

# **The Swordsmith's Daughter**

**Justin Lo**

## **Chapter 1. Exile**

I peered out from my room, careful not to press too hard against the splintering wooden doorframe, lest it crumple down and cause a ruckus. I saw my father standing there, his small, heavily tanned frame clad in his mauve nightrobe. The knocks on the front door were insistent, and from the pattern of knocks, I knew it was from the government. We used to do a lot of business with the local officials, but this did not seem like friendly company.

Without holding so much as a small candle-lantern, Father unfastened the polished metal bolts on the front door, which swung out recklessly as the patrons' pushing suddenly went uncontested. Shocked by the loud clap of the door hitting the wall, I leapt back into my room and hid in the largest elephant. I shivered as my coats and dresses parted to make room for my face, brushing with itchy caress against my trembling cheeks.

"When will you, the governor's swordsmith, ever make good on the last order we placed years ago? Two dozen swords – we have let the contract run a year and a half past due already," said an authoritarian voice.

"I have told you repeatedly for years; we no longer practice our craft."

"And why is that?" asked a different voice, impatiently. There were at least two of them.

"Swords no longer interest me," said my father in a steady voice.

"Well, then," the voice concluded coldly, "your place in this village no longer interests me. We have appeased your whims for far too long. I suggest that you peaceably move out of this prime real estate. You are no longer a privileged servant of the government."

"As long as my daughter may still attend school, I will do as you wish," replied my father. I cringed at how easily he surrendered, but I was too young to have the courage to do anything about it.

"Of course, of course. That sweet girl of yours. She may yet prove talented, so why let that go to waste, hmm?" At the time, I thought nothing of this comment – just a concession of goodwill for a man going into exile. "Have you trained her in the art of blades?"

"Never," said my father. "It is unbecoming for a young lady."

This was a lie, but one to protect me. The women of our house were never sheltered from work and craft, and my mother before she departed had known secrets of ancient weaponry that even my father did not know. But of late, my father had encouraged my studies in other vocations, and even entreated that I find a husband far from any association with swords, whether that be as a soldier or police officer or blacksmith.

I felt betrayed – betrayed that the one gift he had imparted unto me – one which I worked day and night for thirteen years to perfect – he suddenly rescinded as if it were his to repossess. After seeing steel, glowing like the heart of a phoenix, transform into the icy reflection of the finished and polished blade, how could he expect me to find equal marvel in lesser magics like schoolteaching or weaving or waitressing?

The confrontational men left shortly thereafter, and my father came to my room to tell me to pack my travel chest with all I could fit; that we would be leaving by noon the next day. Where to, I had asked, but he had no answer. I guessed that we would stay over at my uncle's place for awhile.

I obediently began gathering my belongings. I had a lot of them, but I knew that no matter where we were going, we would have to live simply, so I decided to pack only what I needed. The old wooden chest, painted turquoise and emerald and reinforced with tarnished brass bands, was rather filthy but still serviceable. I laid down a bed of housework dresses and aprons as protective sheets, and over them I carefully placed in my inks and quills, my arithmetic and grammar volumes, a small locked box of necklaces, earrings, and other jewelry, and the automatic music box my mother gave me for my seventh birthday. On top, I placed my blankets, my only social dress, and the other daily clothes, hats, and gloves. Finally, wrapped in many layers of cloth and twine, I laid in the diamond-crested envelope dagger my father had specially made for me to commemorate the first sword I finished with him. I smiled and closed the chest. It was long past midnight, and my candle was running low. I blew out the flame and set my watch beside the bed.

I lay there for awhile, but even though it was dark and late, I could not fall asleep. My heart was pounding in a combination of fear and anticipation. It was also a humid evening, and the mosquitoes kept landing on my limbs or flying into my ears or, worst of all, flittering up my gown. I rolled about periodically, never quite satisfied with my position. Only as I focused on the chirps of the crickets did I finally drift off to sleep.

## **Chapter 2. Returning to Mother**

My father roused me early the next day, finding me sprawled inelegantly on the bare bed.

“Celia, wake up, the wagon is ready.”

“Ah?” I asked, sitting up and pulling down my gown embarrassedly over my knees.

“Wear this today,” he said, handing me a day dress blue-violet as the hydrangeas we used to grow in the garden. “It was your mother’s, but it should fit you now.”

I carefully changed into the dress, which was a bit loose, and I brushed my hair a few times to untangle it.

“Do I look alright?” I asked father.

“Yes, yes, very beautiful,” he said, without evening turning to look at me - he was staring out the window at the horses. I kicked him in the side to show my appreciation for his attention.

“What was that for!” he exclaimed, turning around, and then he froze. “Ahh . . .,” he said, nodding. He leaned in and hugged me. “Yes, very beautiful. Just like your mother.”

We headed out, thanking the spirits of the house for having us. My trunk was heavy but I insisted on loading it into the wagon myself. I wanted to prove that I could be independent, so that my father could stop worrying about me. His hair had long since gone white, and I could think of no reason besides the fact that he had to single-handedly raise an adolescent girl, quite possibly the third most difficult of creatures to tame, after tigers and elephant seals.

I worried enough that my own hair could turn white, too. In two years or so, I would probably be married, and I wondered if I would have enough time to come back and look after dad, since he has no son or wife. The neighbors and the officials (when they favored him) all encouraged him to remarry when Mother ascended, two years ago, but he steadfastly refused; there could only be one woman in his life. He was probably for the wiser – if there were such things as haunts, my Mother would certainly become one, just to make sure Father never took up another woman. She had that sort of personality, and even now I knew that she looked after Father and kept him safe. With this dress on, I could feel her radiance flowing into me.

I caught Father staring at me again, instead of boarding the coverless wagon. He seemed transfixed on me now that I was wearing this dress. I had Mother’s round hazel eyes, bordered by naturally bountiful lashes, and I had her soft lips. But my wavy hair was definitely from Father, as were my long, deliberate fingers contrasted against my slender body, which lacked the pride of Mother’s feminine endowments. And so I did not really look particularly like Mother, and perhaps

that unsettled Father a bit. A doll that bears an uncanny resemblance to a living person causes the same sort of discomfort, as if infringing upon another's patented appearance.

"Come on, let's go," I said, sitting in the back with our belongings. Father snapped out of his spell and took the reins. The borrowed horses, mediocre specimens with a nice sheen and unpleasant odor, started down the road; I watched as our house, one of the nicer ones in the neighborhood, faded into the distance. The last things I saw were the speckles of yellow from the rose bushes.

"Father, surely you can tell me now where we are going?" I asked. I hated it when people withheld information from me, especially when it concerned my life.

"I'm afraid I cannot."

"You cannot tell me, your only daughter, your precious Arcelia?"

"No, I cannot," he replied.

"Why not? I bet it is because even you do not know!" I cried, trying to make him reveal the location out of pride.

"Indeed, I do not know," he answered plainly. "The horses, they are the ones who know."

I did not much like the idea of entrusted our lives into the hands – or hooves – of feces-scented horses with ragged manes, but I kept my mouth shut. It was not time to stir an argument with Father; it probably already stung his pride enough to admit that he did not know where he was headed.

Around noon, we had traveled to the opposite edge of the spread-out town, and Father hopped off to buy some lunch; I was to stay in the wagon to make sure no one made off with our belongings. It was at this moment that I realized that the same jet-black wagon had been following us the entire time. The driver hopped down and approached me.

"How do you do?" he asked. I immediately recognized the voice as one of the men from last night. He wore a navy-and-black uniform, probably a lieutenant of some sort, and his hat sported various tassels.

"I am doing well, thank you, sir. Yourself?" I answered, trying to cover any emotions. I was angry, but I could never win in an altercation with this grown man, who had a saber to boot.

"Very good. You are the daughter of the swordsmith, are you not? Or former swordsmith, I suppose," he said, fingering his mustache with disdain.

"Yes, this is she; Arcelia is my name."

"How old are you now?"

“Sixteen years, sir,” I answered. I would not really be sixteen for three more weeks, but I did not like being thought of as a little girl.

“Ah, the age of marriage already! How quickly the young ones grow. But I wager that you have little interest in men – your mind is only on swords, right?” he asked.

“Swords? Why should they interest me? A proper lady does not interest herself in the arms of combat,” I said, anticipating that he wished to gauge my ability and promise. For although they sternly exiled my father, I knew that there were no swordsmiths anywhere near as talented as he was – save for my mother.

“That is such a pity. Strange, though, that your fingers look worn and calloused the way your father’s do.”

“Well, sewing and weaving does things to you!” I said with a chuckle. Lying left a bitter taste in my mouth, but I swallowed it anyway.

“You know, if you were to ... suddenly change your mind – pardon me for saying this, but I think you belittle your own ability – you would have an even grander home than your previous one, and we would pay you handsomely in coinage and in suitors. Do you never worry that your father may not be able to support himself, now that he has no wife, no sons, a daughter of marrying age, and of his own choosing, no income?”

I bit my lip. How dare he toss around my concerns as if they were pawns in a chess game?

“I should like to think that the matter is beyond your jurisdiction, good officer. And even if you were to set me up with a nice forge, what could I do? I have no skills at sword-fashioning to speak of. I can hardly even tell your sword there apart from my father’s!”

“Well, just think about my offer,” he said, as if none of my protests ever reached his ears. “You can come to my station any time, and you will be welcomed.” With that, he tilted his hat to me and placed his pipe into his mouth before beckoning his horse to depart.

My father arrived back shortly thereafter, carrying a small loaf of bread and a chunk of cured ham.

“I hope no one bothered you while I was in the store?” he said.

“Nope, all quiet,” I said. “Anyway, let’s start eating – I’m extraordinarily hungry!”

We sat side-by-side in the back of the wagon, our legs dangling off the back end. I was taller than my father when we stood up, but shorter when we sat down. We ate unglamorously – out of our hands, tearing the bread and meat like monkeys, and as we had no means currently of making tea or obtaining well water, we drank some of the beer we had tucked away in hopes that it would

not become hot and disgusting. The midday sun was rather unforgiving, and we had to put on our hats to see anything at all, let alone to stop ourselves from sweating to the point of dehydration.

The edge of town was not a sudden drop-off of civilization: the houses just became more and more infrequent. By this point, the edge of formal administration, you could even see and hear wild animals in the old growth forests of oaks, sugargums, red maples, and tulip-trees. The squeaks of warblers, the cooing of doves, the staccato of robins, and the triplets of wrens accompanied our lunch, when neither of us much felt like talking. After living in the thick glide and grind of city life, an intricate dance of routines and manners, it was nice to relax into the lawlessness of nature.

After lunch, we resumed our journey, down roads we had not trodden for at least a year. As the horses led on, I realized that we were headed down a familiar way.

“Father, these horses are taking us to Mom,” I observed. “Aren’t they?”

He nodded. “It seems so. Perhaps Gwyn wishes to see how much you’ve grown.”

“Do you think she would be happy that I am wearing her dress?”

“I’m sure she would be very pleased,” reassured my father.

I looked down at myself and smoothed out the dress. Small straws of hay had strewn themselves across my lap like little bunnies, hopping up and down. I brushed them to the side and plucked off a small acorn, which I then threw at a knot-hole in a nearby tree. I smiled privately, pleased that my gift of marksmanship had not escaped me after all.

When my mother and father used to attend social functions, I had to tag along as there was no one else to look after me, but most of the other children at the parlors were boys of all ages – Darsen and Bartholomew were closest to my years; Ross was like an older brother and Petey and Les were younger by a few grades. We would play darts and marbles and mock swordplay and, if none of the adults were looking, variants of poker and rummy. Over the games, friendships were forged – pacts of utter honesty. These friends were my only companions growing up as the only child. When I was in school, I spent most my time studying hard, and besides, the girls in my class carried an inherited contempt for a girl who arrived at school with smudges and singes from the forge on her clothing.

Even though I, in coming somewhat of age, saw my friends scarcely three times a year, especially as father abstained from parties in the absence of my mother, I still sustained a hallowed trust in them. They were perfectly good at lying and cheating as most boys are, but I knew they would have my back when I needed it most.

I liked to think that Father was like that for my mother before me. She was a rough-cut diamond, sometimes abrasive but with the face of a sculpted angel. My father chose her against the wishes of his own parents and the rest of the community, in a fit of ardor and obsession that never quite ended.

We arrived at Mother's grave about an hour after entering the foothills of the nearer woods. It was a rather beautiful monument, erected at a time when our family was prosperous in money but devoid of the wealths of joy our complete family used to create.

In the past year, some ivies and brushweeds had grown up from between cracks in the cobblestone floor where the mortar crumbled away. Still, aside from a few tufts of moss and lichens, the polished red granite obelisk still retained its stately splendor, alone in this small cleared plot in the forest.

"Why did Mother choose to be buried here, of all places?" I asked.

"I do not know, my daughter. Years before her death, she pointed to this plot, marked it with a circle of stones, and declared that she would be buried here at the twelve o'clock stone or else forever haunt our water closet, that strange woman. But since she chose to rest here, so too will we live here," declared my father, brushing his strands of white hair to the side. His sweat weighed his bristly bangs down again.

"How would we live *here*? A grave is hardly a home," I pointed out.

"That house right over there," he said, pointing to what looked more like a shed, but with a chimney. "I had it built two years ago, mostly as a temporary shelter, but I think that if we work together, we can make another room for you to stay in, and it will keep us at a low profile."

"It's ... so tiny," I could not help but say. At most, it was a quarter of the size of our old house. "It does not even have running water. How will we bathe?"

"Over that hill, there is a basin where the waterfall drains," said my father. "There is a well we can use to drink from, as well."

"I guess ... I guess it'll be okay, then," I conceded.

I looked around again, at the crowns of the trees, the successively taller hills in the distance, the lone gravel path leading here, and the grave marker beside me.

"It'll be okay ... since all three of us are finally together again."

### **Chapter 3. Reminiscence**

That evening, I unpacked my belongings and attempted to feel cozy. My father returned to town once to buy some repair lumber, shingles, and other miscellaneous items such as paper fans. I sat on the bed, leaning over with my elbows on my knees, looking over what I had brought.

I spotted the music box and brought it over to my lap. It was fringed with gold leaf, and otherwise made of painted porcelain. A gorgeous box indeed. I wound up the springs and let it play back; after just thirty seconds, my father entered the room.

“Celie,” he said, pursing his lips.

“Yes, Papa?” I asked.

“Have you ever heard that music box ... and thought ...,” he began.

“Yes, Papa?”

“And thought ... that the music is rather awful?” he finished.

I stared at him in mock shock. “You have the gall to say that about Mother’s music box?!” I exclaimed, and he looked ashamed for a bit, flushing pink. “Just kidding!” I said with a laugh. “There is no melody, and indeed the dissonance sounds downright awful, if not unintentional. It’s as though someone carved the note-pegs to draw a pointillistic picture and the cylinder got stuck in the box by accident.”

“Ah, so you noticed it, too.”

“Well, I’ve opened it up before. No picture.”

“Why would Mother, who loved music and instruments so much, give you such a thing? Of all things to remember her by.”

“I’m sure she had her reasons,” I said, setting the music box aside. “Mother ... I miss her a lot.”

“The way she grounded you after you stayed out too late, or the way she yelled when you broke her vase?” he asked.

We both laughed heartily. It was true, the discipline had been a lot more lax since she left.

“Father, you never told me how she died.”

“Natural causes,” he said tersely, a sober expression suddenly crossing his face.

“Like hell she died of natural causes!” I snapped. “I’m almost an adult now. I deserve to know.”



“Some man she had been doing sword transactions with showed up at the house and stabbed her. Is that enough?”

“If that is all true, then it is enough.”

“It is ... all true,” he said, but he seemed hesitant, even faltering.

“I don’t understand. Why kill her? What could that possibly achieve?” I wondered out loud, but Father had no response. In the back of my head, some rational clockwork in me concluded that Father was leaving out a crucial part of the story, and that the missing piece could still be festering today like an old infection incubating, waiting for the right time to suddenly expose itself and finish the job. If mother had been dealing in intelligence, or in sexual favors, I could understand the hit, but she was merely forging and selling swords with father, and the two were always a unit. To pick her, the lady, out for the kill would be exceedingly peculiar. Even assassins had some chivalry left in them.

Long after father had gone and I had blown out my candle for the night, I lay there, covered as usual in beads of sweat. Was there something Mother knew that Father did not? The fog of ignorance clouded my mind, and I gave up on thinking for the night, falling fast asleep.

## **Chapter 4. Water**

The next day, in the early break of dawn, I woke on my own to a barrage of light streaming over my face. I had not slept very long, but without any curtains, there would be no hope of returning to sleep. Father, understandably exhausted from the move, was still fast asleep in the cot across from me, so I snuck out of the house on my own. I climbed barefoot over our hill and then cautiously down a slope of boulders until I arrived at the streambed.

The stream was even clearer than Father had described, free of silt and debris due to its depth and speed. Somewhere downstream, people tapped it for all sorts of purposes, and probably filled it with dirt from laundry and waste. But here, the water was still pristine.

I shed my clothes on a dry rock on the bank and plunged into the water below the waterfall, where the size of the basin kept the water from moving quickly. I shivered and chattered my teeth for a little while, but soon the water felt warm and cozy as I adjusted. I swam out until my feet could no longer reach the rocky earth beneath them, letting the water envelop my body, holding me as if with a thousand caressing arms, and with the same strength.

Water is like steel, and water is like air; if you strike it harshly, it shields itself and repels you, but if you dip into it, it will let you explore its depths and savor its embrace. I did a backstroke around in circles, my hands entering the water quickly but painlessly. The water was smooth and glossy to the touch, and it dribbled off my arms sensually as they swung through the air.

An amateur strikes water with a blade as if the water were an opponent's weapon, and the water splinters and sparks: it is an anvil. But a slice without vulgarity parts the water without leaving a trace, as if the sword were passing through air.

I am like the water. Those who raise their arms against me will be met by my blade, and although I am no stronger than water owing to my size, steel is as natural an extension of myself as my lips and fingernails. But those who are gentle with me, I let them enter my life and know me.

Just a week before leaving, oblivious to how drastically my life would suddenly change, I had met up with Darsen and Bart at the local tavern per our tradition. Over the mugs of barely passable beer, we talked about life. As usual, I complained about how my father oppressively barred me from making swords when he only had the right to dictate his own life. Bear in mind that I was naïve to the association between blades and my mother's death, which my father insisted was due to either illness or natural causes, depending on whether he remembered what he attributed it to the last time or not.

My friends of course agreed with me, and we had a somewhat demented brainstorming session for how I might be able to forge swords behind his back. It all seemed brilliant at the time, as most things seem after a few beers (or in my petite case, just one), but of course when I sobered up afterward, I realized that the first step involved distracting my father with an overflowing bathtub containing mallard ducks, all covered in duct tape (to enhance their attachment to his body). Suffice to say, that was the end of that scheme.

But even as we joked around and drank, we were never so inebriated as to forget that we were growing up. We lamented how we had to act and speak properly, attend boring functions, and focus our studies on just one thing. For Darsen especially, the last matter was particularly difficult – he seemed to dabble in any profession which interested him at the particular time, even though by secondary school all the boys were supposed to know what their calling or family duty was, and all the girls were supposed to know that marriage and child-rearing were as inevitable as water flowing downhill. I knew Darsen the painter and Darsen the woodworker and Darsen the train conductor. He just liked everything and nothing.

Bart, too, had his gripes. He never liked the idea that someone could be right *by definition*. He thus resolved to rise through the ranks so that he could one day be right on his own account and act however he wished. He daydreamed of becoming chief officer or even governor-general of the city-state.

And when the “mug coaster of unbridled confession” (as we called that cork disk) slid onto my placemat, I had no qualms about letting loose, even about growing up and becoming a woman. I did not chatter in a gossipy way, mind you, but I laced my stories with enough impersonations and mockery to make the guys laugh. Some say a woman needs to have sexual prowess or a penchant for immaculate housekeeping or stove-top pizzazz to woo a man, but I, lacking all three, humbly claimed a half-dozen men a kiss away from being suitors just by making them laugh. Not that I wanted it at all; one of the things I frequently lamented was the fact that any sort of woman and man could not keep each other casual company without others suspecting amorous intentions, and that this misconception was primarily the men’s fault. I had no feelings at the time for either Bart or Darsen, but I suspected, despite their protests, that they probably felt otherwise at times. I warned them that if they had wet dreams about me, I would happily lend my blades to make eunuchs of them. They quickly caught my drift and never once treated me to anything more than fish and chips.

I trusted my friends with my triumphs and failures, and they congratulated and consoled me in turn. We teased each other, we insulted each other, and we apologized to each other. Like water, our friendships seemed always connected and infinitely flexible, resuming its original shape after any perturbation.

I wondered now if things would always stay that way. Would the others change in my absence, leaving me behind, replacing me with their future wives or friends in business? Would I change, living out in the wilderness, forgetting the company of other people? Even with my family reunited in spirit, life would not feel complete. One day, I knew that I would meet everyone again. I crossed my fingers in hopes that our reunion would be one of camaraderie.

## **Chapter 5. Old Friends and Old Enemies**

Two uneventful years passed by, far more peacefully than I expected exile to be. Despite my musings about a larger conspiracy against my family, nothing ever transpired in that period. Times were harsh, that was for sure – my father at first wanted to have no forge in the house whatsoever, but where would our income come from, then? So we built an extension room for me and we cleared another plot away from the home to enshrine the forge, so that the smoke would not enter our sleeping chambers. My father and I produced metal utensils and trinkets and envelope daggers, as well as two personalized combat daggers strictly for self-defense. All this manual work strengthened my muscles and trained in me a priceless courage and sturdiness, although it did little to enhance my prospects of marriage.

I attended school for the remainder of the first year in exile and graduated, whatever good that did. At my new school, people paid even less attention to me than before, probably partially because I no longer had the means to even buy fashionable clothes. I got into the habit of wearing work clothes and even men's clothes (when I had no more clean dresses) to school, which of course bothered the educational officials. They warned me sternly about going against the decencies of society, but my Father seemed to cease caring about pleasing officials of any kind.

After school ended, I just worked around the home, tended to our new garden which grew most bountifully near Mother's grave. It was as though she were still providing for us the way she did in life. I teased myself with the thought that perhaps her ghost came out at night and watered the plants and kissed their leaves and petals to coax them into grow more voluptuously.

It was when I tended to the garden that I felt most beautiful. I would see my reflection in the water pail and the red granite, and I would notice that my eyes had grown even fuller, and my chest, too. I would witness how the constant work chiseled away my chubbier body of status into the lean forms of the wilderness.

One day, as I admired myself idly in the garden, I suddenly heard a voice that was not Father's. Instinctively, I drew my dagger from its sheath under my dress before realizing that it was none other than my old friend, Bartholomew.

"Woah, you don't have to go berserk on me! I won't tell anyone about your narcissistic tendencies," he said.

"Hey!" I said, glaring at him.

"Well, if I were you, I'd check myself out, too. You've gotten mighty pretty. Twice the woman of anyone back in town."

"Do you have the misfortune of having to marry one of them?" I asked, resting my hand casually on my waist.

"Not if I can help it!" he said, grinning. "Act like a slob, and they jump away, those trifling chickadees."

I laughed heartily, my wavy hair scattering about. "Just act like the boors we used to be in that tavern!" I brushed the long brown strands back behind my shoulders. "So, why trek all the way out here?"

"Listen, Arcelia, you may think that you and your father are safe here, but I think that something malevolent is stirring in town."

"They're after us?"

"Yes," he confirmed. "The new Governor-General wants to begin a campaign against the mountain barbarians."

"But the mountain nation has the finest blades in the continent! They would probably slice the militia's swords in two, not to mention the blade-wielders themselves," I said.

"Exactly. None of the other swordsmiths can make swords like you do."

"We're out of practice, and besides, even we cannot make swords as good as the mountain people. They are a sword culture – they have honed their technique for as long as they've been there, to protect their rare ores and animals from being appropriated by envious hill-peoples. You're better off trying to get one of their swordsmiths to double deal!"

“Arcelia, all I know is that they’re talking about something that you and your father can only do. I don’t know any more than that. Maybe you can sneak into one of the officers’ meetings and find out what they are planning.”

“What would they do to us if we were to refuse?”

“I am not sure, but I suspect that you would be kidnapped as a bargaining chip to your father.”

“They stoop that low, now?”

“Ever since the times became hard, when we started running out of the resources needed to keep up with the fast pace of development of other city-states, they’ve stooped that low,” said Bart.

“You definitely have to look out for who you can trust.”

I nodded. “Yes, but worst comes to worst, at least I still have my dagger.”

“That is true,” he said, smiling enigmatically.

“So, when is the next officers’ meeting?”

“This Saturday, in the evening. Two days from now. I can come and fetch you to help you out, but disguise yourself, either as a maid-servant or a man if you wish to access the hall. Anyway, the official messenger will be arriving soon, but I wanted to give you forewarning, just in case.”

“Thank you, Bart,” I said, kissing him lightly on the cheek, without anything more than the affection of children.

He pranced off into the forest, leaving me staring for a little bit as my former life flooded back to me – the joyful and idle times, as well as the tension surrounding the circumstances of Mother’s death and our move. I quickly put down the watering pail and returned home to alert my father to the potential visitor of the day.

“It makes no difference,” he said gruffly, not looking up from his anvil where he was hammering away at a small piece of heated steel. “No blades means no blades.”

I spent the next two hours agitated, pacing around and fingering and brushing my hair but not really doing anything of product. There suddenly came a knock on the door, which broke my nervous delirium.

“Hello, good Mr. Rievaman,” he said, bowing and taking off his feathered hat, and then turning to me, he added, “And the fairest Arcelia as well. You are quite the spitting image of your mother.”

“And you are?” I asked impatiently, curtsying with a scowl on my face.

“Dovet Cooke, one of the ministers to the governor. I believe you had a run-in with Weber Georgeston, did you not? Rest assured that we have since sacked him for his less-than-illustrious conduct.”

“What news do you bring, then?” I asked.

“My, my, Arcelia seems to be the new mistress of this house, already, doesn’t she?” joked Mr. Cooke. “Well, Mademoiselle Arcelie, we come with great offers. I know that your resources and means are low, but we would elevate you to the nobility. Your father, a duke, and you the heiress to duchess with equal powers.”

“In exchange for swords?”

“Not even!” exclaimed Mr. Cooke. “No, what we ask for is not even that – we have assembled a dozen able and agreeable swordsmiths from around town and beyond. What we ask for is the location of the finer ores, which you surely know of.”

“Finer ores? What do you mean?” I asked, genuinely oblivious. “We always just used the raw materials that *you* provided! That ore could be smelted into fine enough steel. After that, the skill of the soldier matters a lot more than the mettle of the blade. All blades cut flesh, and if homogeneous in quality, will not shatter.”

“I do recall Weber complaining at the end that you, fine mademoiselle, steadfastly denied knowing anything about swordsmithery,” said Dovet, stroking his beard.

“I can talk the talk, but I do not pretend to walk the walk – any person in the company of a swordsmith would recognize what I just said. You know as well as I do that steel has a bit of carbon in it, but do you have the skills to achieve the right percentage of carbon content?” He shook his head. “So I am just like you, bearing no knowledge of the actual techniques. I just know the textbook stuffs,” I said.

“Ah, I see. A natural-born tradeswoman, then? You should set up shop in the bartering guild and make a handsome profit.”

“I shall consider it, sir,” I said.

“But back to the matter at hand, this fine ore was the raw material specifically requested up until four generations ago by the swordsmiths of your mother’s lineage. Unfortunately, the details of the orders were destroyed when the old town hall burned down – you are too young to know about that, though.”

“I *did* study my history,” I said defiantly. “That was sixty-eight years ago.”

“Yes, and we have reason to believe that the secret of the fine ore has since passed down by mouth in your family only. You being the only living descendant of the Carmouthe school,” he said, pointing to me. “How does this deal sound to you?”

I smirked. “It would be wonderful and attractive indeed, except neither my father nor I know of that secret. We both are of the Rievaman school, and my mother always did her own thing.”

“But she is in Heaven now,” said Mr. Cooke. He visibly deflated a little from his previous rock-steady demeanor. He scratched at his ear, apparently a habit whenever he was troubled – you could see little scars dotting the lobe.

My father, for the first time in awhile, spoke up. “And whose fault was that? An assassin, yes, but most certainly sent by your people! For no reason, an innocent woman was killed!”

“An assassin?!” cried Mr. Cooke. “We do not send assassins after civilians!” He was visibly outraged. “I bend the law sometimes, but I do not bend my honor! I was the one who visited Madame Carmouthe that day, but I am no assassin. I was unarmed, I swear on my honor and at the feet of God.”

“*You* were the one there?!” I screeched, drawing my dagger and holding it to his neck. He made no move to resist.

“Put down your dagger. I am an unarmed messenger, and that is all I shall ever be. I am not even an officer of the army. You do not want to anger the real officers by slitting my neck, when you have not even heard me out.”

“My mother in her grave tells me enough that I do not need to corrupt my earwax with your filthy words,” I spat, holding the dagger steady.

My father intervened. “Celie, put down the dagger. Do not be rash at a time like this.”

Even at such emotional moments, he maintained his composure. That was the difference between a wise adult and a child: the quality of the stone that comprises each is the same, but the adult is a large block and the child a small sphere, more easily swayed off-kilter by the wind. I obediently lowered my weapon.

“I will only say this once,” Mr. Cooke said evenly, holding his hand to his neck where my dagger had floated but not nicked. “I did not kill your mother. The blade that passed through her was your father’s, and the only hands on the hilt were her own. And now I think I finally understand why she did it.”

“F-f-father, is this true?” I exclaimed.



“I do not know who plunged the blade in, but indeed it was of my making,” said my father. “I assumed that it was murder.”

“Suicide? But why?” I asked.

“So that the secret might die with her. The ore of the weapons, three generations before, which were seized by the enemy and turned against us. You say it takes only skill, but my own father was there. He saw that power. It is no myth. And now I believe that you and your father indeed know nothing, that your mother planned it all along. That she knew she had to die to protect you from the secret. I have no further business with you.” He started down the steps, the sound of his clogs echoing loudly in the silent forest.

“Wait,” I said, reaching out, though my fingertips came no closer than a yard from his back. “Will we be left alone now, then? Since we know nothing about this fine ore.”

“I cannot guarantee that,” said Mr. Cooke. “As I said, I am but a messenger. What the higher-ups wish to do is beyond my control. They desire the ore as a stranger fig desires its neighboring oak. And I do not know when they might suddenly decide to squeeze. Already, they surround you. I pray that they just have the wisdom to come to believe what I now know. To this day, they believe that I killed her out of spite – a crime of the moment that destroyed possibly their only gateway to the ore. That my career is probably over after this second failure is no consolation to me.”

“Mother was never meant to die ...,” I said in disbelief.

“Why do you think, for three more years, the government only lightly prodded you for new swords? Why were you allowed to keep your property? Only after that long did they evict you. They were sorry. *I* was sorry. But I do not know if the new governor feels quite so sorry. His ancestors were the ones who stole the swords from this town’s armory and took over the city’s governance. And then one night, sixty-eight years ago, your ancestors burned the town hall as a diversion to reclaim and destroy those powerful blades. And they succeeded. No one even knows where the disposed, mangled swords lie today. The governor grew up with stories about the glory days and how he might one day repossess the swords. I would tread carefully from now on, if I were you. Even if you run, they will find you.”

And with that forewarning, Mr. Cooke disappeared into his carriage and headed back towards town. I quickly returned to my quarters, unlaced the back of my dress and slipped it off, donning a shirt, vest, and pants. I used my dagger to slice my hair crudely to shoulder-length, the longest it could be and still fit under a cap.

“Father, I will be back before sundown. Do not worry – I am only visiting old friends who may help us to evade the worst of this. At the very least, it seems that Dovet means us no harm. He may buy us a few days of safety through his sacrifice.”

Father hugged me tightly but then let me go. “You are a grown woman, now. I will not stop you from your romances.”

“Romances?!” I cried incredulously. He thought I was sneaking into town for a secret amour? “I am thinking of your safety, and mine! What care do I have for romance?”

“But romance, might it not be the only way for you to find peace, in the shelter of a home and under the strong arm of a loyal man?” he asked.

“Perhaps, but I refuse to marry to anyone who will not take you in as well and protect you through your old age,” I said firmly. After moment, I added, “I have little intention of marrying my childhood playmates, either.”

With that, I set out along the gravel path to town, not possessing any horse and frankly not requiring one. It was mid-autumn now and not quite so hot, although I craved a nice cleansing bath in the crisp waters behind the house. Men’s clothes especially made me itch, and to compound my malaise, I had also been bitten by more than a few bugs lately. It was only through fortune’s graces that my Father spotted the most severe of the insects, a tick which had not quite yet burrowed. The woods were only uninhabited if you discounted the millions of bugs who made each tree a multi-story complex.

I arrived in town forty-five minutes later, having impatiently run some of the way. I wished to visit Darsen, who would be nineteen by now. Only God knew what sort of state I might find him in, but it was worth a try.

His house was a decent abode over in the northeastern part of town, mostly occupied by families who moved in within the last two or three generations. I approached his house and knocked on the front door. A young girl stared at me from inside but made no motion to open the door. Finally, a taller man arrived – Darsen himself.

“Hello, and who are you, sir?” he inquired, shielding the young girl who seemed eager to tumble outside.

“Jim.”

“Jim who?”

“Jimbob,” I answered, annoyed that he didn’t recognize me. I leaned in and whispered, “It’s Chili, you doofus.”

His eyes widened. “Ah, well, come on in.”

He quickly shut the door and led me into the living room.

“You have changed a great deal over the past two years. In fact, you seem to have changed so much that you became male,” he said plainly.

“Yes, I got tired of having breasts, so I went to a witch doctor to fix the issue. Now, your turn to be investigated. Who is the little girl? Your daughter?” I joked. “They sure grow up fast.”

“I have no daughter!” he exclaimed. It was amusing to see a six-foot man flush rosy pink.

“Ah,” I said, savoring the opportunity to lean back carelessly and cross my legs, since I was masquerading as a boy, which is probably what I was at heart, anyway. “So, how have things been?” I asked.

“Well enough. This adorable jewel here is my niece. She’s visiting until the weekend’s end because my sister-in-law took ill and my elder brother had to travel to the next town to find an apothecary who has the right cures for her ailment.”

“Is it rare?” I asked.

“Well, if you ask me, she’s just got the blues,” said Darsen with a shrug. “She looks fine, just lazy as all hell. Won’t even take care of her daughter now. Pardon the language I am using in front of a lady!”

“Ah, no language bothers me. But how do you know she is not genuinely ill? She may have been bitten by a lazy-worm.”

“I suppose,” he said, “but a woman who spends all her time sheltered indoors does not step over many lazy-worms. And you are always outside, and you’ve never contracted lazy-worm.”

“My feet are tough as leather, the lazy-worms can’t even get through,” I proclaimed with a harrumph.

“That is not ordinarily something to be proud of,” said Darsen. “I suppose you just have to avoid men with a foot fetish.”

“Do you have one?” I asked.

He leaned in, and brushed my bangs out of my face. “No, just a fetish for eyelashes,” he said, licking his lips. I instinctively shoved him away with a high-pitched yelp.

“Just playing with you,” he said. “I guess you are still a girl after all. So, what brings you into town?”

“My father thinks it’s for romance,” I said. I uncrossed my legs and sat with greater poise.

“And is that what you’re here for?”

“Not particularly,” I said. “Actually, I’m here because I need to know what is going on. Two people have visited us in just one day, and it seems like the Governor-General has business with us. I am worried that it will come to arms soon, although the two visitors today were unarmed.”

“Visitors? I cannot say I know much about that. It doesn’t cross my line of work at all.”

“What is your work these days, anyway?” I inquired.

“Bah, I sell pet food. And fix bicycles.”

“Is that all?”

“Oh, I forgot to mention that I also compete professionally,” he said.

“Ah, is that so?” I remarked. “In what?”

“Eating contests!” he exclaimed proudly, showing that goofy toothy grin he used to flash as a kid, albeit with all his adult teeth now.

“You will never grow up, will you . . .,” I muttered.

“Well, now isn’t that simply *rich* coming from someone more than a head shorter than me?” he said smugly.

“Oh, fine, pick on the short girl, what an original idea!” I cried, standing up on my tippie-toes and barely reaching his chin. “You *know* what I meant.” I released myself and touched down on my heels.

“Well, I’m not sure I’ll have a chance to grow up. Or anyone else from our group. There might be battle on the horizon with the mountain folk. We’ll probably all have duties, and maybe some of us won’t come back. I guess this is one time when you’ll be glad you aren’t just one of the boys.”

“I suppose,” I said ambivalently. “Or I suppose not. I miss being in the loop.”

“If being in the loop is your desire, then you should be wearing a glitzy dress and hairpiece in the salon next door. Us men are only in the loop about women and drink; the women are the ones in the loop about everything under the sun.” He crossed his arms, as if his wearying generalizations were some triumph of knowledge; still, he had a charm in the way his supple body naturally curved, just like his slightly wavy auburn hair.

“I have no time for gossip. I can stop the battle, if I can withhold the weapons. Seeing as I know nothing about the ore – which is what they want in the first place – I feel like the advantage is ours, because surrender is not an option. But I need to know what wiles they have in store. That

they believe that we harbor the secret is probably the most dangerous weapon they have, unbeknownst to them.”

“You really have changed, Chili,” said Darsen. “Do not think only about the chess board, the stratagems and the attack postures. There are a thousand people and a thousand hearts in this town, and knowing from the grapevine which way each one sways, that is the knowledge that will claim victory for you.”

“I’m tiring of this already,” I retorted. “What of Ross, Petey, Les, and especially Bart, then? Where do their loyalties lie? I may as well know who is still my friend; those are the most important hearts to me.”

“Ross, he is married. He works for the bank and earns a heapful. A strong ally and financier to have, but I would not trust him to side with an impoverished girl over rich investors and partners. His demeanor changed significantly recently, especially when he has had to shield his twin son and daughter from being used as blackmail targets because of his wealth.”

“Mm, I suppose that is to be expected,” I said, although I wished Ross still lived in the smaller world, where he would just babysit us younger children.

“Peter and Leslie are still young, but both of them tall and athletic. Apparently rather popular with the girls, and they say they owe it to you. I do not think their conception of aspiration makes it past the next week’s food and company, but they have hearts of gold.”

I nodded. “And Bart?”

“I ... have not spoken him in over a year.”

I was genuinely taken aback. “What happened?”

“Well,” he began and then he recoiled sheepishly. “W-well, you see ... .”

“‘You see,’ what?”

“We had a bit of a tiff.”

“A bit of one? Sounds more like a fractured fault line to me,” I observed. “Whatever caused it?”

“Actually, it was you. We were fighting about you.”

I glared at him. “You mean to say, over who got me?”

“I wouldn’t put it quite that ... bluntly,” he said. “I mean, none of us ‘gets’ you ... .”

“But I was some sort of trophy? To the best man go the spoils? Did I not forbid you from loving me?” I cried, my hat coming off and my hair cascading down along my neck. I probably had a rather pitiful expression on right then. After all, it was love for me that created the first tragedy of

Mother's passing, and now I might lose two of my best friends over love as well, that most base of emotions.

"Do not worry, you are not a trophy. If anything, we got into fisticuffs to see which of us was worthy of being the trophy for you. We revered you all along, but we held it back for so long, so it all came gushing forth in a torrential stream. He loved you because you represented unorthodox liberation, a woman in the mold of a goddess. I loved you because of your resilience and grace under fire. That you did not see it all along is your own blindness."

He stood there, leaning on his right leg, towering head turned down and gazing at me with harmless eyes. His niece, being disturbed by the raised voices, had since come in and clasped onto his leg. The room seemed terribly chilled, inhospitable, a barren battlefield where nature's wrath surpassed the will to fight one's enemy.

"That is disgusting," I said finally, and then sat down, tucking my hair back under the cap.

Darsen sat down beside me. "I am still your friend. Perhaps Bart still is, too."

"Who wants a friend who is blinded by lust? Even now, you probably are imagining me in a slip, sprawled on your bed."

He looked down at his niece and beckoned her to leave. "Shh, don't worry, we are not fighting. It will be okay." His niece left and climbed the stairs gingerly to her room.

"Listen, Celi-chili, stop blabbering," he said, wrapping his strong arms around my shoulders. I slumped into them carelessly so that he had to tighten his grip.

"Yeah, I suppose it's better to be loved than hated," I said without enunciating. "But to choose one to love is to both be hated by the other, so two loves come for two hatreds."

"Arcelia, you're mumbling to yourself," he said.

"Shut up and just hold me," I ordered, looking down at the floor. "If you want to prove that you love me, then protect me." I knew that I sounded demanding, but I could not help it at the moment. I was fearful of the untested waters, the sudden immersion in a civilization and politic that had changed so much over two years, and that fear drove me to desire control over the situation. But there was no one I could control but the one who was holding me.

I ducked out of his embrace, not wanting to hurt him any longer.

"Nevermind what I just said. I will be okay on my own – I don't want to drag you or anyone else into this."

"Where are you going next?"

“Back home, probably,” I said. “I had better sharpen my dagger and swords, if it comes down to that.”

“Wait, Arcelia,” he said.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Who were your two visitors the other day?”

“Dovet Cooke, a messenger, who backed down after we said we didn’t know the secret. And Bart, who said we could sneak into a council meeting Saturday evening to discern what their next move will be, now that they know that we will not give up the secret willingly.”

“Bartholomew,” he muttered. “Has he been paying you visits often?”

I shook my head. “First time in a few months. But he seemed the same as always.”

“Okay, I entrust you in his hands. As long as his hands stay where they should.”

“Rest assured, they will,” I said smugly. “By the way, perchance you could help me with my disguise? I could go as a man, but they would surely realize I was not of appropriate rank at the door. I wish to disguise myself as a servant, since they come and go frequently and scarcely fall under suspicion as long as they tend to their jobs well.”

“Why would I have a maid’s habit lying around this house?” Darsen asked. “But the tailor’s shop is next door. Take these coins and buy one for yourself.”

I thanked him and headed out, acquiring a plain blue-and-white apron-dress, the one with the greatest opportunities to conceal weapons or papers. I giggled to myself as I headed out, the shop-owner probably more than a bit disturbed at the sight of a gleeful young man exiting with a frilly maid dress in more or less his size.

## **Chapter 6. Infiltration**

Back at the house, Father and I quickly packed up our belongings and hid them in a storage shed out of sight from our main complex, where we could easily arrange for their removal and safekeeping. It was already nightfall, so we took to sleep, although we slept with our blades sheathed right beside us.

We spent the following day refreshing our skills with the blade, mock battling each other with broomsticks and any symbolic objects we could gather around the house. At sundown, I visited Mother’s grave, sweaty but refreshed, aching in a way that connected me to my vitality.

“Mother,” I said, kneeling before the granite monument, “please protect Father and me. I wish you were here with us in body, but even in spirit, I know you are still powerful. Guide us so that we may find the path towards living out our lives in peace.”

The gentle, dry autumn breeze swept the leaves around and blew a bit of sand into my face. I forced a few tears to rinse my eyes out, and spat unceremoniously behind me onto the grass to get the grains out my mouth. As I looked back, I saw the circle of stones again, unchanged by the seasons. I idly wondered how many more times I would be able to stand here like this, unperturbed, surrounded by the mysterious, silent stones and the enormously disproportionate obelisk, their cold forms patiently holding on to long-lost truths.

Saturday arrived all too quickly, and once I had bathed, I prepared my disguise, affixing a dagger sheath on my thigh and tying capped darts into a bundle to lay into the apron pocket. But I did not stop there – I truly feared the worst. I proceeded to brush and tie up my hair into a bun, securing it with ribbons attached to long ornamented needles and twisted wires, for picking locks or grasping inaccessible objects in case I happened to be captured. Onto my earlobes, I hung small vessel-shaped earrings, the left filled with poison and the right with barbiturates, both liquids originally obtained from the apothecary for defense against bears and other wild animals. The vials were just wide enough to dip the tips of my darts into, if the need arose. When I was all done, I used the sword my father begrudgingly bequeathed to me as a mirror, making sure none of the jewelry looked like more than master-pleasing filigree. With a touch of lipstick and blush, I felt presentable enough and proceeded to wait for Bartholomew’s arrival.

It was around three in the afternoon when he arrived at my door, dressed in a soldier’s uniform.

“Oh goodness, you look far too stunning to be a mere maid!” he exclaimed. I beamed at my success and bowed in a fantastic sweep, the lacy ribbons in my hair rippling audibly.

“I am such a sucker for sparkling jewelry,” I said with a laugh, resisting the urge to reveal the true functional beauty of my costume. It would be better to gloat afterwards, preferably not having used any of the devices.

He brought me to the Hall of Chiefs, where I dutifully carried a bottle of fine wine and a cheap wine glass on a bejeweled sterling silver serving platter. The guard smiled at me with dreamy infatuation as I batted my eyelids in his direction with a humble lowered head. At the first branch in the hallway, we parted ways after he beckoned me to turn left, where I would find the Blue Dining



Room. The private dining room's fireplace was back-to-back with the fireplace of the meeting room, neither of which would be in use since it was still warm out. Through a crack in the bricks, I would be able to hear the conversations, and hear I certainly could. First, however, I discretely smashed the wine glass onto the floor, so that if I were caught, I could pretend that I was trying to clean up the mess.

Careful not to jab myself on the broken glass, I leaned into the fireplace and cupped my ears.

After a few minutes of merry feasting, the meeting started. "The campaign is to begin within two months. It doesn't take an idiot to realize that we need the invincible swords by then," came a growl that broke the din of silver against porcelain dinner plates. "Dovet Cooke, I trust that you have acquired the location of the fine Carmouthe family ore?"

"Good sire, I come with the news that neither Cornelius nor Arcelia knows the secret location. It would appear that Gwyneth took that information with her to the grave."

"To the grave, did you say?" replied the Governor-General. "Now *that* may well be the most intelligent observation you've made all evening. Why, I might even let you off the hook."

"How is this, sire?"

"That grave of hers, that Gwyn Carmouthe, you say it is very large and ornate, do you not?"

"That is a truth, sire," replied Mr. Cooke.

"Then could the secret not be buried with her somewhere?"

Suddenly, I heard the front double-doors to the meeting hall swing open. The others in the room, who had slowly resumed chattering amongst themselves as the conversation progressed, suddenly fell silent.

"Weber, what a pleasant surprise. You are still in town?"

"I have information that I bought off a low-ranking soldier that may be of pertinence to you, but I would first have you reinstate my station if you wish to know it."

"I will decide based on the ... *pertinence*, as you say, of the information you have acquired."

"Well, there is one additional condition given by the soldier. Since I am a man of my word, I am obligated to add this condition as well: when we kidnap Mademoiselle Arcelie, she must not be harmed or defiled in any way."

My eyes opened wide. So they were indeed after me.

The general replied off-handedly, "I do not anticipate it will come to that, if you truly know the whereabouts of the buried secret – we will simply take it, so of course the girl would remain

unhurt. I only take pleasure in hurting worthy adversaries, and weak girls are no such adversaries. I am sure she will understand if we need to ... exhume her mother. That selfish whore of a woman.”

I clenched my fists so tightly I nearly opened a wound in my palm. But I remained silent and motionless.

“Ah, I think we have an agreement, then, your honor. Let us say that this soldier, upon a visit to the forest, discovered a protrusion of sorts in the center of that pile of rocks near the grave,” began Weber. I ran through my mind what soldiers ever visited our forest home – Father and I had been vigilant at all times, hadn’t we? Never once was the home unattended. “Let us say that, today, this soldier made another visit and retrieved what turned out to be a chest of stone, only to discover that there is a lock requiring what seems to be a key in the shape of a large toothed dowel.”

“Oh, this is pertinent indeed!” cried the general with a chortle, smacking down his mug in revelry. “You, fine Weber, are reinstated effective immediately! And so, this key you speak of -”

“- In the hands of Cornelius or Arcelia, undoubtedly yes, your honor, you and I are thinking the same thing,” said Weber with a rueful intonation. “I would aid you once more, but that would require you to dispose of this Cooke, your honor. He is an eyesore, and one who had me fired for ruthlessness before your illustrious arrival. I should like to think that any inquisitor worth his weight in salt ought to be ruthless.”

“I am inclined to agree. Hmm, on the one hand, I may preserve Cooke, who has not only expended his intelligence for naught, since you knew all this already, but who has also tried my patience one too many times ... and on the other hand, the information.” I could imagine the Governor-General, making a mock scale with his two hands, teetering back and forth.

“Sire, you just promised my continued employment, sire,” said Cooke with a tremor in his voice.

“Unfortunately, unlike Weber here, I am not much one for petty things like honor. I have a greater ideal to fulfill, one of our prosperous nation after we claim the wondrous mines and forests of the mountains! A wealth for all! Do you men not find this a lofty ideal indeed?!”

The attendees roared with approval.

“Then out, Cooke, I have no further need for you. Be grateful that you yet live.”

I heard footsteps leading out and instinctively tightened. The Blue Dining Room had but one exit – the very hallway containing the entrance of the meeting room. I could feel the sweat slipping out from my gloved fingers and toes. My heart pounded and I brushed my bangs out of my eyes. I had to leave the complex soon – I knew enough to act, although a part of me wanted to

know the last tip. But where would Cooke be if I darted out now? Would he be an ally or an adversary?

I lifted my face out of the fireplace and held my breath, eyes fixated on the doorknob of the dining hall, ears ignoring my heartbeats and listening for Cooke's footsteps. At first they grew louder, and then it seemed he was passing in front of my room, past the door, along the wall towards the exit. I breathed a sigh of relief, but then the footsteps grew louder again.

"So, Weber, what is your final tip?" I heard Governor-General ask. He drew out the question; every moment now counted.

The footsteps grew yet louder, and suddenly the door opened a creak. Cooke slid in, locating me quickly, then silently but swiftly drawing his hand across his neck. In that split-second, I realized that I had to bolt for it, all stealth be damned: Weber knew I was here, and he knew I was here because I had been double-crossed by none other than Bart, who had been the soldier informant all along. And who possessed the chest from my mother's grave.

I nodded, leaping to my feet and turning the corner by pivoting around the chair. Cooke opened the door wide for me and I streaked out, drawing my dagger at the same time, retracing the route I had used to enter. I could hear the meeting breaking, people storming out haphazardly; the crowding at the door could buy me more time. But at the front entrance, I spotted the guards rushing in – too many to combat. I instead ducked into the closest room and hurled the nearest wooden chair with all my might at the window, shattering it. I dove out the window into the gardens, cutting my leg deeply against some of the glass shards.

"Damn," I cursed, realizing that I might leave a trail of blood, never mind the pain. I tore ribbons out of my hair, tying them tightly around my bleeding calf. But limping, and encumbered by the weight of the dress, I could not move quickly enough, and I saw a steep shadow behind me just moments before I was tackled to the stone floor. I quickly flipped the dagger into a hunting knife position and stabbed backwards, connecting with flesh and temporarily freeing myself, but I soon felt the frigid edge of a shortsword against my throat, and I froze in place.

"Let me be the one to capture you," said the voice. It was Bartholomew. "I will not harm you, and I will not let anyone else harm you either. If you run now, I cannot guarantee your health or your life."

I relented, dropping the dagger.

“This is for your own good,” he continued. “If I did not lure and capture you here, they would have gone after you, with greater force and greater malice. I will keep you in comfort until your father hands over the key, and then you will be freed.”

“And if my father does not hand over the key?” I asked as he escorted me around the side and down a stone stairwell into a dungeon full of cobwebs and mildew, puddles dotting the floor that had probably remained stagnant for a century, or whenever last they were generated from urination and vomit. “Then you will kill me?”

“Your father will hand over the key,” said Bart confidently, opening a rusty cell door, which screeched with a banshee’s abandon from years of disuse and decay.

“Not if he doesn’t even have it,” I muttered. I sat down onto the large stone block which stood in the middle of the dungeon cell. He shut and locked the gate.

“I will bring a first-aid kit to tend to your leg-wound. Do not move around too much or you may injure yourself further. I guarantee you will only have to endure this two days at most. And I will sneak you as much food as I can find around this place. I still love you.”

I spat in his general direction. “Love me?”

“Yes, you may not believe it, but I do. I planned this all for your benefit.”

“If you loved me, you would have included me in on the plans, instead of having me jump out of broken windows and stab you as well. How is that wound, anyway?”

“Fortunately, not deep. You were not at an angle to go in for the kill, being flat on your stomach and all.”

“Well, thank goodness for that. I am too young to be killing my lovers,” I said, looking at the metal cot with a single square-woven blanket over it. The blanket had that distinctive color of mummy wrap, and probably was last used by a person who died in that bed. I was too disgusted to even vomit.

Bart encountered an officer on his way up. “Excellent work, soldier. You have proven valuable. Is she injured?” While they chattered, I carefully unwrapped and uncapped a dart from within my apron pocket and unhooked my left earring.

“She is, but I will tend to her wounds,” said Bart. “We promised her father that she would be completely unharmed if he conceded the key.” I took a deep breath and unscrewed the vial, dipping and removing the dart quickly before replacing my earring, making sure no poison had leaked onto the outsides of the vial.

“Are you prepared to dismember her if he does not cooperate?”

Bart visibly shuddered. “I do not believe that to be part of my duty of defending my homeland,” he replied and continued on his way without further inquiries. I held the dart in the shadows, behind my back.

“Don’t worry, young one. I would complete that duty ... with great pleasure,” the officer replied, pressing his fingertips together with sinister amusement.

The officer approached the cell, a smug look on his face. “Arcelia, you are quite the beauty they say you are. Why must you always live out in the woods with that cowardly father of yours, when you could have married any man in the town, and continued practicing your craft, to boot? I hear he even forbids you from forging swords. He does not understand the desires of young aspiring women these days, does he?”

He laughed, fingering the hilt of his sword whose scabbard smacked alternately against his leg and the iron bars. A ring of keys jangled from his belt. I steadied myself, focused only on the side of his neck, which was illuminated in the moonlight. And with a quick flick of the wrist, I threw the dart, the same way I used to do years ago in the salon parlors with Darsen and Bart. He reacted far too late to stop the dart from sinking effortlessly into his carotid artery. He convulsed a few times before falling to the floor, crumpling in a rigid lump, his face and fingers contorted, marble white as they drained of blood. I smiled first, frowned second.

I stared at my hand, realizing that I had not just hit a dartboard, but a man. A vile man, but a man who probably had a family, who probably knew how to love. And I had just killed him. It was now that I vomited, my stomach convulsing and soiling the floor further with the clear acid, the rank odor filling the cell quickly.

I regained my composure a few moments later. If I didn’t want to kill any more people, I had to escape quickly. I pulled out the longest knife I had and sliced the belt loop to free the key ring, which fell just out of reach. I deftly removed the wires holding my hair up and fashioned them into a grabbing hook, pulling the keys into my grasp.

I was soon outside, but before I could orient myself, I saw Bart, who was startled out of his wits. I dove into the bushes, knowing he would find me soon. I prepared a tranquilizing dart, sheltered by the large lobed leaves of a sassafras shrub, and then I quietly snuck around the perimeter, leaving a confused Bart looking around in fear. Now, it was my turn to be the predator.

“Arcelia, give yourself up. They will come after you with a dozen swords.”

“Not if they don’t realize I’m gone,” I said. He turned around to the origin of my voice only to rapidly fall into a dreamless sleep. I leaned over his body, retrieving the first aid bundle and the

dart, and leaving him only with a light kiss on the forehead. “Farewell, Bartholomew.” I dragged him into the bushes, but he would eventually wake of his own accord, and I had not the constitution to execute him in his sleep.

I took into the forest until I was a safe distance away and could afford to tend to my wound, which was bright red and possibly infected. I winced as I doused it with spirits, but the pain was also emancipating, like the soul of a sword, taking shape from the trials of repeated hammer-strikes. I could feel my own self passing through gate after gate, each successive archway severing a cuff that chained me to the weights of fear and limitation.

The wound re-bandaged with gauze rather than lace ribbons, I passed through the forest, lacking the sun or compass which I normally relied upon to navigate. I traveled not with my eyes, but with my ears: I listened for any signs of gushing water, for I knew the river to my homestead passed through this thicket on the way to the waterfall. Every minute that passed, I could sense the militia progressing along its destined course; I could see the people like a swarm of ants, descending upon the two bodies at the dungeon and courtyard. And then they would march out into the forest to my father. I could not be traveling much quicker than they, and I was in the hilly forests, not the direct path.

It was probably around eleven at night, though I could not say for sure, when I arrived finally at the riverbank, but just as I did so, I heard footsteps and sighted in the distance the glimmer of blades. Had they already killed Father, and now pursued me?

“Jimbob!” cried one of the blade-wielders. I registered quickly enough that it was Peter’s voice. “Jimbob, where are you?”

I smiled and realized that they must have been sent by Darsen, recalling my rather unusual greeting the other day. But I hesitated to move towards them – they could, like Bart, have loyalties beyond their own control. Even Darsen, who embraced me so tenderly before, could I trust him? I probably had a hefty bounty over my head, as I was the enemy’s chief bargaining chip – unless they wanted to face Father head-on, which would not be advised.

Breathing heavily, I ducked behind an oak tree of considerable girth, sliding down onto the ground that was covered in a moist mat of half-degraded leaves and thin-stalked mushrooms.

“Darsen is holding the house with your dad, but we were ordered not to return without you. A friendly man named Cooke brought news of your discovery and capture to Darsen, but by the time he arrived on the scene, you had already escaped,” explained Leslie. “We have heard your footsteps already – there is no use in hiding from your saviors, who care for you just so!” He

laughed in a childlike way, although he had attempted to deliver that line as suavely as possible. ‘Older women,’ as they would term me, were simply not as easy to sway, but I laughed in spite of myself. I could imagine having a playboy of a son, just like that. But I frowned – would I ever have children? Would I live past today? Would Darsen? And then I blushed, realizing that I had associated him somehow with my children. I smacked my head frantically, removing the thought from my head.

“Alright, alright, I give up,” I said, but I still brandished a sedative dart, just in case.

Their eyes lit up in the night when they saw me. “You’re safe!” I softened, deciding to trust Darsen’s contingent.

“Are you two really qualified to be using those swords?” I asked, noticing that they carried the weight easily, but seemed to have a stiff grasp and stance.

“Come on, Celie. We’re not your little brothers anymore. We’re way taller than you,” they said.

“You’ve always been taller than me,” I growled.

They laughed and each took one of my hands, leading me downstream to the house.

“We must hurry – Darsen and your dad are outnumbered badly. If you want to tease us about our swordsmanship, you had better set a better example.”

“And shame you for being outmaneuvered by a short girl?”

“Oh, you are no girl, Celie,” said Peter.

“I am too!” I retorted, flashing them a gentle smile. I saw them blush before they turned away.

“I-I guess,” Peter stammered. “But we can’t treat you like one. We all know that you favor only Darsen, and we wouldn’t stand in his way. Bart did and see what happened to him! He’s stuck snoring under some bush.”

“That had nothing to do with it!” I exclaimed, offended at the suggestion. “What would I be doing with Darsen, that half-wit? He’s a jack of all trades and a master of none.”

“The more you insult him, the more you’re just digging yourself into denial. You women think you are so complicated, but you’re just *delusional*.”

I yanked my hands out of their grasp. “I refuse to be tugged along by such bigots!” They chortled raucously and we continued on our way. For a moment, it seemed like the old times were back, and I rejoined them in laughter.

## Chapter 7. The Music of Swords

The moonlight highlighted the thatching on the roof of our house, which was thankfully still standing. The three of us rushed down the hill, almost tripping on a few stray roots on the way down. My injured leg sent flares of pain through my body as I pressed my weight against it, but I clenched my teeth and bore it, unwilling to let myself become a damsel in distress.

“Celia, is that you?” came a voice.

“Celi-chili?!” chimed in another.

I hugged them both, so thankful for such a simple reunion, with people I ordinarily could see every day. Their warmth coursed through my snuggling face, and I squirmed with delight as my father stroked my hair gently.

Suddenly, Father asked, “Celia, there was a hole in the ground in front of Mother’s grave. Do you know anything about that?”

“Yes,” I said sullenly. “They found a treasure chest of some sort there. I never even suspected that Mother would hide something there; how stupid of me. It’s locked, though.”

“So they’re coming after the key?” asked Father.

“Yes, they’ll be arriving shortly. They need the key, and they probably won’t stop until they have it.”

“Did Mother ever give you anything which might contain the key?”

“Eh? What do you mean? The only thing Mother ever gave me besides food and spankings was that pretty music box,” I said. “Although I think we could all make do with not hearing that awful melody on continuous replay.”

Father suddenly released me. “The music box!”

“You think the key is hidden in there?” I asked.

“You would know more about it than I would.”

I leafed through my memories of the Hall of Chiefs meeting, trying to remember what Weber had said about the nature of the chest; it was in the ground at the center of the rocks ... it had a lock ... and the key had a round cross-section.

“Father, I have it,” I said quietly. “The key is the spiked cylinder that plays back the music. It must be removable somehow.”

“Will we hand it over or hide it?” asked Darsen.

“Handing it over would ensure our safety,” said Father in his usual restrained tone.



“I didn’t crouch down and stick my head into a fireplace for an hour, cut my leg on broken window glass, break out of a dungeon, and ambush a soldier just to *surrender the key!*” I cried. “Do you men have no balls whatsoever?!”

And with that argument-ending declaration, the five of us readied ourselves, laying down hunting traps throughout the house in unsuspecting locations and then spreading out amongst the trees. No one could anticipate how large a force we would be up against until the moment it arrived. My green chest, which contained the music box, was apparently now on its way to a private safe at the bank headquarters, courtesy of Ross, though what concessions and promises Darsen had to make without Father’s and my approval, we would probably not know until after all of the smoke cleared. I just hoped that I had not been consigned to indentured servitude for the favor.

The sound of men marching crescendoed in the darkness of midnight. It sounded like a party of a dozen or so, and when they finally appeared, I could see that Weber and the Governor-General himself were amongst them, but hanging in the back, the pawns scouting the front lines. I was tempted to begin pelting them with darts and rocks, but I realized that there would be only one chance to take them by surprise, and now was not that time. We needed to let the nerves fester awhile in the younger, inexperienced soldiers, and to coax the senior members into letting down their guard and less carefully regulating formation.

The soldiers fanned out to search the complex. One by one, they fixated onto our decoy keys, which of course were laced with unique punishments. A metal canister, vaguely cylindrical, hung by string from a peg in the wall, and upon pulling it down, the unsuspecting soldier suddenly released a trap from the ceiling which clamped his arm tightly. Three more fell before a soldier encountered my personal contribution, the lump under the bedcovers which looked genuinely like me, curled into a fetal position. The man swept open the covers only to find himself face-to-face with various animal skulls I had collected over the years from the river, where the deer often traveled to die. He recoiled in horror, his nerves and probably his focus broken for the rest of the evening.

But alas, tricks could only last so long. With a few of the soldiers incapacitated, the contingent stopped searching and decided instead to come after us, since we would provide the safest, least trap-ridden path to their goal. My father let loose a wolf-like howl, which was our cue to rain darts upon them. A few connected; many fell short, and most frighteningly, the ones aimed at the Governor-General were effortlessly swatted away by his oversized blade, which must have weighed twice a normal broadsword. I had never seen him with my own eyes before, but even my

greatest estimations paled in comparison to him in the flesh: he was an enormous hunkering man with squinted, hardened eyes, clad in regal armor with polished sheen – perhaps never used before. Despite any rustiness from the excesses of his wealthy city life, his reach would be formidable, and even though I had a very long sword to make up for my smaller armspan, I hoped that I would fall into duel against anyone but him. Darsen, with his greater flexibility and approximately equal size, although more lanky, would match better.

A soldier spotted me and we clashed steel near the edge of the forest, a few young opportunistic pines swiftly beheaded as we swung quickly and often. He was clearly a fresh recruit, the adrenaline causing him to pounce on every small opportunity to take a jab at me instead of pausing to consider my weaknesses. Nevertheless, the pace was wearying and I soon felt aches in my arms, even though the fuller in my sword was specially designed to make it extraordinarily light for its size.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw that everyone was engaged in fighting, about one to one, with Weber and the General still roughly still, wanting to size up the situation and terrain before taking action. They were probably trained on a battlefield, where such a scholarly attitude would be appreciated. Nevertheless, it was useless against us, who practiced the art of battle as it was smuggled out of the mountain folk's tradition. Like wolves and tigers, our communication and coordination was as wordless as the wind. The campaign to capture the mountains would only sacrifice hundreds of our young men if the General were to lead our militia. I knew that termination of the foolhardy campaign and the resumption of our former peace could both be ensured tonight, but only if we emerged victorious.

With renewed resolve, I calmly searched the young soldier's style as we continued our dynamic stalemate. I realized that he used a lot of momentum when going for jabs – he wanted my heart and neck for too badly. I relaxed myself and slowed my pace so that he would spot an opening, and he took the bait, jabbing unchecked like Weber years ago, pushing on the door that my father had suddenly unlocked. The young soldier tried to withdraw, but he was far overextended, and I wasted no time in smacking his head resoundingly with the octahedral pommel of my blade, sending him unconscious onto the floor. I quickly removed his blade and tossed it into the forest, and undressed him as well; I did not have the heart to kill such a cute young man, but should he regain consciousness, he would at least be unarmed and unable to access any concealed weapons he might have. And stark naked. I noticed to my dismay that the thought was mildly satisfying.

But there was no time to revel in temporary triumph: the Governor-General, as in my greatest fears, was coming straight for me.

“Ah, little girl. Your family before you has eluded me far too long! How dare they steal and hide the prized weapons of my ancestors, and bury the secrets of their power!”

“They were never yours to begin with,” I said evenly, my eyebrows furrowing.

“What was that, little girl?” he asked.

“They were never yours to begin with!” I screamed, holding my sword steadily before me and loosening all my joints. I had to be careful not to over-exert myself, or my wound would give and I would fall invalid.

“I have waited for this so long, and here you are, in front of me, holding in your puny mind the one secret I must have. But soon, you will be all mine, your secret with you. I once thought you an unworthy opponent, but now I know your true face. You are a ruthless, demonic woman who would poison one of my finest officers. I will banish you back to the depths of Hell!”

He came down upon me with an enormous slash, and I barely rolled out of the way. He was brawny, but not without considerable expertise. Stupid tricks would not work on him – even his groin was heavily armored. I saw in the distance the ongoing fighting, with Father assaulted by both a soldier and now Weber as well. But I could not let my focus drift; the others would have to hold their own.

I clashed swords with the General, who gave his sword a forceful jolt, sending me hurtling backwards into a tree.

“Did you really think you could defeat me?”

He lunged forward, grabbing my wrist and wrenching my sword from my hand and breaking my pinky in the process. I grunted in pain but continued to stare him in the eye.

“Do not worry, little girl. I need you to sire me a son to be my personal swordsmith, so I will not harm you if you stop resisting. The magnificence of the Carmouthe lineage must be mine and mine only to possess!”

He leaned in and kissed me roughly on the lips, the revolting scent of his sweat and the slimy acrid taste of his chewing tobacco-laced saliva entering my senses. I gagged over and over again. I wanted so badly to shout but I could not – he squeezed me too tightly. The only thought more reviling than of dying here was having him enter me, and so I held strong to my wits and searched for any opportunity to escape.

Darsen caught sight of my impending rape, and he quickly ducked away from his opponent and ran towards us, the soldier just on his tail. The General, although consumed with feral desire and occupied with ripping my clothes to shreds, still retained enough wit to pull a dagger. I gargled a wordless warning to Darsen before the General punched my neck and I could no longer make any sound. It was enough, though, and Darsen side-stepped, the fast-moving dagger landing squarely in the chest of the soldier, who gasped in shock before falling to the ground.

The Governor-General realized his error and lifted his heavy body off of me to swat Darsen away. He easily knocked the blade out of Darsen's hand with the force of a horizontal cut, but it was just enough time for me to unhook my left earring, which I had left on from earlier. I positioned it concealed in my mouth, just behind my lips, the cap precariously lightly affixed, and when Darsen backed off momentarily and the General turned back towards me and kissed me once again, I pushed the vial into his mouth, his tongue's instinctive lashing knocking off the cap. I quickly withdrew as the poison poured luxuriously into his mouth.

"Y-you!" he cried. "W-what have you done to me!"

And then he collapsed onto the floor. The potent liquid had run its course. Everyone around suddenly stopped, the soldiers no longer motivated to fight their own citizens, and, as I noted, Weber too was writhing kneeling on the ground, bested in true combat, his dominant arm savagely sawn off.

Everyone stared at me, and at first I thought it was because I was the heroine who had defeated the mighty Governor-General. But men, alas, will always be men, and I quickly realized that it was my indecent exposure which garnered all the men's eyes. I screamed and covered myself with the cloak of a fallen soldier.

"Go home, all you perverts!" I shouted indignantly, and the crowd dispersed into the quiet of the night.

## Chapter 8. Aftermath

I took a long sip from the gold-trimmed teacup. It was a fine and beautiful ware, befitting Ross's affluence.

"So, let us get down to business, little sister," he said, ruffling his oversized collar before sitting down. "You wish to have your trunk and key back, do you not?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Darsen promised me certain rewards for the safe protection of your belongings, which I have made good upon on my end. Indeed, I even had your clothes laundered, and the incorrigibly filthy ones fully replaced."

"Well, that is all excellent. What do I owe you?" I asked.

"Twenty percent of the profits from any good produced from the ore."

"What a fool, that Darsen! But a promise is a promise, I suppose." We shook hands, and he withdrew from his coat pocket the music box cylinder. He beckoned to the maid who was standing in the back room, and she brought over the small chest, retrieved from the Hall of Chiefs. I carefully inserted the key and to my gleeful satisfaction, it clicked open. But inside, there was nothing.

"Ah, what a pity," Ross said, pushing up his glasses. "It seems to be empty."

I just glared at him, knowing that he was teasing me again. "Okay, big bro, when did you open it?"

"Hmm, I think it was about the moment my men retrieved the chest, I should like to think. I already knew that the key was in the music box, since gossip travels faster than a galloping horse, especially in a town like this one where the men gossip as compulsively as the women," he said with a shrewd smirk. "We have already investigated the site. There is no iron ore to be found."

"It's a useless plot of land?!" I exclaimed. "Are you sure you looked hard enough?"

"Oh, you misunderstand, Arcelia. I never said it was an empty site. I just said there was no iron. The site ... is the most magnificent of silver mines I have ever seen."

"Silver ...," I said, twisting my hair around my index finger, my splint-supported pinky sticking out prostrate.

"Yes, and your mother left this as well, wrapped to protect it from moisture." He handed me a small bound vellum book. I opened it and saw that it contained thousands of instructions and illustrations.

“Study it well, as I hope that my twenty percent should amount to more than twenty percent of zero.”

“If we lose money, will you pay us for our losses?” I joked, realizing how complicated the instructions were. “I cannot even tell what I am to be manufacturing here.” I flipped through pages of rods and circles and pipes, all measured exactly. And then I remembered my mother, holding me in her lap when I was younger. She would sing to me, and then she would play the same folk tunes on her flute.

Sure enough, on the last page of vellum stood a perfect ink diagram of the finished flute, its components assembled and welded according to the arrows.

“So Mother, you did answer my prayer from that day,” I whispered to myself.

I thanked Ross and departed his house, where Darsen and the younger ones were waiting for me outside.

“Any news, Chili?”

I laughed. “Yes, plenty of news indeed. Looks like Father and I will be opening a woodwind shop soon.”

“Wood? What skill do you have with wood?”

“Oh, you are a fool still, aren’t you!” I exclaimed. “Flutes from the forge are the instruments of the future!” I posed with flair.

“So,” said Les. “Spill the beans. Are you going to marry Darsen soon?”

“Eh, *Darsen*?” I cried.

“You don’t *have* to act so repulsed,” Darsen deadpanned.

“Ohoho,” I replied. “Well, I fully intend to marry a man who is rich and devoted enough to support my father, and who will buy me all that I desire! Darsen just flits from job to job – he’ll always be poor! Although,” I said, pausing, watching Darsen’s eyes turn round in that pathetic puppy-dog way. “Although, Darsen *is* rather fetching. Ah, I know! Shall we have a steamy affair instead?” I flashed a mock sultry gaze in his direction; he of course winced uneasily.

Leslie turned to Peter’s ear and whispered, “I knew it, women are truly evil.”

I tapped Leslie and Darsen both on the head. “I was just kidding! What care would I have for riches, when I already have the wealth of the best friends in the whole wide world!”

I took Darsen’s hand into mine. “Come on, let’s head on home. You’ll have to start your apprenticeship soon.”

“Woah, wait, apprenticeship?” asked Darsen incredulously. “What are you talking about?”

“If you’re going to be my husband, you had better know how to work in the forge with me!” I exclaimed. “So, as of this day, I am making you my apprentice.”

“*Your* apprentice?” And after a pause, with even greater emphasis, he added, “Your husband?!”

I smiled, jumping up to peck him lightly on the lips. He visibly melted and followed me, dreamily. Leslie and Peter bid us good day and headed out for school, leaving just the two of us to walk the path to my home.

There, Father was waiting on the front steps; I could smell the forge alive and kicking, waiting to be fed its first metal in weeks.

“Ah, Arcelia, I see that you have brought help.”

“But we don’t have any material from the new mine yet,” I argued. “Why did you start up the forge already?”

Father reached into his twill apron and pulled out a small nugget. “This here is gold that I’ve been saving for a long, long time. I suspect that Darsen may find it useful for his first task as an apprentice?”

Darsen and I just looked at each other and smiled.