

## 5. Death and Promises

Fae drank at the service counter and insisted to several patrons and hosts the entire time that he knew nothing about any witch spies or militia messengers in spite of ongoing disbelief and relentless inquisition. By the time Ethaeldra arrived, the inquisition exhausted Fae and her presence finally provided an excuse to conduct a retreat then collecting drinks, the couple sought shelter in the darkest corner they found and sat quietly for a moment.

“I hear rumor of witch spies and militia messengers rushing about the streets and leaving town in a hurry.” Ethaeldra commented with a sarcastic smile and a tone containing a hint of mockery. “I suppose I’ll know something officially no later than tomorrow, along with everyone else.” she continued perhaps a bit impatient with his silence, “-so you successfully kept your militia secrets from me. Well done, Fae.”

Exhaling, Fae held his mouth open as if to speak. Moments passed then Ethaeldra sighed in frustration and explained, “The point is I don’t care about access to privileged information - I’m disappointed you obviously don’t trust me any more than any casual acquaintance that brings you drinks or asks you questions at the service. Just once, I wish you could figure out something like that all by yourself. If you so much as guessed the reason for my disappointment, I wouldn’t care about the secrecy.”

Fae nodded then shook his head respectively in a combination of acknowledgement of her explanation and embarrassment over his ignorance. With apparent genuine surprise, Ethaeldra inquired, “How can you investigate total strangers from a distance, determine their most probable behavior and the most practical and least hazardous way to kill them, and then know no better than to lie to a girlfriend?”

Subsequent to a moment of contemplation and in the apparent absence of a credible answer, Fae simply remarked, “Maybe if you carried weapons and snuck up on me in the woods I would anticipate your sensitivities better.” then as if in afterthought, he inquired, “-and how do you know what I do anyway?”

“I know what scouts do. I know how long you’ve been a scout. It’s an easy guess, Fae.” she contended and after a moment suspended by a sympathetic stare, Ethaeldra implored, “So tell me what is happening already. The suspense is killing me.”

With a shrug, Fae stated impassively, “War is what is happening. What else would ever happen? You knew that much without asking, right?”

“So, tell me about it. What are the particulars?” Ethaeldra demanded.

“It’s not local.” Fae stated raising his eyebrows in acknowledgement of her reaction as Ethaeldra dropped her mouth open and Fae further explained, “We’re going to walk about three weeks away, join up with a couple other armies then kill about fifty-thousand hard cases from somewhere out east. The scenario is they’ll otherwise gobble up other countries and armies then end up here a couple years later with possibly more than a hundred-thousand bodies. We’ve decided it’s time to change practices, time for alliances and diplomacy so we detect threats early and snuff them out young.”

Shaking her head, Ethaeldra sarcastically inquired, “Are we also going to open up some trade routes then while we’re at it?”

“I know.” Fae conceded, “We all recognize the contradictions but these are the conditions. We didn’t sit around and cook this up, this came to us, and our choice is sit here and wait for legions to come sweep over us in a day, or change our practices-”

“-Change to what?” Ethaeldra impulsively demanded.

“It’s convoluted logic and a compromise,” Fae argued, “everybody knows that, but everything the militia has ever done has always been a compromise. That’s who we are. We’re the compromise that preserves integrity. The difference is compromised principles versus assimilation. You can have the compromise of a militia that still preserves your humanity or you can have politicians and economists come here and show you the proper way for humans to live, and trust me, once they start explaining it to you, you’re going to immediately wish for the compromise of a militia.”

“Don’t talk to me like a recruit, Fae... I comprehend the consequences.” Ethaeldra assured then fidgeting for a moment, she inquired, “-and you have to go on this?”

Struggling to choose words cautiously, Fae explained, “It’s not me personally... It’s my position, my function... The function I serve is a necessity.”

With a skeptical glance, Ethaeldra asked, “What function is that, Fae?”

With a degree of apparent reluctance, Fae explained, “I joined the militia the day I turned seventeen. That was a choice. I have never chosen anything since then. For whatever reason by whatever circumstances, I am where I am. This is my function. I have to be a part of it. I have no choice.”

Ethaeldra shook her head and asserted with a scowl, “Nobody stays in the militia this long. Nobody stays this long and still goes out every summer to patrol. You should have resigned twenty years ago. You’ve made nothing but choices. Nobody will fault you for calling enough, enough. You have other choices. You could choose to quit. You could choose to marry me. Why does the only choice always have to be the one that presents the highest probability of death?”

Fae stated firmly, “All choices always present an absolute certainty of death.”

With a sigh, Ethaeldra suppressed a smile then sarcastically remarked, “Oh, that’s encouraging. I’m trying to talk you into choosing me over death, and this is important enough to you to present me with witticisms?” With a pause to sip from her drink, Ethaeldra tilted her head somewhat ponderously then asked, “What do you want from me, Fae? Do you want me to wait for you forever, while you choose one war after another over me? Should I love you even though you will never choose me? Should I love you in spite of all this?”

“... No.” Fae answered perhaps somewhat unexpectedly then concluded, “You should love me because of all this.”

Closing her eyes, Ethaeldra sat silently for some time then finally confided, “I can’t promise you I will still be here for you when you get back.”

Fae defensively argued, “I have never asked you-”

“-Of course you have never asked me.” she concurred raising her voice slightly then pausing to compose herself, Ethaeldra took a deep breath and remarked, “Yes... I’ve noticed. I appreciate your many sacrifices.”

“You know it’s not martyrdom.” Fae responded patiently, “I just don’t want you to love me because of some obligation.”

“-and I don’t want you to love me because of some convenience.” she countered then glancing around discreetly perhaps self-conscious of her volume, Ethaeldra exhaled slowly and asserted, “I need you to choose me, Fae, for something other than a prank on a recruit. I’m not trying to tamper with nature or alter fate. I just need you to choose me. Make a declaration... Am I not worth fighting for? Am I not what you fight for?”

Staring into her eyes for a moment with something of a pleading look, Fae insisted, “That is exactly what I am doing. I really ought to be more obvious to you by now. I’m not choosing anything over you - I’m just doing what I think I have to do. I can’t stay here and indulge myself while everyone else goes and does this for me. I can still walk and use both my arms. I just can’t stop until I know I’m useless-” Ethaeldra raised her eyebrows in reaction and Fae held up a hand to restrain her from comment, imploring, “Don’t overreact. You know I’m not suggesting everyone else is useless and selfishly indulging themselves. I’m just saying those that don’t respond when their specific function is needed are useless and selfish... Of course, I want you to be here for me if-when I get back. I just want to know it’s what you want and not because of some promise or sense of obligation. I’m sorry if I can’t say the right thing or say it the right way, but... I’m saying things to you I never believed I would ever say to anyone and it’s incredibly difficult for me. I think I feel what you need me to feel - I’m just not good at relationships that don’t involve frequent beatings and killings. Please make allowances for that... I’m really trying here...”

Ethaeldra sat quiet and still, carefully examining Fae, not necessarily impressed, for she evidently believed she knew him too well, nor completely unconvinced. With a dramatic pause, Fae stated, “You really look beautiful in the candlelight.” Ethaeldra demonstrated no reaction and continued studying him then Fae motioned with his hands as if to amend his comment and declared, “That is... you are **particularly** beautiful in the candlelight.”

Clenching her lips together with the slightest hint of a smile at one corner of her mouth, Ethaeldra concluded, “You really are easily impressed with yourself, aren’t you?” Fae restrained from any further cleverness and simply stared at her affectionately until Ethaeldra finally inhaled then exhaled deeply and informed him, “Of course, I’ll consider it. Maybe I’ll close my curtains, confine myself to my bed and spend all my days sulking in the dark obsessing for you in your absence but probably only because I’m too lazy to find anyone better even though it can’t possibly be all that difficult.” Holding her breath a moment, Ethaeldra nodded slightly as if in concession then in a more serious tone, she rhetorically inquired, “You want no obligatory commitments? Fine, I promise you nothing. Just remember if you regret it later, you asked for it.”

“Duly noted.” Fae replied then equivocated, “In the meantime, until or if you should change your mind, I welcome your continuing unrestrained adoration.”

Ethaeldra responded with a smirk, “I’m sure I can hardly contain myself.”