

Larina



“Did you kill him?”

Larina smiled at the homeless beggar lying in his own filth. Crouching low between vacant buildings, she raised her eyebrows twice. “Danth? Nah. I’ve something better in mind for him. Let’s just say I doubt he’ll bother you anymore.”

To Larina, life in the cutthroat seaport of Storms End was nothing more than a game of steal and lie, or die. Burnt-out walls of the old city rose up on either side of her crouched form—their desolation instilling in her a strange comfort. A

sensation of safety from those she had wronged and planned to con again if she wished to remain alive.

Thunderhead Fjord came to an unemphatic end along the city's polluted shores; slapping its spent energy against countless, rotted pier stanchions lining the haphazard shoreline of the once glorious seaport.

With Thunderhead at the mouth of the fjord, and indeed, the thriving area around Madrigail Bay farther down the coast, Storms End had become little more than a bastion for cutthroat sailors and rogues. A haven for anyone wishing to avoid the attention of the greatest realm the free kingdoms had ever known.

Ruled by a benevolent king, the realm of Zephyr was highly respected amongst her trading partners and enemies alike—a kingdom of tolerance and good fortune. Allies enjoyed the protection of King Malcolm Alexander Svelte, the Learned, while her enemies lay in fear of her mighty war machine.

At least they had before Helleden Misenthorpe returned from the dead and laid waste to the kingdom. The rumour circulating around the city was that Zephyr had lost the ability to defend itself. If the 'so-called' benevolent King Malcolm didn't get his act together soon, there might not be a kingdom left to save. Larina had heard rumblings of the Kraidic empire gearing up for war whispered in the dark corners of taverns and places of ill-repute.

Those rumours were unsettling. For those left alive in the ancient shipbuilding city in the aftermath of the maniacal sorcerer's invasion two years ago, and the subsequent death of their much beloved queen, Quarnaine, life had never returned to normal. Many were left homeless or without family. Larina couldn't imagine how bad things would become if Zephyr were invaded again. The Kraidics were

notorious seafarers—brutal and relentless when they had an enemy in their sights.

As was the case for the spirited lass known to anyone undesirable enough to have the misfortune of making the acquaintance of the Storms End Lightning Bolt. Larina cared less for the title she had been given; preferring to remain nameless and faceless to facilitate her penchant of slipping from shadow to shadow unmolested by the authorities. For her, survival had been inbred at an early age.

Gazing at the end of the alley where she knew they would come, the weak voice of the elderly man she helped prop against a charred wallboard drew her attention.

“You must go. I’ll be okay. They won’t bother with the likes of me when they’re on the hunt.”

She gave him a compassionate smile, her long cheeks lifting on the ends of thin lips. Flicking a loose strand of brown hair from in front of her face, she adjusted the filthy burlap sack around the frail man’s shoulders. “I’ll be back, Allard, don’t worry. When I return, my bag will be stuffed with food.”

She could tell by Allard’s eyes that his time to leave this world wasn’t long in coming. The fact that he suffered so, this close to the end of his life, raised her hackles.

Allard had spoke of him once being an important man in the king’s army. If she believed half of the tales he had imparted during the several, cold nights she had snuggled next to him over the last couple of years to share body warmth, he had played an important part in the Battle of Lugubrius two decades ago.

As delighted as the haggard man sounded of his accomplishments, he never told Larina what exactly he was proud of. At first, she had put it down to the ramblings of an

old man, but the more she came to know him, the more she began to believe his tales.

She patted his shoulder and stood, adjusting the belt holding her black tunic against her thin waist.

Allard reached out but didn't have the strength to bend forward. "Promise me you'll get yourself a better weapon. A dagger's fine if all you want to do is sneak up behind someone and cut their neck, but with the enemies you're acquiring, it won't be enough to keep you safe."

She blinked as his words sunk in. Pulling her nondescript dagger from its sheath, she bent at the knees and waggled it between them. "Good ol' '*stick 'em*' has served me fine so far. You needn't fear, my old friend. Pray for the families of those who chase me."

She stood, sheathed her dagger, and padded quietly in her soft-soled boots to peer out of the end of the alley.

It took her a moment to find them. Coming down a broken, wooden plank walkway fronting the remains of the old section of town, several large figures made their way toward her hiding spot. She jumped back to Allard and took hold of the burlap—pulling it over his head.

"They're coming. Best you don't draw attention to yourself." She inspected the darkness at the far end of the alley and took a deep breath. "Be safe, old boy."

She ran halfway down the dark backstreet and stopped in the shadows. Something didn't feel right.

Born from the one-time bond of her mother and a paying customer, Larina's first memories were of being left alone to fend for herself in a warren of shanties and derelict buildings—the resulting fallout of the same maniacal sorcerer's sojourn into Zephyr twenty-one years prior.

During the many nights that her wayward mother would return smelling of stale smoke, ale, and something more

repulsive, she would find Larina huddled in a corner, shivering with fear. More often than not, her mother would berate Larina's weakness before passing out in preparation of beginning the cycle all over again whenever she awoke the next day.

On the odd occasion, her mother, out of what Larina now suspected must have been guilt, offered her sympathy. She claimed Larina was the daughter of a high-born sailor whose ship had docked in Storms End.

Larina swallowed, fighting to keep her eyes from misting over in the dangerous alleyway. Many were the sleepless nights she had lain alone, listening to night sounds; scrabbling, scratching, clawing, and shouting all around her. The only thing that had helped her survive the night terrors was the misplaced belief that one day her father would return and take her away from a life of squalor.

She had held onto that belief until the day she heard rumours that her living space in the one-roomed hovel she shared with her mother was about to be 'vacated.' A term she had become well versed in. 'Vacated' signified that the owner had either died or moved on.

At the age of nine, she had been forced to reconcile the fact that her mother was not coming back. Her time in their flea-infested living space had come to an end. Perhaps more grievous than the report of her mother's impending demise, was the death of her dream. Once her mother was gone, the highborn sailor would have no reason to return.

She had rushed to the seedy district her mother frequented and found her sprawled in a back alley amongst piles of refuse, her clothing soaked in blood. Not knowing whether to scream at her mother for being so careless, or to cry, she held her dying mother's cheeks between her hands and demanded to know the truth about her mysterious father.

With the last of her strength, her mother had shrugged. The words uttered on her dying breath haunted Larina to this day. *'Who knows? It may be true. Why not hang onto that vision. It's probably the best thing I've ever given you.'*

Movement at the head of the alley startled her out of her memories. Wiping at her eyes, it was time for the Storms End Lightning Bolt to run.