

SHIELDED ALTERNATE POV

Enzo

“Enzo, we’ve got to go before anyone realizes you’re here,” Luc said from beside me.

An hour ago, a runner from the palace had skidded to a stop in front of our party just outside of Teano. I’d known everything was about to change as the dust settled around the runner’s horse.

I’d woken up this morning thinking I’d still have to marry the Hálendian princess. But now she was . . . Beyond that, now the entire kingdom faced war for retribution of an atrocity we hadn’t committed.

My mind had been spinning from one extreme to the other ever since.

I shook my head when Luc took a step nearer. “There aren’t any Hálendians in Teano.”

I kept my hand on my sword, just in case. It was Luc’s job to keep me safe—I knew that. Yet his hovering only made me more nervous. No one—not even the villagers in Teano—knew that we’d made good enough time to arrive a day early.

I swallowed and studied our surroundings. The innkeeper’s people worked alongside the soldiers we’d brought for the tour of the kingdom’s outer villages, gathering enough supplies to make the trek back to the palace as fast as possible.

I’d been looking forward to not being in the palace when the Hálendian arrived. To let her get settled—let my annoyance at her refusal to respond to my letters settle.

But now, a whole different set of troubles loomed before me. War. Turia wasn't ready for this kind of conflict with our neighbors to the north. Not with Riiga plotting something to the south as well.

A dull roar of shouting started from the market *plat*—they must have heard the news as well.

“No more stops on the way to the palace,” Luc said, taking the reins from our horses from the stable hand. “Not anywhere inhabited, anyway.”

Back to the palace. Scrambling to figure out a way to protect the kingdom. We'd trained with the Hálendians before—shared knowledge of healing and fighting between us. Even so, we would be outmatched.

“We'll get there,” I replied, looking up at the bright blue sky and letting the sun warm my skin. This trip was the only time I really broke free from the expectations of the palace. When I could meet actual people, and see the realities of our kingdom.

It was going to be my last moment of freedom from the princess. But she'd taken away even that.

“En—” Luc started, but his warning came too late.

A girl in a wide hat sprinted around the corner, looking back like she was being chased, and slammed into me. I stumbled, air emptying from my lungs, grabbing her arms to keep us both from falling.

“Whoa, are you all right?” I asked. Luc dropped the reins to our horses, reaching for his sword instead.

She looked up, mouth frozen open in response, and my mind emptied.

Her eyes caught my attention first, ice blue with a ring of

navy around the iris. Her skin was fairer than any I'd seen in the kingdom—a ghost compared to my olive skin and dark hair. Her hat had flown off, and her hair, peeking out from under her scarf, was the golden color of ripe wheat.

Hálendian.

A beautiful Hálendian, but a Hálendian nevertheless.

My gaze darted to Luc's. His hand was already on his sword, ready to attack. But this girl was running *from* something, not toward us. Almost like—she'd been a Hálendian in the platoon when the news of war was announced.

Before I could say anything more, she twisted out of my arms and shoved me. Hard. I slammed into Luc with a yelp and we both stumbled back.

She grabbed my horse's reins and leapt onto his back, then kicked his sides so he shot forward and galloped down the road.

"My horse!" I said as I stood there like a tree and watched her race away. There was no way I was letting some Hálendian girl *steal* my horse. I'd had enough of Hálendi ruining my day.

I grabbed the nearest reins away from a stable hand and leapt into the saddle, digging my knees into its sides.

"Wait!" Luc shouted, "You can't just—"

But I was already gone. I glanced back as Luc jumped into his saddle, chasing after us. There would be consequences, but I had to *do* something.

Wind blew through my hair, and my coat flapped behind me. Ahead of me, the girl rounded a bend out of sight.

I leaned forward, urging my borrowed horse faster, scanning the bosco for any sign—there. A flash of yellow in the trees. I

veered to follow, Luc coming up right behind me. He'd lecture me for weeks about this, but I wasn't about to abandon my horse to some Hálendian thief.

The girl's horse slid to a sudden stop, and I thought for sure she'd fly over its head, but she held on. Then my horse was sliding to a stop next to hers, Luc's next to mine.

An idyllic meadow surrounded us. Bright sun, tiny flowers scattered over the ground. Two men in black cloaks stood in front of us, hoods drawn low over their faces. They each held black blade at their side, and no matter how the sun shined against them, the rays seemed to miss.

Luc and I locked eyes, his brows furrowed low. I was beginning to wish I hadn't followed the horse thief.

The girl tried turning her horse, ready to run again, but another man in black stood behind us and her horse reared back, tumbling her to the ground amidst the stomping hooves. I'd never seen my horse so spooked before. Who were these men?

Before I could talk myself out of it, I jumped off my borrowed horse.

"No don't—" Luc started, but I was already down.

I grabbed the girl, hooking my arms under her shoulders and dragging her away from the pounding hooves. Luc jumped down and stood between us and the two men in the meadow, and all of our horses bolted into the bosco.

The girl shook off my help, standing on her own and straightening her skirt. "You shouldn't have followed me," she snapped under her breath. Even so, I caught her accent. She hadn't been in Turia long enough to soften it.

“Of course I followed—you stole my horse!” I hissed back.

I stood next to Luc, between two of the cloaked men and her. My hand gripped the hilt of my sheathed sword hard. I’d never truly felt the weight of my kingdom until this moment. If something happened to me out here, when the kingdom was on the brink of war . . .

“We mean no harm!” Luc called out. Our opponents raised their swords. To me, quietly, he said, “If you see a chance to run, *take it.*”

I swallowed hard. We drew our swords. Luc turned to check on the man behind us.

“You should go,” I said to the girl, my throat tight, all my focus forward. “Run.”

But the girl didn’t. Instead, she untied the sweater from her waist and tossed it aside, along with her bag. She’d had a sword at her waist, hidden under the layers. She pulled it out. The ring of metal wasn’t as reassuring as it should have been.

At least we weren’t outnumbered anymore.

“*You* should run,” she said. And then she raised her sword high over her shoulder.

This wasn’t some thief, then. A *trained* Hálendian.

One of the cloaked men flicked his hand, and suddenly the air began vibrating, like a ripple in a lake. Closer and closer, the shimmering air blasted toward us. I stood frozen, not understanding what I was seeing. My sword couldn’t defend against air, no matter how much I’d trained.

My breaths came faster. How could *this* be my last moment? Chasing down a Hálendian horse thief in some bosco?

At the last moment, the girl’s hand shot out, and the wave

dissipated into nothing.

“Watch out for their magic,” she said, and then sprinted toward the two men in front of us. Her skirt billowed out as she ran, like a wave of its own.

Magic?

And she’d *caught it*?

The clash of their swords echoed loud in the silence. The girl tangled with both cloaked men in a fury of steel and shimmering air.

The man behind us stepped into the meadow like he would join his two companions. Luc and I exchanged a glance, then raised our swords and joined the fight, focusing on the single opponent blocking the exit.

Luc and I had fought together enough that we didn’t need any sort of communication. We attacked fast to keep him from shooting a shimmering wall at us. Luc drew him out, and the man stretched to slice into Luc’s exposed leg. Before he could make contact, my sword cut deep into his shoulder.

I should have met resistance against the bones in his arm, but it sliced right through. The man disintegrated with no more sound than the thump of his sword as it landed in the soft grass of the meadow.

We both froze, breathing hard. “Where did he go?” I whirled around, but the man was gone.

Luc gripped his hilt, sweat running down his temple. The girl still fought off the two men, her blade moving so fast I could barely see it.

We *should* run for it—protect the heir, and all that. But we nodded once to each other, then ran into the fight.

I slipped in next to the girl, drawing some of the focus away to give her a reprieve. Not that she needed it. I'd never seen anyone fight like her before, not against *one* man, let alone two.

Luc went around the right side, drawing one of the men's attention away.

"No!" the girl cried out, and, too late, I realized Luc's folly.

One of the cloaked men raised his hand, and a wave of shimmering air blasted directly into Luc, lifting him from the ground and throwing him back to the edge of the meadow.

He landed with a thud I felt in my bones. An ache that turned to fire.

The girl flicked her sword into the man who'd attacked Luc. The man disintegrated into nothing. I turned my fire toward the last opponent, who seemed more shadow than man.

The girl and I fought together in a smear of steel and fury, but this last opponent was faster than anything I'd ever seen. He used his free hand to send the shimmering wall toward me, but the girl always intercepted it enough that I could avoid it.

But the man was too fast, even with both of us working together.

She had the man distracted with a complicated attack, and I eased around to his weaker side. He sensed my intention, and twisted to send his shimmering magic against me. The girl reached across her body to shield me from the attack.

But I was too far. I ducked and rolled on the ground, under the wave. Then the man spun, slicing his sword toward the girl's exposed side.

She twisted to avoid the blow and fell back, but by then I was on my feet again. I swung hard and fast, slicing my blade

through his neck.

The figure disintegrated like the others, his black sword falling to the ground.

I stood with my sword raised, sweat trickling down my back. The stream's gurgle and birdsong returned to the meadow as if nothing had ever disturbed it. I hadn't even realized the sounds had stopped.

What kind of creature had the power to stop *sound*?

"Luc," I called, spinning toward where he'd fallen. If anything had happened to him, I . . . I didn't know what I'd do, couldn't think past the gaping possibility. "Are you—"

"I'm fine." He sat up several yards away, rubbing his chest. My shoulders eased down and I let out a deep breath. But his voice betrayed him. Injured. And here we were, alone with a Hálendian, at least two days of hard riding from the palace.

The girl was still lying on her back, arm draped over her eyes like she'd decided now was the perfect time for a nap.

The glint of the black sword caught my eye. I'd never seen metal like that, before, never even heard of it. I sheathed my sword and reached down for it.

"Don't touch it," the girl said.

The sword dissolved just like its owner.

"Cavolo," I muttered. I jerked my hand away and looked—really looked—at the girl on the ground. Dark smudges under her eyes, clothes that didn't quite fit. Hálendian boots.

Everything had been turned on its head today. Friends had become enemies, a leisurely trip had turned into a headlong rush. People disappeared along with their weapons.

I knelt next to the girl and slipped my hand under her

shoulders, helping her sit up. She gasped and collapsed back in pain.

My grandmother's teachings flooded back to me, the times I'd helped her in the healing chambers. I inspected the girl and found a small tear in the front of her blouse. I lifted the blouse enough to see the wound.

"It doesn't look very deep," I said quietly, pressing on the skin gently to assess it.

She pushed my hands away. "I'm fine," she said. "Just a scratch."

I sat back, giving her space. It truly wasn't deep. Yet this girl, who obviously knew how to use a sword, whimpered at the slightest movement. I glanced back to where the blade had fallen. The grass that had been green moments before was now withered and yellow.

"I'm only trying to help," I said. And if I was honest, I was curious, too. She'd been running from something back in Teano. Her eyes held the edges of panic, a haunted look that bled into her every movement.

"Why?" she asked. A tiny line formed between her brows, and the strangest urge to smooth it away came over me. She studied me, noting my uniform. "I stole your horse."

The weight returned—we needed to return to the palace. I was exposed out here, and if I was exposed, Turia was exposed.

"I remember," I said, keeping my face carefully blank.

She frowned and scooted away with a wince.

She could have answers, insight to Turia's situation. *If* I could get her to trust us.

I turned away, giving her space. "Still breathing, then," I

called out to Luc.

Luc rolled his eyes and rubbed his chest. “Like you could get rid of me that easily.” He limped toward us, kicking through the grass to look for his sword. “I think I cracked a few ribs.”

Were there more of those cloaked men out here, waiting to attack? I whistled for my horse. He was well trained—he’d come if he could hear it. If he didn’t come, we’d have to go back to Teano and risk exposing our location.

The girl’s breath came short and fast. It didn’t match the injury. My grandmother always talked to those in her care, said sometimes all they needed was a distraction.

I knelt by the girl’s side. “This would have gone a lot differently if you hadn’t stayed, . . .” Would she give her name?

“Aleinn,” she whispered. She focused on the ground, like some invisible weight pressed against her. “And yours?” she asked.

It was a small thing she asked. My name. Yet it was so much more than a name at the moment. Even knowing that, something in me wanted to tell her.

“I’m Luc, and that’s Teren,” Luc blurted out.

I snapped my mouth shut. Luc glared at me. *We can’t trust her*, his look said. I volleyed back with an *I know*, but maybe this girl, Aleinn, had answers. She was Hálendian. Her people had declared war, and those cloaked men had appeared in Turia the same day.

Plus a tiny part of me just wanted to stay near her.

I’d never been in this position before—unrecognized. When she looked at me, she only saw *me*. Not the crown or kingdom or anything else.

I wasn't willing to let that go. Not yet.

Besides, if there were more of those cloaked men out there, we could use her help.

I reached out my hand to help pull her to standing. She hesitated, staring like no one had ever helped her stand up before. Would she brush me away again? Would she—a girl who only saw me as a boy, not a prince—reject me?

She slowly reached out and put her hand in mine. I didn't know if it was leftover energy from the fight, or maybe curiosity at this Hálendian who didn't know who I was, but my skin came alive at her touch, noting every sensation, every callus on her hand.

Luc cleared his throat, and I stepped away with a frown.

"Right, well, thank you both for your help," Aleinn said, hobbling back to where she'd tossed her bag and sweater.

I didn't need to look at Luc to know he wasn't about to let this girl go. We turned as one to follow behind her.

"What were those cursed things?" I asked Luc, keep close behind Aleinn, but not so close she'd feel threatened.

"Do I look like a walking library?" Luc answered. He found his sword and shoved it back in its sheath. He whistled for his horse. "Where are those maledetto horses?"

Despite being a soldier, Luc didn't handle pain well. It was going to be a long trip back to the palace. Aleinn ignored us, tying her sweater around the sheath of her sword once again, and returning the bag to her shoulder. She started back toward the road.

"Wait!" I called. I had to think of some way to get her to stay with us. To trust us.

Something crashed through the bosco toward us. I grabbed the hilt of my sword, but it was only our horses—Luc’s and mine. I didn’t know where the horse I’d ridden here went; I hoped it found its way back to the village.

Aleinn swayed a little. Maybe her injury was how I could get her to come with us. To answer our questions.

Luc and I mounted our horses and steered them into her path. “We need to leave this meadow before something else finds us.” I offered my hand down to her. Luc glared at me, but we both knew he wouldn’t be able to lift her to the saddle with his injuries.

Aleinn shook her head. “No, thank you. I’ll continue on my own.”

Luc looked ready to tie her up and toss her on the back of one of our horses, so I moved to block her path, then dismounted. “You’re injured,” I said. “We can take you to the best healer in the kingdom.”

It wasn’t even a lie. My grandmother, Yesilia, could heal any affliction. She’d know what to do about the wound from the black blade.

“I’ll—” she swayed. “I’ll just go back to the village.”

The village she was running from? Who just found out Hálendi had become our enemy? “I wouldn’t go there right now if I were you,” I said with a glance at her fair hair.

Luc glared at me. “We need to go.”

“I’m not leaving her here,” I replied.

“I wasn’t suggesting that.” Luc glared at Aleinn, and I wanted to kick him. He was undoing all my work.

But Aleinn nodded.

Did that mean she wanted . . . ? She launched herself up into my saddle. I guess she meant to come with us.

She settled her skirt around her legs, and I lifted myself into the saddle behind her. She sat like a stick had been attached to her spine—straight and stiff.

I nudged my horse forward and shifted. She smelled better than anyone who'd just bested two men in battle had any right to smell. Like forests and berries. But we'd never make good time if she sat like this.

"Lean back. If something else decides to chase us, we may need to run for it." I wrapped my arms around her and eased my horse forward, trying to keep both of them calm.

Luc spoke from ahead of us. "Let's find that healer."

The healer, and answers. "There's another village due south of here," I said. "Let's see how far away we can get."

#

She was freezing. And pulling any warmth I had left out of me.

The sun had set hours ago, but we still had a long way to go before we reached the palace. The idea that the blade was poisoned had been flitting around my mind for the last half mile.

I called out to Luc, who was riding ahead, and slowed my horse to a walk. "Luc, we need to find a place to stop."

"Already? We haven't even—"

"Something's wrong. She's freezing cold. It's just a small wound, but I think she fainted." She'd been drifting to the side for the past mile and stopped responding to my nudges. I'd even whispered a poem in her ear just to get a reaction. She was

deadweight in the saddle and wouldn't wake up.

"She passed out?"

"Yes, but she's freezing, Luc. I think the blade may have been poisoned."

He cursed under his breath. "You're sure? We're only another six or so hours to the palace."

I shifted her in my arms. "I'm sure."

I spent the next mile racking my brain for a solution to an unknown poison on a shadow's blade, trying to remember what Yesilia had taught me about remedies. It was too dark to find anything useful on the forest floor, but still I looked.

"There's a light ahead," Luc's voice pulled my eyes from the ground to the bright windows of a nearby cottage.

"Let's stop here, then." My arm was still tight around her, but the cold was making the muscles in my arm cramp.

"Are you sure? They might chase us off, or swindle us out of—"

"Out of what? We don't have anything to be swindled. It'll all work out, Luc. We're stopping."

#

As it happened, not all farmers were as welcoming as I'd imagined them to be. Or maybe I was just used to having a royal guard and insignia.

"She's sick," Luc was saying to the stubborn old man.

"It's not cold tonight, and I won't be wasting firewood. You look like a healthy man—find some other way to warm 'er up, eh?"

I narrowed my eyes and shifted Aleinn's unconscious form in my arms. I stood just outside the light spilling from the man's

single candle, trying to bite my tongue. She was injured and helpless, and he wouldn't spare a few logs for a fire to warm her?

"My wife's been kind enough to set up a small bed in the corner there for your girl, so you can take it for the night or be on your way."

Luc opened his mouth, but I spoke before he could get us kicked out of the only shelter we'd seen in miles. "We thank you for your hospitality, sir. This will be adequate."

He pursed his lips and brushed a hand through the white, sparse hairs on his head.

I went around him and laid the girl on the makeshift bed and rubbed my frozen arms. I lifted the hem of her blouse to assess the wound again and cursed. The cut was edged in white, with green streaks clawing away from it like veins in marble.

I turned to the man's wife, who'd just returned from the outdoor pump with a bowl of water for us—we'd had to practically beg for it.

"Madam, do you have wintergrain in your garden?"

"Yes, of course," she snapped. "It keeps the deer away from the herbs."

"Could I trouble you for some? My friend has...an upset stomach, and it would help it settle a bit."

The woman's narrow gaze darted between me and Aleinn, but she nodded. "Get it yourself. I've already lost enough sleep over you three."

I ducked out the back door of the cottage with the small candle they'd left us, finding the edge of the garden and pulling up the small, leafy plant by the root.

The farmer and his wife had retired when I returned, so I found a smaller bowl in their kitchen and used it to wash the root as well as I could, then mashed it into a pulp with a rock.

Luc held the candle and I lifted the hem of Aleinn's blouse, exposing the cut that was no longer than my littlest finger. Luc grunted at the sight of the green and white around it. I pushed the pulp into the wound as far as I could. Aleinn arched her back and tried to swat me away in her sleep.

I tore a strip from the faded blanket the farmer had offered us. Ignoring her protruding ribs and the three red scars on her right side, I pressed the folded cloth against the cut. I tied another strip around her torso the best I could. The bandage wasn't much, but it would keep the wintergrain root in place and soak up what little blood was flowing.

She settled down, breathing easier already.

"My cut isn't turning white and green."

I jerked my head up at Luc's whisper. He'd lifted his sleeve to reveal a small cut on his forearm. I reached out tentatively and felt the skin around the cut, but it was normal.

"Why is hers poisoning, but yours isn't?" I whispered, not wanting the cottage's owners to hear us. "Was only one blade poisoned?"

Luc looked between his arm and Aleinn and reached out a tentative hand to feel her skin. He yanked it back. "It doesn't make sense that only one blade would be poisoned. But she's freezing. Will the root help with that?"

I grimaced. "I hope so. Wintergrain root should pull poison out, but I don't know if the black blade's poison is different." I rubbed my hand over my eyes. "If she were warm it would

speed up the process of pulling out the poison. Do you think they'd kick us out if I started a fire?"

Luc snorted. "Yes, actually. I think they might." I agreed. Luc rubbed the back of his neck and his face scrunched up. "You'll have to lie next to her tonight. See if your body heat can warm her up at all and help the root work faster. We need to get out of here and back to the—back home." He glanced sideways at Aleinn.

I scrubbed my hands over my face. "Why me? You have body heat as well." The thought of lying next to her all night was both intriguing and painful—I wasn't sure I'd warmed up yet from holding her in the saddle.

"I don't want to get my throat slit by an angry woman when she wakes up next to me." He widened his eyes, and I couldn't help but laugh a little.

"You're supposed to protect me, not put me in danger."

"Yes, but I don't think she'd slit your throat. Not without giving you time to get away, anyway." He frowned and I remembered that spark I had felt when I held her in the meadow.

I pulled off my boots and unbuckled my sword. I sat awkwardly next to her and unbuckled her sword, sliding the belt away and laying them next to the bed within easy reach.

I unlaced her tall boots and caught a knife just before it clattered to the floor. I unsheathed the hunting knife and lifted it up, raising my eyebrows at Luc. He just shrugged and settled on his back on the floor—staying close enough to warm her feet, but staying between us and the farmer's bedroom door, using Aleinn's bag as a pillow. I slipped the knife back into her boot

and lay next to her, our bodies almost touching. I pulled the thin blanket we'd been given over us both and Luc blew out the candle.

I tried to settle in, to relax. We'd probably only have a few hours before daylight—we'd need all the sleep we could get. Luc was already snoring softly.

I closed my eyes, but they opened again. I was too cold to sleep. Instead, I studied her face, relaxed in sleep. She was beautiful in the moonlight. Tranquil. I reached out to brush a golden strand of hair away from her face before I realized I wanted to.

She stirred, turning her face into the palm of my hand.

I didn't even know her name. She could be anyone. A spy from Hálendi. An assassin. But we'd fought together seamlessly. Then my mind halted on an idea: maybe she had information on what had actually happened to Jennesara.

The timing could work. She hadn't been in Teano long, she had wounds on her stomach from some sort of conflict. The haunted look, the weight. It wasn't much of a possibility, but it was there.

She leaned into me and I wrapped my arms tighter around her. I shivered, but tucked her head under my chin. I'd have to do my best to keep her from freezing to death tonight so I could get answers from her tomorrow.