked pointedly at Lady Buika.

"Yes...please, Adel. We have need of privacy, as it would seem we have much to tell you." Lady Buika swept her hand out to allow Adel to proceed her towards Callahan's house.

It was the tone in their voices which convinced Adel at last. They were serious and believed what they were saying.

As she walked, Adel tried to prepare herself for what they might tell her, but her world had been rocked to its very core. The true messiah? What did that even mean?

She wasn't sure she wanted to find out, but on some level, Adel knew she needed to find out if she was ever to have any hope of controlling the flood of energy waiting to engulf her.

She clenched her jaw, stepped into Fellow Callahan's home and tried to brace herself for truths she didn't want to hear.

* * *

They sat at the old wooden table in silence as Fellow Callahan brewed a pot of tea. Lady Buika looked to be strategising her next move. Adel's apparent ignorance had changed the board upon which they were playing.

"Here we are." Fellow Callahan set down three handleless cups and his teapot.

"Perhaps it is best if you explain what and how your father has trained you. Take us through a typical day." Lady Buika was studying Adel as if she were a prize pig at market and unsure if Adel was worth the asking price.

Adel heard the question through the daze still clouding her mind. She tried to formulate an answer but it felt as if her thoughts trudged through knee-high mud, but as her mind drifted back to the comforting routine she had known on the farm her words began to flow. "We woke in the early hours, just before the sunrise. We would say morning prayer to Halom, then warm-up exercises and go through combat forms and techniques. Then chores on the farm, feed the chickens, mend fences, weeding or whatever was needed for the season. Then first meal. Then sparring practice followed by syphoning practice to cool down and to send energy to any minor injuries from the sparring sessions. Then academics for me and scripture while father tended to duties. He would test me on what I had learned in those few hours. Second meal, then weapon forms, techniques, and practice followed by weapon sparring. Final chores on the farm before the sun set. Last meal, and discussions and readings from the Tenets of the Elohim, then early to bed."

Lady Buika nodded but did not look satisfied. "And when did this routine start?"

Fellow Callahan smiled as if he already knew the answer, and Adel was a bit surprised by the question. "As long as I can remember, my Lady," Adel answered hoping it was enough to satisfy whatever test she was being subjected to.

"That does indeed sound like Leonard," Fellow Callahan said with a sad smile. He looked to her then and it appeared it was his turn to pull out information. "And during these discussions and when you studied scripture...what texts did you discuss, what books did you read?"

Again the question seemed odd. Books? There was only one book of scripture she knew of. "The Tenets, sir. It was always the Tenets of the Elohim."

Fellow Callahan nodded. "And these discussions, did they ever deal with material that might..." he paused and shared a searching look with Lady Buika, "...that might contradict what was written in the Tenets?"

Contradict? "No, sir." Adel had never thought about something contradicting the Tenets of the Elohim before. "We would discuss possible interpretations of some of the passages, and of the deeper lessons within the Tenets, but contradictions....no."

"You never read a small blue leather bound book, never spoke of Anastasia Quinn as anything other than as a mythical hero?" Lady Buika's disbelief was obvious.

"No, my Lady, to both questions," Adel answered. She held her hands together nervously. She was disappointing them somehow and they were angry at her father. She waited with a growing dread for the next question.

“How could he-” Lady Buika’s anger threatened to explode from the now very dangerous looking woman. Adel tensed, ready for a physical attack about to be unleashed.

“I think that is enough for now.” Fellow Callahan’s hand touched the Lady’s wrist and cut off the outburst before it truly began. “I think I grasp Leonard’s rationale.” His eyes flicked down to the sword at Adel’s hip. “Though not fully.”

“His rationale?” Lady Buika’s fury twisted her beautiful face into something almost primal. “What possible reason could he-”

“He has given her a choice.” Fellow Callahan’s clipped words cut through the fury like a sword stroke. “Not much of one, mind you, but a choice nonetheless.”

“A choice?” She hesitated in thought for a moment and then frowned as she understood.

“Yes,” the older man patted Adel’s hand as he saw her look of confusion. “A chance to make her own mind up about all of this.”

Fellow Callahan and Lady Buika shared a knowing look and they both sighed at a remembered sadness.

“Where to begin?” Fellow Callahan held the cup of tea in his hand swirled it in thought. “There are many within the faith, who have different views on the accuracy and interpretations of some of the histories within the Tenets of the Elohim.”

Lady Buika rolled her eyes at Fellow Callahan who ignored her.

“Your father, the Lady Buika, and I are all believers of this different interpretation of past events. We call ourselves Quinnites after Anastasia Quinn, whom we believe was the real messiah, not Meskaiwa.” Callahan spoke calmly as if he were putting forward a simple idea to think about and debate, but the connotations of it shook Adel’s world to the core.

“But...” Adel tried to understand, “why, who is this Anastasia Quinn? Why was she so important?” Adel had read history books during her studies. There was no mention of Anastasia Quinn she could recall.

“Anastasia Quinn had another name, a much more infamous name.” Fellow Callahan paused. “The Dread Queen was the title the northern realms gave her. The woman who lead the Soulless hordes. Yet, it is always the victors who write the history books. In the south, there are many who still speak of her as a demi-god. To them, she was the Arbiter of Justice, Halom’s judgement in the mortal form of a champion. She carried a dark blade which would only cut if you were an enemy to the faithful, an enemy to Halom.”

Adel’s hand shook as it found the hilt of the dark sword at her side. There and then, it suddenly felt as if she grasped a viper waiting to lash out.

“Now, many of the stories told so long ago have obviously been embellished, and we know the sword you carry will cut any who touch it, the same as any other blade. But Anastasia Quinn was a real person, and the sword she inherited is the same you hold now. She heard Halom’s Will sing through her just as Meskaiwa did, and she performed miracles aplenty as well.” Fellow Callahan shrugged his shoulders. “Meskaiwa Denii, no doubt, was a very noble and religious man as well, by all accounts a very good man who helped many people.”

“So this is all just some argument over who was more holy thousands of years ago?” Adel was

getting somewhat annoyed. If this was just some philosophical debate why all the secrecy?

“It’s far more than just an argument,” Lady Buika hissed. “There has been an ongoing war within the faith for hundreds of years. Secret societies plotting, politicking and killing in the name of the true messiah have quietly changed rulers of nations, and the destinies of kingdoms. Faith unifies the people, and faith speaks to the hearts of those people, common and royal alike. Yet, even if that is not enough of a reason, there is more.” Lady Buika leant closer. “Anastasia was meant to win. It was only through the North’s unholy alliance with the Navutian giants that turned the tide of the war. Meskaiwa is a false prophet-”

“Well, that is possibly too harsh, there may have been two during-” Fellow Callahan interjected.

“A false prophet,” Lady Buika spoke over him, her voice cracking like a whip, “and who’s followers would have all three of us here killed if they had any hint of the truth of who you were.” Lady Buika’s eyes shot icy daggers straight into Adel’s very soul.

“But...my father. He fought in the Union Wars. He was a champion of the faith, for the very Singers you say would kill us now.” Adel had to look away from the Lady’s stare, this wasn’t making sense.

“Yes, he fought for the Singers, but he was also our champion, hidden in plain sight. To the masses, your father was the mysterious Black Hand of the Singers, a righteous assassin and warrior used with clinical precision against the enemies of the Union and the Singer Faith. However, to those few who kept the Quinnite rebellion alive in their hearts, we knew him as the Arbiter and the greatest and purest of the Heirs of Quin for ten generations. If it was not for the sudden outbreak of the Union Wars, where our enemies of the faith joined with the unexpected power of Ronaston Mihane’s Syklan Knights, well...let’s just say you and your father would be holding some very holy and royal positions of power right now.”

“What?” Adel could barely keep up.

“Your father was meant to be Hierophant and your mother queen.” Fellow Callahan sighed and turned to Lady Buika. “You know you have damned her now, to the same fate as ours if we are found out?” Callahan studied the tall and proud woman for a moment longer. “Of course you did.”

It was the first time Adel had seen anger cross Fellow Callahan’s face.

“My mother...” Adel found the breath catching in her chest. “Father... he would never speak of her other than to say she died in the wars.”

The other two were silent for a moment as they shared a look.

“You’ve already trapped her in this with us,” Fellow Callahan said as he shook his head, “she might as well know the rest of it. She deserves to know this.”

Lady Buika fixe Adel with another of her icy stares. “Adel, your mother was the Queen of Baufinn, Tabitha Grey.”

The shocks continued to come, one after another for Adel. She felt numb.

“But the King and Queen, along with the entire royal family and most of the nobility were killed when the Navutians sacked New Toeron,” Adel said through the dazed fog within her mind.

“Not all of the royal family...” Lady Buika said, looking pointedly at her. “We found you. Your father arrived too late to save Tabitha, but he killed those responsible before they could get to you, and

it wasn't the Navutians who killed the royal family." She paused and Adel saw a hint of anger and outrage flash across Lady Buika's face. "The Singers discovered the secret of how Queen Tabitha's baby was conceived, and that you were not the King's baby. They took the opportunity of the Navutian raid and set forth to purge the Quinnites from Bauffin. You see Queen Tabitha, who was my longtime friend and akin to my sister, was also an Heir of Quinn, yet from a different line than that of your father. I, along with some other trusted friends within the Quinnites, helped them to meet in secret so they could conceive a child, you, Adel. The bloodlines of Quinn were to be united and you were to be the heir of the Bauffish throne, and later, once your father had secured his position as Hierophant, your true bloodline would be revealed."

This is all just a dream, Adel thought to herself. Somehow, all of it had to be a dream. It was too unbelievable to be true. She was just a girl from a small little farm, on a small little island in the middle of nowhere. Her father had been a good soldier who fought within the Singers enlisted men. That was all. But she couldn't stop herself from hearing more.

"We tried to execute the plan, despite the war. But it all came unravelled and we chose to go back into hiding. Your father was meant to have told you all this. We have been preparing for your return for sixteen years." Lady Buika's passion touched every word, while Fellow Callahan sat quietly listening to them and watching Adel carefully.

Just a dream, Adel repeated to herself. It has to be. "Is what she says true?" Adel looked up to meet Fellow Callahan's eyes but part of her didn't know why she should still trust this old man, he had been part of all this as well.

"It is true. You are the daughter of Queen Tabitha Grey, and by blood heir to the Bauffish throne. The Mihane's sit in your place, though they know it not. Everyone of consequence believes you to be dead, to have been killed by the Navutians like they believe your parents were. Only some of the Singer ruling elite, like the Hierophant and only a few of the Seraphim, know who truly killed your mother and would-be stepfather, but as all of their agents were also killed by your true father during the attempt, they have no reason to believe are still alive." He took a deep breath and sighed. "It is true that those of us within the Quinnite Rebellion who knew the truth have been waiting for you to return to us. And lastly, and I am certainly sorry for this, it is true that if the Singers knew who you really were, they would use every resource within their power to get rid of you."

Adel stood from the chair slowly. The room was just too small. This was all too much. She had come here to be a Syklan, just like the other initiates. She didn't want any titles, or thrones, or crowns. "I...I..." Adel didn't know what to say. She wanted out. "I...need some air."

"Why didn't he tell her?!" Lady Buika demanded of Fellow Callahan. The Hafaza champion stood to bar the door from Adel.

"Oh, dear Lady, can you not see?" Fellow Callahan stood as well and ushered Lady Buika out of the way. "It was the one thing few of us expected to happen."

"What are you talking about you old fool?" Lady Buika made no attempt at hiding her anger any longer.

"Love," Fellow Callahan said simply. "The love of a father for his daughter."

"Love?" The answer had shocked her, and Lady Buika grudgingly stepped aside.

Fellow Callahan helped Adel to the door and opened it for her.

Sweet and fresh air filled the room and Adel felt she could breathe once again.

“Yes,” Callahan smiled and shook his head in wonder. “On that tiny island out in the middle of nowhere, Leonard Corbin, one of the hardest, most righteous and most efficient killers we’ve ever known, had his heart melted by a baby girl and somehow learned to be a half-decent father.”

Lady Buika opened her mouth to shout, but Fellow Callahan’s open hand whipped in front her face snake-quick to forestall her.

“You have never had children, so you do not know their power. The power nature gives to them. And once you feel that power, even a man like Leonard Corbin, wants nothing more than to protect the small, innocent child who gives you their unconditional love. Love trumps duty, almost every time. Leonard did not want to trap Adel into the path everyone else set for her, to burden her with that fate. But her powers became too strong, so he had to send her to me, and thus to us. In his mind, he let his daughter grow up without this burden looming above her. He tried to shield her from the realities of his world for as long as he could, and in the end, would not force his daughter to be the new Arbiter. He’s trained her in body, blade and faith so she could fill the role, but in the end, the choice will be hers.” Callahan smiled as he spoke and put a gentle hand on Adel’s shoulder. “This must be a lot to take in. You will need time, but I must stress, you cannot speak of this to anyone else. Do you understand?”

Adel nodded. “I understand.”

She saw the cage surround her which her father had tried for so long to protect her from. Memories began to click into place, and enough of them began to make a different kind of sense. They were telling the truth. Deep down, she knew it to be true.

The sound of a giant bell struck as the giant bronze clock within the Academy’s clock tower struck nine bells. She had to go to her next class.

“Weaponised Conduit training, isn’t it?” Lady Buika asked with a raised brow. “I shall escort you. Don’t want you getting lost now do we?” The smile she showed Adel had nothing to do with the friendly gesture her words hinted of.

She didn’t trust Adel.

“Thank you, Lady Buika. It would be appreciated,” Adel managed to say. She didn’t know if she wanted to cry, scream, run or do all three at the same time.

Adel bowed her head and walked away from the garden which had only yesterday been a safe haven. Now...well, now she didn’t know what it was.

Fellow Callahan saw them off. He gave Adel a look of compassion, a look which said he was there for her.

He hoped he was, but at that moment, Adel had no idea who she could trust.

“And Anastasia was victorious over the dark hordes and Halom saw her courage and her goodness and knew He had found His daughter once again. Halom embraced Anastasia in His arms and welcomed her home. Together they ascended back to heaven where Anastasia waited for the next time her people would need her courage. And there, still she waits, ever vigilant, ever ready, to one day return and fight back the darkness when our need is greatest,” her Father’s words echoed in

her mind, and it shook Adel to her bones. Her father had ended so many of their playtime games with the same litany. He had always smiled and hugged her, at the end of the game. She would jump into his arms and he would carry her back to the house, just like Halom taking Anastasia back to heaven. It was part of her most cherished childhood memories and, she now realised, was his way of teaching her of the creed she had been born into.

She walked the rest of the way to class in silence, alone with her memories which continued to twist her childhood with every step she took.