

Thicker than Water

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It had been months since Zula had been this close to the palace. Yet somehow, as she stood on that rooftop, overlooking the grounds she'd once called home, she'd never felt so far away.

A thousand memories unfurled beneath her. Here, the tree she'd climbed the first time she ran away to the city beyond. There, the chamber in which her mother had beat her for it. Everywhere, subtle reminders of all she'd lost. Her innocence, her brother, the life she'd always longed for.

Now it would all come crashing down, and any remorse she might have felt, any nostalgia, had long since died away.

This was the home of Princess Zula Semiña, second in line to the throne of Vashleon. But the Sareneta, the Flying Viper, the most elusive assassin in the kingdom, belonged to the streets of Nlamius.

The city is my home, she told herself over and over; a mantra in her head. It always was.

The voices beside her snapped her out of her trance.

"Oh, come on," Amaris chuckled, shaking his head. "You're not getting cold feet now, are you?"

Fey planted her hands on her hips, glaring up at the pale elven boy. "Don't be ridiculous. I just..." she shifted in her boots. "I don't like heights."

"Well," his left arm wrapped around her shoulders, the right reaching for Zula, making her stiffen. "You're one of us now. Better get used to it."

"I'm not a criminal, Monty."

He winked. "Sure, buddy."

"Hopefully," she brought their bickering to a halt, her tone a warning in itself, "we won't need to break any more laws once this is all over. Nala and her crew are waiting for us, remember?"

The thought of Nala Kurez, captain of the very ship they planned on riding to freedom tonight, set her soul alight with a new sense of hope. Everything was in place, and maybe, maybe, they could pull this off.

Glita Semiña's reign would finally come to an end, and Vashleon, no, the entire world, would be free of her tyranny.

She looked over her allies one last time. Feyjin Olero, Amaris Montague, her partners in crime, her friends. They were here and they were loyal to her cause.

The realisation made her feel like she could fly every time it crossed her mind.

"Right." She clapped her hands, brushing Amaris' arm off hers. "Everyone's in position?"

Fey gave her a mock salute. "Juni's in the castle, obviously, ready to intercept the Queen. Monty and I will head to ours now but it's up to you to finish the job, okay?"

Zula nodded. Though hearing Juni's name still sent a jolt through her nerves, she chased the old fears away. She had her friend back, alive, even after all the hardships, and she wasn't letting the Queen take that away again.

Not like she did with Tevali. Not like she would with so many innocent Zepakians if they didn't destroy her, and stop the meaningless war she planned on waging.

That was what she wanted, after all. Zepakia versus Vashleon, in a battle that would surely obliterate both nations. Well, she wouldn't let her mother have it.

When she stared at them now, side by side, Zula could have laughed at how different Fey and Amaris looked to one another. Amaris, with his ghostly white skin and silver hair to match, his cold green eyes and his twig-like figure. Fey, with her dark, upturned eyes glowing with warmth, golden skin and rippling muscles. But the grins on their faces, the twin determination in their eyes, made them one and the same.

They would finish this. Together.

Now, Zula stood alone on the roof once more, with only the moons and the endless sky for company. Shrouded in the night, she glared through the window and into the lavish corridor of the palace. She'd lived in those quarters long enough to know her mother would be walking by sooner or later. Into the bedroom where she'd killed her coward of a husband in the name of power, and soon after, her hero of a son, in the name of keeping it hidden.

Zula had often wondered how her parents had ended up with a son as kind, as brave, as loyal as Tevali. How she had been so blessed to have him as a brother, yet so cursed to have Glita and Rushir Semiña tormenting the two of them at every turn.

Before she could ponder it further or risk drowning in her own grief, a shadow emerged in the window, blocking the candlelight from view. It was no more than a silhouette but Zula would recognise that figure anywhere. Despite everything, all the horrors she'd seen since leaving the palace, no fear compared to that which she felt right then. She doubted any ever would.

Queen Glita. Her mother.

Every part of her heated, from rage or anxiety, she didn't know. Forcing the bloodstained memories of her childhood away, she wiped her sweating palms. She replaced the dark memories with thoughts of here, of now, of what they would accomplish for the world. Amaris and Juni stood in the corridor, obscured and ready to put their plan into action. Zula stood here, her dagger at the ready. Fey crouched atop a balcony a few doors down, prepared to use her powers of metal manipulation, and make the blade land true. On the coast, Nala and her crew waited for them to sail away together. They would be free. Vashleon would be free.

She didn't need to fear her mother anymore.

So, with a shuddering breath, she turned her attention back to the window, where a familiar elven knight who had ram horns, as opposed to Amaris' bull-like ones, now stood.

"Your Majesty," Juni recited, her professionalism nothing short of genuine. Or so it seemed. "Off to bed, I presume?"

"Yes," the Queen snapped. "Now out of my way, peasant girl, I need my rest."

Irritation itched at Zula's being, as it always did when her mother talked that way. Especially to Juni. Yet somehow, as usual, the elf didn't so much as flinch. "Apologies for the intrusion," she went on, "but I have news regarding..." her voice turned to a whisper, so quiet Zula wouldn't have been able to decipher it if she didn't already know the words by heart, "the princess."

At this, the Queen stiffened. "Speak your piece, girl."

Juni recited the words they'd practised a thousand times over, back in the hideout. Word that after her escape, Zula may have hidden in a less...desirable part of town than they'd first thought. A place that reeked of alcohol and decay.

Southside. The last place they'd expect a princess to run for cover. Home sweet home to an assassin like herself.

As they spoke, Zula twirled the dagger in her hand, peeking around the corner for the next phase of their plan to show himself. And to think he always complained about Fey's punctuality. Where in the name of Lo-Ra was he?

As if threatened by her thoughts, a tall, skinny figure emerged in her line of sight, dressed in Royal Soldier's gear that seemed to sag off him. Her heart reignited at the sight of it. Just as Zula had so many times in her youth, they were relying on Glita's arrogance in order to get away with this. Examine him too long and she'd know that he wasn't just a lowly guard. And so far, she hadn't so much as glanced Amaris' way. They just had to hope their luck and his skill would hold out.

"I'll send my scouts into the area tomorrow," Juni concluded. "Rov nesa Semiña."

Long live the bloodline.

With one last salute, the young elf marched away, and Glita was striding to her room with a scoff. That salute, that was the signal. Amaris had succeeded.

Without her Rensah, the religious artefact keeping her magic hidden until it's needed most, no god-sent gifts could save Glita from the attack to come.

Glita stood in her bedroom window. Zula's dagger glinted in the moonlight. It was up to her now.

But was she ready for what came after?

She realised, with shock, she was. She no longer feared the future.

They say that blood is thicker than water and maybe they're right. Maybe the blood spilt for, and with, the people she fought beside now, was thicker than the endless sea they would travel across together. It didn't matter where they were going or what they were doing, as long as she was with them. Her real family. Not her mother, not her father, and thanks to them, not even the brother who had loved her more than anything.

And so, for Tevali, and for the life that'd been stripped away from her, she raised her dagger up high. For Amaris and Fey and Juni, for the life she'd chosen for herself, she let it fly.