

14 NIGHTMARES

"I'm going to let you take the lead on this one," said Zai'il. "I'm not so good with children."

Aria chuckled softly as she paused and peered up at the shop sign. "Are you sure this is the place?" she asked as she and her two companions walked through the front door.

Kharra nodded as her eyes scanned the shop. Zai'il followed close behind.

"Oh, hello there," came a kind, masculine voice from the back of the shop. "I'll be there in a moment."

Kharra nodded as her eyes scanned the shop. She passed by a large rack displaying long leather tunics, each dyed a different and distinct color. Some were plain, and others sported decorative collars, lapels, woven cuffs, tooled leather belts, and more.

"Hmm," said Kharra as she glanced at Aria and then back at the tunic in front of her. "I think this light lavender tunic would go well with your eyes. I like this black one too." She rubbed the material of the cuff between her index finger and thumb. "Very soft."

"Kharra, I don't really—"

Kharra chuckled. "Don't worry. I'm joking. It is soft, though." Zai'il snickered at Aria's fluster.

"Ah, welcome," said the man as he neared.

Aria turned to see his approach. He looked to be in his early forties, with a few pieces of gray beginning to poke through his otherwise black hair. His hands were rough and calloused, but strong.

The man nearly stumbled when he saw Aria and Zai'il. "Uh, oh, Kruustas, I-I'm sorry. I didn't realize—I mean, I didn't mean to make you wait." The man alternated between licking his lips and swallowing, shifting the weight between his feet as he did so.

"I am Kruusta Aria. This is Kruusta Zai'il, and this is Kharra. We are . . ." Aria paused.

"How is your son, Master Fornsworth?" Kharra asked, earning herself a surprised blink from the two Kruustas.

The man froze, his eyes wide and his mouth open. He glanced at the Kruustas, at Kharra, and then back at the Kruustas.

"How did you . . . ? I haven't said . . ."

Aria studied Kharra, curious about the younger woman's approach. Zai'il remained silent but watchful. Keeping her gaze on the man, Kharra pursed her lips and tilted her head like a disappointed parent.

The man's panicked eyes rested on Aria. "I-I'm so sorry, Kruusta," he said. "We, we didn't know what to do. He only arrived here the night before last. We... we were going to send him back after he had some time to rest and had a home-cooked meal. He... he's a good lad. He just had a scare is all."

Aria raised an eyebrow at the man, and he cleared his throat again. Aria pursed her lips. "Master Fornsworth?"

"Please, call me Elias," said the man.

Aria nodded. "Elias, I'm not here to punish your son, but if he's run away, he will need to return."

The man's shoulders drooped a little bit, but he nodded.

"Do you think, perhaps, we could speak with him?" Zai'il asked. "Maybe we can find out what scared him, or, at least, ease his fears. Kruusta training can be difficult and demanding, but I'm sure he's a tough boy or he'd not have been selected."

Elias nodded again, his head moving with slow resignation. "He's with his ma upstairs. Follow me. I'll take you to him."

Zai'il, Kharra, and Aria followed the leather worker through the back of his shop, past all the pre-made tunics, vests, cloaks, breeches, belts, bags, and more, past a table stacked full of tanned hides, and up a set of wooden stairs.

The man opened the door at the top of the stairs and held it open for the three women. They entered into a wide sitting room lined with multiple leather seats, most of which were thick, stuffed, and worn from use.

"Alyse, Jorun, could you come to the front room?" he called.

A woman with plain brown hair pulled up and bundled atop her head stepped into the sitting room from a doorway in the back. "What do you—" she started but saw the Kruustas and stopped. Instead, she broke down into sobs.

At the same time, multiple pairs of thudding feet pounded down a different set of stairs. From a hallway to the left of the sitting room emerged two children. One was a dark-haired boy who looked to be in his mid-teens and another was a younger girl, no older than ten.

"What'cha need, Pops?" said the boy without looking at the guests.

The young girl saw Zai'il and yelped. She then ducked behind the boy.

The boy finally looked at Aria and immediately paled. His eyes grew wide with terror, but he stayed his ground. Aria noticed a relatively fresh wound on his right hand and the unmistakable sparkle of crystal at its center. Silence hung heavy in the room as Aria worked to

find words that would not frighten the boy further. Zai'il's eyes wandered up to the ceiling, trying to avoid adding to the tension.

Kharra stepped forward. "Hello, Jorun. My name is Kharra, and these two ladies are Aria and Zai'il." Kharra extended her hand casually to the boy, who stood of a height with her. "We're not here because you're in trouble." She glanced at the two parents and then back at the boy. "We're just here to talk."

The boy blinked at Kharra's extended hand and then slowly, took it in his. The tension in his entire frame eased. "You . . . you're not a Kruusta?"

"Nope."

The boy's brow scrunched. He looked at Aria and then at Zai'il. "But you both are." It was a statement, not a question.

They nodded.

"And you didn't come here to bring me back?"

Aria thought for a moment before answering. "You will eventually have to go back to finish your training." The boy's brows shot up, but Aria smiled. "But I am more concerned about your well-being. Something scared you. Why don't we all sit down, and you can tell us what caused you to run away?"

"You people are monsters, that's what's caused him to run away!" blurted a red-faced Alyse. "You're terrorizing children."

Zai'il's brow angled downward. Aria stared at Alyse and forced down the anger that suddenly welled in her. She felt something touch her elbow and glanced down to see Kharra's hand. Aria took a long, silent breath and relaxed.

"Mrs. Fornsworth," Aria started, "the Order of the Shard was founded to protect people from shard-beasts, but it's an organization run by people. People have faults. I won't pretend that

I think everything is okay at the academy at this moment, but I really do want what is best for your son. Right now, that means finding out what's really going on there and what caused him to have such a fright. Please, if there's something wrong at the academy, I want to get to the bottom of it. The academy is supposed to be a place of learning and training, not fear."

The redness remained in the other woman's face, but the tension in her body relaxed. She exhaled loudly, nodded stiffly, turned on heel, and exited the room. The young girl who had been hiding behind Jorun dashed through the same doorway after the woman.

Aria turned back to the boy. "So, are you okay if we ask you some questions?"

Though fear still lingered on his face, he nodded tentatively.

"Please, have a seat," said Elias.

Aria and Kharra each picked out one of the thick-cushioned chairs placed on either side of a low rectangular table. Elias sat on a light tan sofa, and Jorun sat beside him.

"I'm fine," said Zai'il as she took up a standing position against the wall opposite the sofa.

As everyone settled in, Aria said, "Congratulations on your shard."

The youth smiled, the unexpected compliment putting him further at ease. "Oh, thank you." He blushed.

"It looks like it hasn't finished healing yet healed yet. You must have received it fairly recently."

Jorun nodded. "It hasn't even been a full moon cycle since I received it."

"We all attended the ceremony," said a much calmer Alyse as she returned to the room. "It was quite lovely." Alyse sat upon the sofa beside her son opposite her husband. The young girl climbed onto Elias's lap.

Aria gave a tight smile to the clearly worried mother. Then she turned her attention to Jorun and asked, "So, Jorun, what happened that gave you such a fright?"

Jorun stared down at his hands, and silence fell about the room as everyone waited for his answer. He took a deep breath and exhaled. "I-I've been having nightmares nearly every night since I received my shard. Horrible nightmares."

Kharra furrowed her brow. "What can you tell us about your nightmares?"

Jorun frowned. "I can't remember them very well. What little bit I do remember... I'm always in a room with thick stone walls and dim lighting. There are people, but I can't tell who they are. My body always hurts something awful, but I can't tell why. Then my vision gets blurry, as if I'm looking through murky water. I see shapes, forms of some sort of creatures moving all about me, but it's too blurry to tell what they are." He sighed. "I'm sorry, that's about all I can remember."

"What about the other nights?" Aria asked.

The boy looked at her quizzically. "Every night I have nightmares, and every night, the nightmares are the exact same thing."

"He looked horrible when he arrived, Kruusta," said Alyse, "but he slept soundly through the night and well into yesterday afternoon."

"Did he have nightmares?" Aria asked.

"I don't think so," the mother answered with a shake of her head. "I don't think he moved at all. He looks much better today."

Aria drew her lips taut. She glanced at Zai'il. The dark woman's nose and lip barely contained her snarl. Then she looked at Kharra sitting on the chair on the opposite side of the table and held her gaze. Without any Mind Seeking involved, she knew all three women drew the same conclusion.