

The clanking of metal rang around me as I heard someone come up from behind.

"Father," I said, acknowledging his presence as I had been taught to so long ago. I turned to meet his worn face, slightly less familiar than before the war had left its mark. Regardless, he stood broadly and didn't seem to be at all phased by the occasional shakes and rattles of the warship beneath him.

"How are you feeling, Father?"

Was I meant to call him "Father" or "Sir"? I wasn't sure I knew anymore. I suppose this means the war left a mark on me too, though I was young.

"Could be a whole lot worse," he replied, his voice as gruff and raspy as ever. He reached into an inner pocket on his coat, the pocket where he'd once had a photo of Mother. Instead, he pulled out a package of cigars. I glared at him, making sure he saw my disapproval was written all over my face.

"Now, now, son. I've been doing this for 20 years, and I don't plan on quitting anytime soon," he chuckled.

"That's the issue," I replied simply and blankly, not interested in continuing this conversation, knowing it wouldn't get me anywhere. I've tried so many times before, after all.

"And hold on, where did the photo of Mother go?" I paused, feeling almost betrayed. "That's all you have left of her... What happened to her being your *most cherished thing in the world*?"

"C'mon, Dar, you know it's been hard for me too-"

"Clearly not, if you've gotten over it so quickly!" I didn't let him finish, not in the mood to hear any of his excuses.

"The war is over. I'm doing my best to leave everything about that terrible time behind me." My father spoke with his usual tone, seeming to feel no emotion.

"And that includes the people who died in it, I suppose?" I retaliated, turning my back on him and walking away from the railing.

The wind washed away the rest of his words as I stomped off.

"Darius," the voice wouldn't stop. "She's not dead."

"What? There's no way she's not. They took her, didn't they?"

Instead of giving me the reply that I hoped for, my father leaned on the railing and sighed, the smoke from his cigar fading into the air.

The war: a time nobody will ever be able to forget. And to think it all started over something simple. An arranged marriage was announced to the public, Rastaria and Blaston, a match "made by the gods", they had said. Little did the people know, the whole kingdom was roped into the deal.

On the day of the wedding, the royals' true motives were unveiled. The citizens of Rastaria were packed into groups, parents separated from their children, and all marched across the gruelling terrain to join the Blaston community. The land of Rastaria had been failing for years, so the king became desperate and signed the deal. However, his daughter, though repulsed by the idea, was forced to follow through with his plan.

In the years that followed, the people of Rastaria were turned into slaves, either working in the mines to fuel the airships or making the ships themselves. Darius's father, Achilles, was

one of these people, toiling day and night over many years to ensure his survival, and eventually, that of his son.

“Darius, it’s complicated.” I could tell he wasn’t sure I was ready for the heavy truth of it all, trying to keep me safe by keeping me in the dark.

“Okay, Sir.” I said through gritted teeth, “Then send the airship down. Our patrol period is over.”

“Why? Don’t you like the clear air at this altitude?” All the words he was spouting seemed so fake now, and whose fault was that?

“If you won’t tell me what happened, I’m fully capable of unravelling it myself.”

As the airship hovered at the dock, I hurried off to the library, determined to find answers. Passing through the crowded streets always felt different every time, the odours of sweet pastries one day, and the savoury smells of the various meat dishes the vendors were selling the next. The tall white buildings that scattered the streets seemed to make them brighter as their red-tiled roofs shone in the sun.

Before long, I made my way up the daunting stone stairs of the library and heaved open the massive oak doors. The musty smell of aged books wafted towards me as I walked in, peering around. Since I had been there so much as a child, I knew what general direction I would have to search.

After stumbling around for a few minutes, I found the historical tomes that I was looking for. Flipping through the pages of a book with a worn leather cover, I stopped to read the list of

contents. I slid my finger down the list, *Founding Rastaria, Life Before the War, The Great Marriage...* this was going to take a while.

I found myself an old wooden chair and settled in to read. The text was filled with tales I had heard as a child, though some of it was completely new to me, and quite frankly, shocking. I knew the slaves had risen up against their captors in Blaston, but I was amazed to learn that my father, of all people, was the head of it. I picked up another book about the war and started to sift through it. *Maybe this won't be as boring as I thought it would be.* As I read more about the years following the uprising, I discovered that not long after the forced marriage, the princess had become pregnant, though the child, apparently, had died at birth. Distraught, the princess snuck away from the heart of Blaston for several months. Eventually, the prince found her hiding out in an abandoned storage shed on the outskirts of the city and brought her back, where she was forced to live the life assigned to her once more. *The forced marriage, the loss of a child, and living captive to a husband? How awful,* I thought.

After reading about several more horrible events, exhaustion set in. There was so much information to process, so I trudged out of town, through the outskirts and towards the steep, rocky cliff that overlooked the village. I hoisted myself onto a ledge and grabbed a handful of stones, hurling them towards the pathway below.

“Ugh!” someone exclaimed.

Darn, I hit someone. “Sorry about that! Are you okay?”

I swallowed the lump in my throat as the face emerged into view. “F-f-father?”

“What was that all about?” my dad asked. “You almost nailed me right in the eye!”

“Sorry, I didn’t know you were there,” I hesitated, “but now that you *are* here, maybe you could fill in a few blanks?”

“Okay, shoot.”

“Well, for starters, how come you never told me you were head of *the uprising at Blaston?*”

His face sank, the muscles holding up a smile suddenly pulled down as the weight of the truth seeped in. “Well, I,” he paused, seeming overwhelmed with thoughts. “How did you find out anyway?”

“Answer me first,” I demanded, tired of him beating around the bush. “Well?”

My father found himself a spot on the rocky terrain and slumped down, defeated. “Alright then,” he heaved a deep breath, “if you’ve paid any attention during your history classes, you’d know about the problems leading up to the enslavement of our people and what followed, but since you’ve never cared about that sort of thing, let me fill you in on a few parts of our history.”

“Dad, I know all this already, c’mon. Get to the part where you tell me about *you*,” I huffed.

Father’s gaze went straight to his hands resting on his lap, wrestling with the buttons at the waist of his jacket, clearly unsettled. “Where to start?” he mumbled before looking back up at the mountain range for inspiration. “You’re 15 now, right? I honestly didn’t think you’d be able to handle all this when you were younger, but now you’ve gone ahead and discovered it all for yourself, haven’t you? Yes, you’re right, I lead the Blaston uprising, and I’m glad I did too; nobody else would have stepped into the spotlight if I hadn’t.”

“Okay, then what about my mother?”

“How about we leave that for another day? It’s complicated, but I’ll tell you all about her someday soon. Don’t go doing anything reckless while you’re waiting though. And besides, I have a meeting with the city council in a few minutes.”

And with that, my father got up and sauntered back down the gravel path.

The time I spent on the mountain sped by and before I knew it the sun had started to set, painting the sky a brilliant auburn. *Well, it’s as good a time to head back as ever.* I thought, mindlessly gazing at the burning sky.

I trudged through the darkened streets and alleyways. I knew the ins and outs of the city well, even though it was darker now, so I allowed myself to zone out periodically to dull the whispers of my mind.

It wasn’t long before I reached my favourite part of the long journey back home. The airship port which bustled with business in the light had slowed down to become a familiar yet eerie maze of stone walls and gated-off corridors. Of course, I knew my way around the metal labyrinth as well, having basically grown up in it. I suppose it’s because of this that I can appreciate it and find the dead silence calming.

Winding my way through the tunnels, I caught a glimpse of a suspicious figure slipping around the corner. *We don’t have any shipments due until next week. What are these people doing here this late?* I thought, feeling uneasy.

Father always said I needed to control my curious urges, but how could I? They pull me in like an antlion preys on an ant, drawing me into all sorts of trouble.

Before I knew it, my legs started to move on their own, magnetically attracted to whoever was skulking around the port. I dragged the tips of my fingers against the cold, gritty walls as I inched my way across the metal floor, closer to the cloaked figure.

Suddenly, the person sped up to a run and slipped into a smaller airship. Without hesitation, I dashed forward and made my way onto the back end just as the rotors began to whirl and the ship lurched forward, hovering just above the ground.

What have I gotten myself into this time?

Afraid that scuttling around the ship to examine it would alert the crew of my presence, I decided to hunker down in a janitor's closet and wait it out until we reached our destination and had moored.

Several hours later, I awoke to a tiny beam of light shining through a gap in the door. Although I wanted to soothe my sore back by taking a trip out of the cramped closet, the fear of being discovered as a stowaway kept me glued in place.

Once the voices dissipated, I cautiously opened the door and stepped out. Eager to see where I ended up, I made my way down to the gangway, careful not to make too much noise. A quick glance at the opulent fixtures scattered around the loading dock instantly told me that I was in Blaston, the home of our oppressors.

Blaston? Why did I end up here of all places? Something gripped me from the inside, urging me to find a way back home, but the thrilling sense of being somewhere new trumped my reluctance and fear.

As the ship that brought me here pulled away from behind, I realized what the consequences of being discovered here would be. Back in Rastaria, if I had been caught somewhere forbidden, a light slap on the wrist would take care of it, and I would have gone on

with my day. But here... discovery could mean death. I took a shuddery breath in. *Well, there's no going back now.*

Cautiously, I wandered through the crowded docks, unsure of where I was going since the whole city was alien to me. The exit signs scattered around the port were my only guide to the outside, so I picked one and followed.

The main city of Blaston was nothing like the environment I was accustomed to at home. Bright metal structures reflected the sun's rays off the huge windows in the stores and houses. The people around the bustling streets were dressed in a glowing shade of white, even though they seemed to only be commoners. The street I was standing on reached out into the distance towards a hill with buildings layered up its side, seeming to get grander and grander as they grew closer to the massive glimmering structure that was clearly the focal point of the city.

Suddenly catching onto the many judgemental and pitiful looks I was getting from the people around me, I realized my tanned worn tunic was a stark opposite to the blouses, flowing trousers and skirts they wore. I definitely didn't fit in, so I ducked behind a floral shop to the side of the road and continued into the city through the alleyways until I heard yelling ahead.

"How dare you?" boomed a voice that pierced through the persistent buzz of conversation. "You idiotic commoner!" the man added, "This is why I don't come down into the city often!" His face carried a look of disgust as he glared at the person grovelling at his feet, begging for forgiveness. The man, who was dressed in a regal sky blue, raised his arm, aiming a slap, as his mouth slowly formed into a sneer.

Just before he was able to take action, a woman in a flowing gown grabbed his forearm and shouted, "Stop that! It was a simple mistake, and you shouldn't react this way! These are all your subjects, after all, my prince."

A prince? How can royalty get away with acting like this? I thought, shocked by his behaviour.

“You’re the one who bumped into the fruit stand. This is nobody’s fault but your own,” she huffed as she turned around to look apologetically at the crowd that had formed.

The prince’s face burned a bright red as he pulled free of the princess’ grasp, snatching her elbow as he directed her away from the scene, mumbling curses under his breath.

Her dress glittered in the light as the princess glanced over her shoulder and her eyes, the same calming blue as her gown, locked with mine and widened.

Her eyes, they’re familiar. Why? What is it about them?

Suddenly, I pieced together my thoughts and questions. Her eyes were a mirror of my own.

Appendix

This story was inspired by this image from Final Fantasy XIV, part of a game series.

