

“Sa ser e tsnvel. Siro tsaghiky, nra karmir vardn u nra jrery sareri verevi yerknk'its' ein galis: Nra nvernery mez, t'ert'ikner, siro, jur, ptghaberut'yan, urakhut'yun, geghets'kut'yan hamar. (This is how love was born. Love's flower, her red rose and its waters came from the sky above the mountains. Her gifts to us, petals for love, water for fertility, joy for beauty.)”

-Sophenen Saying

Taline finished the last stroke with her makeup stick and looked at herself critically in the mirror. She hadn't used as much ceruse today, having decided upon ochre from Farundia instead. The stuff was expensive but it set off the kohl around her eyes perfectly. She smiled and spun in a circle twirling her dress around before turning to leave. Today was very important, her first Vardavar without her parents. She was finally allowed to dress as she chose and walk amongst the people! Many times at school other girls would tell her how lovely her life must be because she was the princess, but in truth it wasn't. Everything she did was weighed, controlled, and judged, it was actually quite awful. She had long ago accepted this though as the heir to Sophe. Taline shook herself and smiled as she opened the doors to her apartments with a grand gesture, today would be a good day!

Gurgen was there of course, the gruff soldier followed her everywhere, it was his job to keep her safe. “You look beautiful, princess.”

She rolled her eyes elaborately as they started walking down the hallway. “Thank you Gurgen, but my parents pay you to say such things.”

He looked a little insulted and she immediately felt sorry for what she'd said to the man. “That is unfair princess, I am your hetaireia. I am not here to kiss your feet.”

Taline smiled and laughed before twitching his mustache, a habit she'd had since she was a little girl. “I know, I'm sorry Gurgen. Come on, let's hurry, I want to be at the festival as long as possible!” She turned down a hallway to the left trying to avoid the palace's main entry hall and stopped as Gurgen cleared his throat loudly. She looked at him, sighing. “Do we have to?”

He looked very nonchalant as always when he advised her. “It is not my job to tell the princess what to do. Your mother however went through a lot of trouble organizing your unveiling for Vardavar.”

Taline nodded, there was no use being elaborate or arguing the point, he was right. She started walking down the main corridor and he followed her a few paces behind as always. “You are right Gurgen, thank you.” She hated it when he was right, mostly because it usually meant she was wrong, which happened way too often for her liking. Though she



supposed that was the point of having an older more experienced Innatraean there to advise her. Did her parents ever get tired of their advisors?

The walk to the main entry hall was straight forward and short from here, so it didn't take them very long. Though the route she'd chosen at first was longer she would have much preferred it, all the attention was not for her. One of the maids had even stopped and clapped for her on their way here, whether it was in congratulations for her coming of age or how she had dressed Taline wasn't sure. The idea that their people should adore her simply because she was their princess bothered Taline. Sophenen were strong people and they should know better, respect was earned not given. Maybe it was because they were servants in the palace? She would have to ask Gurgen about that later.

Taline took a deep breath and sighed, willing her hands away from straightening her dress. It was time and there was no use putting it off any longer, she nodded to the door attendants and tried to smile as the two massive doors were opened, admitting her to the main entry hall. The avetaber's voice seemed to echo loudly throughout the chamber as everyone turned to look at her. "Her Royal highness, Taline Bagdhasaryan, princess of Sophene!"

Taline stepped into the hall while looking around at all the Sophenen nobles gathered there. Then she met her mother's eyes and paused for a moment, waiting. Her mother nodded almost imperceptibly and Taline felt her face lighting up as she smiled. The court annoyed her, she much preferred the streets of Sophene themselves, but approval from her mother meant everything. The smile didn't last long however as she looked around the entry hall again. She would have to employ every trick she had to extricate herself quickly enough to see the festival and not insult anyone too grievously. Then she remembered a story Gurgen had once told her, about using one force against another to trick them into allowing you to retreat from battle. Maybe such would work with politics as well.

She didn't look at him but spoke out of the side of her mouth, she knew he would be there standing just to her left and one step back. "Gurgen, I have need of you." She could tell by his resigned sigh that he already didn't like whatever she had planned.



Gurgen smiled to himself inside while watching the princess, it was important to keep a stern face when guarding her. She was walking and looking up into the sky watching a flurry of rose petals being carried past her by the wind. The smile on her face was one of pure wonder, she'd seen the festival before of course, but she was older now, at that age when ideas of love first started expressing themselves. He looked away for just a moment to scan the street ahead, most Sophenen would never hurt their princess, but he was her hetaireia so keeping her safe was more than his job; it was his life's purpose.

When he looked back at the princess he noticed she had stopped and was staring at something while touching her lips, with a peculiar look on her face. He followed her gaze and sighed upon seeing a young couple kissing under a distant walnut tree. The princess was definitely thinking about things she shouldn't be. He couldn't blame her though, she was young and this was Vardavar, everyone was thinking about love today. He stopped next to her. "Princess, they will be releasing the largest bloom of rose petals soon, then pouring the rose water into the river. We should go watch."

The princess didn't reply for a moment, obviously lost in thought still, then she shook herself and looked at him a bit embarrassed. "That is a wonderful idea Gurgen! I'll meet you at the statue of Anahit in the main plaza!" Without another word she started to run.

Gurgen put a hand on his sword hilt to keep it stationary and started to run after her. Truthfully he had expected as much. When she was a child the princess had enjoyed playing a game she amusingly called korts'nel hetaireia or "lose the retainer." Thankfully the crowds here were light now, most of them were already at the main plaza, though there were still small groups shopping for goods or playing games at festival booths. Most paid neither of them much attention besides noting their presence and smiling or laughing. The princess stopped up ahead and looked at one of the booths, it was a fortune teller.

Gurgen caught up to her a few heartbeats later and stopped at her side. She flashed that innocent troublemaker's smile his way, making him sigh. Then she held out her hand. "I want to get my fortune read for Vardavar!" He opened the purse and handed her a few silver pennies, fortune tellers always charged more during festivals. A few foreigners looked their way quizzically, probably because it looked like an old grizzled soldier giving a noble coin. They didn't understand that it was his job to carry the princess' purse for her. She smiled and turned to go inside the booth. "Thank you Gurgen!"

The Fortune Teller was an older woman with a myriad of strange gemmed jewelry, color dyed clothing, sigils hanging around her neck, rings, and odd tattoos. In Gurgen's experience all fortune tellers were either like this or young and beautiful, she looked up as they entered and smiled. He saw the old woman's quick eye movement as she looked over her new guests, though he wasn't sure that the princess did. "Would the young lady like her fortune read? Is she perhaps interested in love? Fate?" She gestured mysteriously



over the table in front of her and opened her old wrinkled hands revealing a deck of cards. "Lady Siran knows all..."

Gurgen rolled his eyes at the elaborate nonsense, but the princess didn't seem to notice. She slapped the silver pennies onto the fortune teller's table and clapped her hands excitedly. "Yes, all of that! Tell me everything!" He couldn't help but smile at her exuberance. It was amazing how quickly she changed from the calculating young woman of this morning who had played nobles against each other and caused a scene just so she could leave sooner, to the now innocently excited young girl. She was in that age of transition, becoming the woman she was meant to be; but still remembering the child she had been most of her life.

The fortune teller didn't even spare him a glance, instead focusing on the princess completely as she made the coins disappear while making a big show of shuffling her cards and spreading them out on the table with a sweep of her hands. She was focused entirely on the princess which he expected, most of these so called fortune tellers were grifters and knew their trade well, she had to know exactly who the princess was. But grifting aside, having your fortune read was relatively harmless, and he would make sure that was all this was. The old woman closed her eyes and floated her hands above the cards, before choosing one at random and sliding it in front of the princess. She tapped the card with her fingers and flipped it over with a flourish, revealing an illustration of crossed swords. She looked at the princess pointedly. "The two of swords, an interesting beginning to your reading. It can mean either duality or conflicting natures."

The princess leaned forward looking enthralled. "Oh, how interesting. Please continue!" The second card would have made Gurgen nervous if he believed in such frippery, it was Death. The princess looked at the fortune teller. "How can someone die twice?"

The old woman took on what Gurgen assumed was supposed to be a mysterious but also knowing look. "It could be simple, two deaths." The princess' eyes widened and the old woman continued. "Of course it could also be something more complicated, the death or transition of one's nature."

The princess looked at Gurgen and smiled as if to say she hoped he wouldn't die, then looked back at the old woman. "What's next!?"

The Ace of Wands revealed itself and the old woman smiled. "A sign of powerful magic.* She glanced at the card of Death. "Whatever death has in store for you it is not the end, but a new and powerful beginning."



The princess rubbed her chin, eyes thoughtful. "That is very interesting, it could mean so many things." She focused back on the table immediately however as the old woman flipped over the fourth card.

"The World. Another powerful card." She looked at princess as if she was about to impart some very valuable information. "This card could mean you are destined to go out into the world." She touched the first card again. "Or, given the Two of swords, bring the world to your home in Sophene."

"I have always wanted to see more of Innatraea. But I wonder how one brings the world home with them?" The princess tapped her chin thoughtfully. "Maybe a foreign husband or an alliance."

Gurgen almost choked when the princess said husband, but he chose to remain silent. She was not quite at marrying age yet and Sophenen royal marriages were normally arranged. A foreign husband arranged by the parents to form an alliance perhaps? His eyes widened and he shook himself, this fortune teller stuff was nonsense. The old woman was reaching for the fifth and final card. Then her hand paused and quivered for a moment while an odd look crossed her face. Part of the act? Maybe this was where she would finally ask for more coin based upon some foretelling nonsense.

After another brief moment the old woman shook herself and reached for the last card again. Gurgen glanced at the princess, but she seemed to have not noticed the hesitation. Then as the old woman picked up the last card another seemed to stick to it, the old woman shook her hand but the second card didn't drop away. Gurgen sighed, this was it then, a request for more coins would be coming shortly. The princess leaned forward intently. "Can I see them both?"

The old woman smiled and placed both cards down before separating them on the table. She had one hand on each and looked at the princess. "An extra card costs an extra coin."

Gurgen rolled his eyes but didn't say anything, one more coin wasn't anything the princess would care about. Sure enough she didn't even speak, only reached her hand back towards him and made a gesture with her fingers. He grunted, registering his discontent, but she just made the gesture again with her fingers; so he dropped another silver penny into her hand. She immediately put it on the table and looked at the old woman. "I want to see both cards, it's very interesting how they stuck together."

Surprisingly the old woman didn't immediately filch the new coin but instead smiled and lifted her hands to flip over the first of those two cards. Her face took on that odd look again as a wayward breeze blew through the tent lifting up one of the two cards and leaving it to rest on top of the other. The old woman seemed to gather herself, taking it in



stride and reaching to flip over the top card. In truth Gurgen wasn't sure how she had managed the breeze, it was strange. As she flipped over the card however they stuck together again and both cards landed on the table face up. The Lovers and The Dragon. The old woman looked shocked, but only for a brief moment before eyeing the princess again. "A very powerful combination rarely seen. The combination of a great love and the ancestral dragons of Sophene." She met the princess' eyes. "You are meant for great things in this life, princess Taline."

The princess smiled, eyes going wide while she clapped her hands. "Did you hear that Gurgen? It's wonderful, I'm so excited. Do you think he will be handsome and have his own dragon?!" She got to her feet and headed out of the tent. "Thank you, Lady Siran!"

As they started walking he noticed the princess looking around more, especially at the foreign men amongst the small crowds. "Princess we should be getting to the main plaza, we will be late."

The princess laughed and patted his cheek before twitching his mustache. "You're always so practical Gurgen! By the dragon gods it's alright to have a little fun with me sometimes!" She looked around again as she started walking faster. "None of these men have dragons anyway. Do you think he will be handsome? Maybe he will be a powerful and skilled warrior like you, or a king!"

He smiled but didn't reply, it was best to let the princess enjoy her exuberance when she was in these moods and entertaining her fantasies, so long as it was just talk. As they neared the main plaza a large flurry of rose petals blew past them on a strong breeze, fluttering over the princess in their passage, a few even caught in her hair. She smiled and turned to watch them fly down a side alley, then ran after them. Gurgen sighed and chased after her again. When he entered the alleyway she was standing straight ahead of him, staring at a vishapakar, or "dragon stone." These ancient statues were scattered throughout Sophene and represented the ancient dragon gods of their people. Oddly he didn't recall there having been one here before and it looked bigger than most, but he also didn't really look out for the old statues anyway, because they didn't represent part of his duty. As he walked closer to her the princess did not move. A cold breeze blew through the alleyway and he shivered.

He touched her shoulder gently. "Princess are you alright?"

She shook herself and looked in his direction, her gaze seemed to be somewhere else, but then her eyes focused on him. "Gurgen, I'm not feeling well, I want to go home."

He knew better than to press the issue, but he offered her his arm in case she was tired. Surprisingly she took it and leaned against him slightly as they started walking back to the



castle. "Of course princess." He looked back for a brief moment at the vishapakar, having the distinct feeling it was watching them. He shook himself, whatever was to come he would protect her.



