

The Hartvane Chronicles

by Josh Closs

Book I: The Outcast and the Chosen One

Sneak Peek: The First Two Chapters

Prologue

The Past

*The waves surged around them.
The temple's walls, unmoved for centuries, seemed to hum with
displeasure.*

"This is a terrible risk."

It is.

"For you, especially."

Me?

My part is simple.

It'll be over in a year.

"We both know that's not true. If it works, you will become..."

I know.

But your job is so much harder.

And lacks the glory of mine.

"I'll miss you every day."

You know I feel the same.

And you know this is the only way.

"Yes. You're right.

"On both counts."

Chapter 1

Today

Rising out from the Abyss of the ocean depths below, a small town built by merfolk sat atop a pillar of rock with a layer of loamy soil on top. That town was Shadecoral, one of the last remaining towns of the Deepdivers, its highest point about two hundred meters below the water's surface above.

Many merfolk had abandoned such towns and moved towards the continents to trade and live more easily with the landwalkers who lived there — the elves, the dwarves, the humans, and the birdkin, along with all of the beautiful combinations therein.

Many, but not all.

The Deepdivers, as Mayor Ekolo would often remind the townsfolk of Shadecoral during his weekly addresses, were "not among that rabble." While the Deepdivers would occasionally send

a caravan to deal with the dwarves on their continent many days' journey away to the south, most Shadecoralers were not permitted to so much as lay a fin over the edge of Shadecoral or poke a finger above the water's surface without express consent from the Deepdivers' High Council, lest they risk offending the merfolken gods and exiling themselves from the community.

This particular morning, two of the town's residents were keeping clear of such offenses in the town's oldest building, its temple to the Merfolken gods.

Melodika Hartvane sighed as she watched her sister. "Please hurry, Monie," she said. "We were supposed to meet them ten minutes ago."

"Hold on!" Harmonia said, her hands clasped in front of her as she swished her tail to stay upright in the water, the sound of it pulsing through the lofty sanctuary. The two sisters were the only ones in the temple's public section at this hour of the morning, and, based on past attendance records, might be the only visitors who would enter all day. If others did stop by, they would almost certainly pass by the row of smaller shrines on their way to Pythmena's altar to offer their tributes and prayers.

Not Harmonia, though.

"Thank you, Fish Goddess," she said, bowing deeply twice before moving on. Her voice carried effortlessly through the water, bouncing off the high ceilings and filling the temple with its pleasant timbre. "Thank you, Sun God. Thank you, Moons God. I hope you two patch things up some day."

Melodika couldn't help but smile. Like always, Harmonia may not have been focused, but she was devoted.

"Thank you, Kelp Goddess, for letting Papa's fields grow," Harmonia said, leaving a wrapped parcel on this altar. "And thank you, Tide God, for not sweeping away Papa's fields."

With that, Harmonia let out a long sigh, a surge of bubbles emerging from her mouth as she did. "Right. All done, Mel."

Melodika cocked an eyebrow. "Aren't you forgetting one?"

Harmonia cocked her head to the side, a puzzled look on her face. "...No? I went down the line, and..."

Before Harmonia could finish her thought, a figure in full clerical garb entered the sanctuary from the back of the temple. "I know Pythmena is not as ignored as your friends along the wall there, Harmonia, but that is no reason to neglect her altar."

Harmonia's ruby-red eyes grew huge as she realized her mistake. "Oh! Right! Sorry, High Cleric Coronith! Uhh, sorry, Pythmena!" she said, thrashing her tail to swim up to the altar and offer her prayers. "Thank you, Pythmena, Goddess of the Abyss," she said, her eyes now reverentially shut. "We thank you for your many gifts as you keep watch over the seas below us. May you continue to favor Shadecoral and all of us Deepdivers."

"Very good," Coronith said, placing a hand on Harmonia's shoulder. "If you have been as diligent in your studies as you have been with your worship, then this should be a most favorable visit."

Harmonia opened her eyes and turned to face Coronith, doing her best to keep eye contact with them. "Ah ha ha, well, about that, Coronith..."

Coronith smiled, turning to Harmonia's more responsible sister. "Melodika? Has she been studying?"

"She can still swing a sword better than anyone else in the town," Melodika said. "Plus, she's probably read *The Peatland Princess* another half-dozen times in the past month, along with whatever other story-like books she can manage to find that slipped through Mayor Ekolo's gaze and made it into the library. If that's the whole test, then she'll pass with full jets."

Harmonia pursed her lips as she glared at Melodika. "Well, some of us don't work in the library with Father," she said.

"You're the one who chose to go tend the fields with Papa," Melodika said.

"As if you'd last a week doing farm work!" Harmonia said.

"Oh, you want to lift boxes of books outside of the water, huh?" Melodika said. "And besides, it's not like I even have time to read while I'm at work."

"Aw, come on, sis, that's a fresh, stinking load of fishshi—" Harmonia said before a firm, familiar hand clasped itself over her mouth.

"Not in the temple, Harmonia," Coronith said, smiling.

"...Right," Harmonia said, blushing as Coronith lowered their hand, the pumping blood of embarrassment just showing through her bronze scales. "Sorry again, Pythmena. And sorry to you, too, Mel. I know you work hard. I'm worked up today, and I took it out on you. Do you forgive me?"

"Of course I forgive you, Monie," Melodika said. "...And yeah, I do occasionally sneak a few minutes to read. I'm sorry, too."

"Good to see that you two have retained the most important lessons over the past twenty-four years, at least," Coronith said. "Come along, then. I'm sure you have better ways to spend a summer morning than taking your yearly tests with me."

"We don't mind spending time with you, Coronith," Melodika said, clasping her hands behind her back.

"Especially since it gets us out of the weekly address," Harmonia said, grinning.

"Well, I am glad to hear that," Coronith said, a weary smile on their lips. "But I—"

Before Coronith could finish their thought, a rush of merfolk came pouring in through the main entrance to the temple, all murmuring in tones ranging from excitement to terror.

"Well, good morning, everyone," Coronith said, turning to face them. "What is the cause of all this to-do?"

"High Cleric Coronith," one of the mid-ranking acolytes said, his face flushed with excitement, "the Crimson Smoke has been spotted in the skies above the southern continent!"

Melodika and Harmonia shared glances at this news before turning to watch Coronith react. "You are certain?" Coronith said, keeping their composure as they turned to the altar, running a finger along a set of runes which glowed at their touch. As they did, the temple began to glow with a vibrant blue light and the water in the upper chambers began to drain away with an audible, though not overwhelming, whooshing sound. "We have had false alarms in the past, after all. Without authorization to leave the water and verify, we must..."

"I received permission to surface, and have seen it myself," the acolyte said, beaming. "The fated hour is at hand!"

"And so you must begin your testing of the candidates at once, Coronith," a new voice said, entering the temple through the front door. Everyone hushed at the sound of it.

Everyone except for the one person who was willing to stand up to its owner.

"Mayor Ekolo," Coronith said, putting on the smile they wore for him in an effort to keep things civil. "So good to see you back in the temple. How long has it been, I wonder?"

The mayor gave Coronith a politician's smile, glancing to one of his many lackeys, who returned his smile. "I hope that you and the gods will forgive my absence, High Cleric Coronith, though it's always a pleasure," he said, smoothing out his vest as he approached. "The town council will be restless for news. I must ask you to begin your testing post-haste!"

"Certainly," Coronith said, turning to Melodika and Harmonia. "We were just about to begin, and the upper chambers should be dry by now. Are you two ready?"

"Of course," Melodika said, giving a small bow.

"Yep," Harmonia said, also offering something bow-like.

"Then I must ask that we have the temple's upper cloister to ourselves, undisturbed for as long as the testing takes," Coronith said. "Mister Mayor? May I have your assistance in that regard?"

"I will make an announcement that you have begun," Mayor Ekolo said, smiling and smoothing down his hair, kept unnaturally stiff in the water. Then, turning to Melodika, "Good luck, young lady. Soon, Shadecoral will be back on the map, and it will be thanks to you!"

Melodika stared for a moment. "Mister Mayor, Harmonia will be taking the tests as well," she said.

Mayor Ekolo forced a smile. "Of course. Harmonia? I hope you're having a good time out working on the kelp farms. It would seem to suit you more than this sort of thing, but who knows, hmm? Good luck, young... Well, whatever term you're using these days."

The words landed on Harmonia like a stack of Melodika's books.

Mayor Ekolo had a long trail of being shitty. That part wasn't surprising. But him being so brazen about it? And today, of all days?

Harmonia needed a moment to find her words after hearing the mayor of her town say that on this, perhaps the most important day of her life.

Coronith, for their part, did not.

"The phrase you're looking for is 'Good luck, young lady,' Mister Mayor, just as has been for decades now," they said, thrashing their tail and creating a flurry of bubbles. "It is not difficult. And I know you know it, as you just used it with her sister.

"The laws of the town are your jurisdiction, but in this temple, we must honor and respect each other's genders or lack thereof, as the gods would have us.

"If you cannot do so, leave."

Mayor Ekolo forced a smile. "Whatever you say," he said, turning to depart. Then, over his shoulder, he added, "Oh, and lest I forget: Good luck to you too, Coronith. I don't know what the council will do if your chosen champion of the temple should fail, let alone what the gods might have in store for you."

Coronith glared at the Mayor as he swam away with his entourage, muttering to himself. "You floating, stinking, miserable pile of fishshi—"

Harmonia's hand flew up and covered Coronith's mouth. "...Sorry. Reflex," she said, lowering her hand.

Coronith laughed. "I am sorry, Harmonia. On many accounts."

"You don't have a thing to be sorry for, Coronith," Harmonia said. "Just to check, though — none of these gods are bigoted like Mayor Ekolo, are they? Because if so, then I want to rescind some of my worship."

"The gods are fickle and mysterious, Harmonia," Coronith said. "But I am sure that they are neutral at worst on the matter, and that some of them are quite pleased to accept you as you are."

"Like the kelp goddess?" Harmonia said.

"Ah, yes, the kelp goddess certainly does," Coronith said, smiling as they looked over to her altar. "That is why the fields you and your Papa tend are so bounteous. Her love is manifested by providing us all with nourishment in our stomachs and oxygen in our lungs."

"Cool!" Harmonia said.

"Well, if we're ready, then. Kryn?" Coronith beckoned a mid-ranking acolyte over. "Please inform any visitors that I will not have the test results until tomorrow morning."

"As you say, High Cleric," Kryn said.

"Tomorrow morning?" Melodika said. "Since when does the test take that long?"

"The test will be no longer than usual, Melodika," Coronith said. "But I must make certain that the results are correct. As the mayor said, we would not want to make a mistake, now would we? I am hesitant to agree with him, but every now and then..."

Melodika nodded. "Right. Yes, that makes sense, Coronith."

"Okay!" Harmonia said. "Let's do this testing thing!"

Halfway across the ocean, in the southern reaches of the eastern continent, the capital city of the Elven Empire was buzzing with the usual industry of a summer morning. Palmroot was a city of both literal and figurative growth, with new buildings replacing deteriorating ones almost every day around the colossal palm tree that served as the city's cornerstone and the Imperial Palace's central feature, reaching hundreds of meters above the tallest buildings. The noises of a vibrant, excited populace were running throughout the city.

Throughout most of the city, that is.

In the Imperial Palace, within the Queen's private bedchamber, well-appointed with the Empire's finest artworks, there was a heavy silence hanging over the room as those present digested the news.

Not an unhappy silence, but certainly an uneasy one.

There were the Queen's three children, each reacting to what they had just heard their mother say.

Prince Kellroy, the eldest child with flowing green hair and slender features, paced up and down the longest available stretch of carpet, occasionally pausing to glance at his mother.

Princess Lurekah, secondborn of the Queen, her meticulously-brushed blue hair perfectly framing her face, had

taken a seat next to her mother on the bed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders, sharing in her joy.

And then there was Princess Prudence.

Princess Prudence, who, up until a few moments ago, assumed that she was to remain the youngest heir to the Elven Empire.

And, as is customary in the elven tradition, next in line to the throne.

For the moment, at least.

"You are certain, Mother?" Kellroy said, stopping his pacing for a moment to ask.

"I have consulted with my most trusted physicians and sages over this past month, and I can feel it within my spirit." Queen Agathys said. She was emanating an aura of joy, tempered with concern for her children's reactions to this news. "I am pregnant. We are beyond the most dangerous stages, and the physicians report that all is well thus far."

"And that is wonderful news," Lurekah said, smiling. Then, pointedly, "Is it not, Kellroy?"

"Oh, please don't take my pacing the wrong way, sister," Kellroy said, glancing down at his feet. "I am delighted to learn that I will have a new sibling. Or siblings! I am, however, concerned about what the public reception of this news will be."

"Forget the public reception!" Lurekah said. "Let us enjoy this moment of unexpected happiness!"

"No, Kellroy is correct," Queen Agathys said. "We must consider all of the ramifications of this event. Both the positive and the negative. It affects some of you more than the rest, after all."

Prudence could feel her mother's eyes gazing at her. "Prudence," the Queen said, her voice tender and patient. "I know this disturbs you. After all, this is not part of your plan. It was not part of anyone's plan, I suppose, but least of all yours."

"I am not disturbed, Mother," Prudence said, forcing herself to look up at the queen. "What do you need from me?"

"I need you to do as your siblings have done," the Queen said.
"With a new youngest heir on the way..."

"I am no longer first in line to the throne, yes," Prudence said.
"Which means I must learn a trade." She felt the eyes of one of her ancestors staring out at her from their portrait on the wall.

Queen Agathys extended her arms to Prudence. "Dearest Prudence. Will you give your mother a hug?"

"Of course," Prudence said, rising and crossing the grand bedroom to embrace her Queen and mother. "And I am sorry if I seem unhappy. I am simply..."

"Surprised?" the Queen said, brushing a stray lock of her daughter's leaf-green hair from her eyes. "Believe me, so was I. Though likely not as surprised as you three were."

"May I ask who the... other party is?" Kellroy said.

"Other party...? Ah," the Queen said. "An old friend. I knew him centuries ago, before his family was falsely accused of various misdeeds and removed from the Imperial Council. I always meant to see what had become of him, but the looming duties of the crown weighed heavily on my head and, simply put, I forgot. Not my most notable failure as a queen, nor the worst, but certainly not one of my proudest moments.

"So when he stopped by last year bearing no ill will towards me despite leaving him to fend for himself, and still bearing all of the charms he had in his youth and then some... Well, let it suffice to say that I was quite taken."

"Would we know him?" Prudence said.

"Doubtful," the Queen said after a moment's consideration.
"At the moment, he is just reputable enough to be seen in the palace, but no more. Now that things have become more serious, he is meeting with my most trusted council members to verify that there is nothing scandalous in his past."

"And if there is?" Kellroy said.

"Oh, you wouldn't throw him out for something like that, would you?" Lurekah said.

"Not unless he has done something truly terrible, in which case I would want him removed anyway," The Queen said. "But if we can find these things now rather than later, then we would be able to properly rectify those sorts of things before the wedding."

"So there is to be a wedding, then," Prudence said.

"Of course," the Queen said. "In a year or two, most likely; these things take time to plan. But we love each other most sincerely, so why would there not be a wedding?"

"Not to mention it would be bad optics to have an unwed queen pregnant for five years, in some eyes," Kellroy said. "I still can't believe that humans only have to deal with it for nine months. Can you imagine how easy that would be?"

"I hear humans have a more tiring experience than our people's," the Queen said. "After all, I should be able to continue carrying out my tasks up until the birth with no difficulties, according to my physicians. No fears there."

Prudence bit the inside of her cheek. "And what shall I do?" she said.

"I have already made arrangements for you," the Queen said. "You shall travel to Shaleburgh, capital of the Dwarven Union, and try your hand at a number of crafts. From diplomacy to smithing, you should find something there to suit your fancy. If nothing else, whatever that business with the red smoke that appeared over their lands this morning will surely keep you busy! But if you find yourself ill-suited for that land, then there are many other options available to you."

Prudence sighed. "I... I do not know if I am ready for such a thing, though."

"I was only fifty when I set out, sister," Kellroy said. "And look at me now!"

"But you had known you were not destined for the throne since you were thirty," Prudence said. "Your situation was different. Here I am, sixty years old — too young to be taken seriously despite being a full-grown adult, and too old to start fresh in time for my hundredth birthday."

Queen Agathys squeezed Prudence close to her. "You will be fine," she said. "No, that is insufficient. You will be more than fine. You will be brilliant."

"You think so?" Prudence said.

"Of course," Queen Agathys said, rising to her feet. "But, in case anything goes wrong, I want you to have this." The Queen opened the drawer of one of her nightstands and pulled out a small, square box with a simple silver latch on the front. "Here," she said, handing it to Prudence.

"What is it?" Prudence said.

"Open it," Queen Agathys said.

Prudence undid the latch and opened the box to reveal an emerald amulet, strung on a silken thread. She gasped as she saw it. "It is beautiful," she said. "Thank you, mother."

The Queen smiled. "It is more than beautiful," she said. "Do you see what is written on the back?"

Prudence lifted the amulet from the box and studied the back, inlaid with intricately-carved runes almost too small to be seen with the naked eye and beyond the princess's comprehension. "So it is enchanted... Tell me, what spell does it hold?" she said.

"Two spells, in fact. One to keep you safe from physical harm, and one to bring you home immediately if things turn for the worse," the Queen said. "Elmsap can tell you the details."

"Supposing he's not too busy spoiling you," Lurekah said, laughing.

"Elmsap does not spoil me," Prudence said. "He simply has learned not to be as impatient as he was in your time with him. That is no fault of mine."

"If you say so," Lurekah said.

"I wore this necklace myself several times, and your siblings took it for a time as well," Queen Agathys said. "My mother gave it to me when I thought I would have to pursue a trade; before..."

Lurekah watched as her mother blinked away the tears welling in her eyes. "We needn't speak of such things now," she said, smiling. "Now should be a time of celebration."

"I wish it could be so, Lurekah," the Queen said, "but Prudence must begin preparing immediately for her journey."

"Um. What?" Prudence said.

"You will, of course, need a Royal Navy vessel for your voyage," the Queen said. "With the Imperial Grand Anniversary coming up in two weeks, they will soon be out of commission for almost a month for the festivities, and you must begin your training post-haste."

Prudence felt her heart sink in her chest. "I am to miss the festivities?"

"I missed the first thirty years of festivities after I started my training, sister," Lurekah said, trying to be encouraging. "It was hard at first, but you will meet so many interesting people and experience so many unique things... By the Eldertree's Roots, Prudence, I am jealous of you!"

"Then why don't you do it instead," Prudence muttered under her breath.

The words chilled the already frosty attitude of the room. Queen Agathys did not want to use a stern hand here, but she was willing to do so if needed. "Prudence. You are a princess of the Elven Empire. That means that you will take this responsibility seriously. For the sake of this Empire, this family, and even yourself, you must. Do I make myself clear?"

Prudence sighed. "Yes, mother. I apologize. I..."

"You are afraid," Kellroy said, crossing to Prudence and placing a steadying hand on her shoulder. "Which is

understandable; I was terrified my first time out as well. But remember this, Prudence: You are a royal princess. You are strong. You are brave. You are charming. And you can face any challenge that may face you, no matter how insurmountable it seems. Understood?"

"Of course," Prudence said, smiling. "Thank you, Kellroy. Mother, may I be excused to my chambers?"

"You are excused," Queen Agathys said.

"Thank you, Mother," Prudence said, gazing down at the amulet. Maybe she could come up with a story of—

"Prudence," Queen Agathys said.

"Yes, Mother?" Prudence said, turning to face her.

"That amulet is for emergencies only. And Shaleburgh is a temperate place filled with exciting opportunities.

"If you were to try to find a way to force your way back here early, I could instead ask you to, say, catalog the Royal Archives for the next thirty years. With Mr. Drupe. And his sons. Do I make myself clear?"

"...Yes, Mother," Prudence said, lowering her head and turning once again to walk away.

Well, there went one plan. On to the next one.

Chapter 2

"By the gods, that was the hardest I've ever thought in my life!" Harmonia said as she and her sister swam home. It was several hours later, and the few rays of sunlight that made it down to Shadecoral were beginning to fade. Thankfully, merfolken eyes were well-suited to the dark, so even the middle of the night would have been easily navigable without a light source. The town was quieter than normal for this time of day, but the sisters were too preoccupied to notice.

"What did you say was the moral of *The Tale of the Good Fisherman*?" Melodika said, rubbing her temples as she swam.

"That being 'good' is better than being good at something," Harmonia said.

Melodika considered this. "That's great," she said.

"What did you say?" Harmonia said.

"To take friends where you can find them, even if they're not who you expect," Melodika said.

"I think yours is more of a moral," Harmonia said.

"I think yours is more true," Melodika said.

"Fishshit, I fucked it up, didn't I?" Harmonia said. "Ahh, gods, I wish I could go with you, Mel!"

Melodika smiled. "Maybe I didn't pass," she said.

"Ha!" Harmonia said. "Mel, you know more about more things than most people know about one thing."

"Hmm... I'm not sure that math quite adds up, but I appreciate the sentiment, Monie," Melodika said. "I just wish that Father and Papa could be home waiting for us."

"We shouldn't have to wait long," Harmonia said as their home came into view on the other side of a patch of oceanic flora. "Papa should only have an hour left in the fields, and Father might close the library early tonight."

"I hope so," Melodika said.

"So, are you ready to head out tomorrow?" Melodika said.

Harmonia snorted, shooting bubbles into the water in front of her. "Mel, I'm telling you. There's maybe a tiny chance that I'm going to go with you, but I seriously doubt it. I just hope you enjoy yourself!"

Melodika looked away. "I... I don't know if I want to go if I don't get to go with you," she said.

"Are you kidding!?" Harmonia said. "You're gonna go be a hero, like in the storybooks in the library! You'll save us from disaster, or fight an epic villain, or rescue a member of some royal family, marry them, and perhaps even smooch them!"

Melodika bit her lip and laughed. "So you think I'm gonna go rescue a beautiful dwarf or something?" she said.

"The beautifulest!" Harmonia said, her arms wide as if to express the beautifulestness of this dwarf.

"Maybe," Melodika said. "It'd be nice. But it'd be even nicer if I could share the experience with you. Er, not the romance part, mind you, but, you know. The rest."

"Right, of course. But first, we need to get you packed!" Harmonia said as they arrived back at their home, an unassuming two-level home positioned almost exactly halfway between the library and the fields. The comforts of home only shook Harmonia out of autopilot when she tried her key in the door.

" Hmm?"

"What is it?" Melodika said.

"It's already unlocked," Harmonia said, turning the handle. "Shit, did I forget to—"

"Surprise!" A pair of voices called out as the door opened, revealing a shimmering array of lights that made the Hartvanes' familiar home look like the most exciting place in Shadecoral (which, to be fair, was a low bar to clear). The two voices belonged to a pair of mermen, beaming at their daughters as they came in, who were completely caught off-guard by this redecoration.

"What!?" Harmonia said, looking around. "How! When? Why??"

"We heard about the Crimson Smoke and pulled some strings to come home immediately," their Father said. "We don't know how many of you will be taking that journey, but we want both of you to have a wonderful night tonight in any case."

"Did you invite the right people?" Melodika said, nervous as she looked around.

"We didn't invite anyone," her Papa said. "We wanted to leave that up to you."

"Thank the gods," Melodika said, sighing. "I didn't want this to be another performance."

Their Father frowned. "Did Mayor Ekolo give you trouble on the way home?" he asked. "You know I'd never invite him."

"Earlier, before our tests," Harmonia said. "And anyone outside of this family, other than Coronith, is liable to be more loyal to the mayor than they are to us with the Crimson Smoke in the air, so anyone else feels like the mayor."

"I'm glad we nailed the guest list, then, since Coronith will be busy all night with your tests," Papa said. "Come on, go get changed and then come upstairs. We have a feast waiting for you."

"Don't oversell it, dear," Father said, running a finger along the wall to calm the flickering lights, changing the environment from festive to navigable.

"It's a feast, I say!" Papa said. "All of your favorites! ...Well, all of your Merfolken favorites. Couldn't get anything Dwarven on this short a notice."

Harmonia sighed. "I wish I had picked up even a little bit of your cooking skills, Papa," she said.

"Ohh, what use does a world-saving champion have for cooking skills?" Papa said, grinning, his bass voice rumbling the water around him. ("Bass" as in low, not like the fish. Merfolken voices have a different timbre than landwalkers', but are not too different otherwise.)

"We'll be sure to teach you once you get back from your adventure," Father said. "For now, Papa has assembled a wonderful dinner, and I've been smelling it most of the day, which means I'm quite ravenous. And it's been quite nice having him by my side in the kitchen, too," he added, smiling at his husband.

"I'm sure it will be wonderful," Melodika said. "Come on, Harmonia, let's go."

"Right behind you!" Harmonia said, heading to their shared room first to change.

No matter how everything else might change, Harmonia knew that her parents would be embarrassingly romantic with each other. What more could anyone ask for?

Princess Prudence enjoyed order. For things to be where she expected them to be, when she expected them to be there. She wasn't the type of noblewoman to throw a fit if a spoon was half a hairbreadth out of place, but she liked to have things follow a nice, logical progression. Chaos and dissonance made her quite cross, as one look at her chambers would tell, her curtains meticulously creased into symmetry and not a single wrinkle in sight on her silken bedsheets.

On most days, at least, she detested chaos.

But today?

This chaos?

With the crew of one ship of the Elven Navy scrambling to shift provisions from their holds to another as quickly as they could, as she watched from the balcony of her royal chambers?

This chaos was quite palatable.

"Lady Prudence?" a voice landed on Prudence's ear like a familiar song from a cherished music box. "Why are they transferring the goods for our voyage from Captain Larks's ship over to Captain Xandell's?"

Prudence smiled as she looked over at her oldest and perhaps dearest friend, her trusted assistant Elmsap. He had raised the Queen herself when she was younger, and had diligently continued his service to raise Prudence.

Now, she supposed, he would help raise her new youngest sibling.

"Lady Prudence?" he said again.

"Apologies, Elmsap," Prudence said, her eyelids fluttering as she broke from her reverie. "They are transferring the goods because they found rot in the timbers of Captain Larks's ship. Unsafe in its current state. So, instead, Captain Xandell will be taking us."

Elmsap frowned. "And you are... pleased about this?" he said.

"Yes, of course," Prudence said, smirking. "Why would I not be pleased about sailing under dear Captain Xandell's care?"

Elmsap's frown lingered. "Something is not quite right here," he said. "And I am too old to not figure it out, but it will take some time. Will you tell me, or must I spend the next few hours puzzling it over?"

"Oh, I will leave it to you to work out," Prudence said. "It should be a pleasant diversion."

"A diversion, at least," Elmsap said, shaking his head as he turned to walk away. "I must finish packing your things. Is there anything you wish to take from the common areas? A favorite piece of art, perhaps, to remind you of home?"

"No," Prudence said. "In fact, make doubly sure that anything irreplaceable stays here."

Elmsap stopped and faced Prudence again. "I am afraid that is impossible," he said.

"Why is that?" Prudence said.

"Because I have been charged to take you along," he said, smiling. "The entire point of the thing. I thought it was obvious, honestly."

Prudence smirked. "You know, Elmsap, you're a real charmer," she said.

"I thought that was the problem with the young lady your mother hired when she thought I had grown too long in the tooth a few years back."

"Oh, no," Prudence said. "The problem there is that *I'm* a real charmer. I mean, yes, she was cute, but if you're looking for the instigator in that flirtation, well. Look no further."

Elmsap laughed. "Very good, Prudence. Will there be anything else?"

Prudence looked him over for a moment before closing the gap between them and embracing him in a tight hug. "You're the only one who just calls me 'Prudence,' you know?" she said. "No matter how much I ask everyone else to drop the 'Princess' part when we're not being so formal. And I..."

"Yes, Prudence?" Elmsap said after Prudence trailed off mid-sentence.

Prudence shook her head. "Nothing," she said, taking two steps back. "Oh, one thing, actually," she said, reaching into the collar of her blouse and pulling out the amulet. "The Queen told me that you could tell me about it."

"Ah," Elmsap said, his eyes gleaming as he saw the familiar necklace. "That amulet contains two magnificent spells etched on the back. The first will keep you safe from all harm; none will be able to act in any way that might bring you pain. Physically, at least. You shall feel no pain so long as you wear it."

"Glad to hear it," Prudence said. "And the second?"

"A teleportation spell," Elmsap said. "Throw the amulet to the ground, and you and everyone else around — within, say, two or three meters — will be brought back here to Palmroot, safe and sound. And in case you should happen to bring back some adversaries by mistake, you will be placed directly in the Royal Gatehouse, with the Elite Guard ready to aid you at once."

"Both spells, like with any enchantment made on something to be given to the royal family, were carefully examined by the most

studious scribes to make sure the oaths therein were old and deep when they were inscribed. You should fear no danger so long as you have that amulet around your neck, Prudence."

Prudence ran a finger along the amulet's smooth jeweled face. "...Well, if it cannot make me sandberry pancakes when the visiting chef has gotten too experimental, then it is a rather poor replacement for you."

Elmsap laughed. "I am certain that you will make do."

"I hope so," Prudence said. "Thank you, Elmsap."

"Of course," Elmsap said, giving a small bow. "If I may have your leave, then I will finish up the packing."

"My leave and my blessing," Prudence said.

"Thank you, Prudence," Elmsap said before departing.

Prudence sighed as she turned back to the book she had on her lectern. "'Service Records,'" she read aloud to herself. "'Captain Larks: After two hundred years of transporting the royal family, there is none so distinguished for her excellence as Captain Larks. Her record speaks for itself.' And, let's see... 'Captain Xandell: Apologies to whoever reads these pages next; Captain Xandell's record is so fraught with disaster that any attempts at accurate cataloguing is hopeless. May the shade of the branches give you relief in your endeavor.'"

"Right. So. This might just work out after all."

Harmonia pondered if the remaining cake on her plate was worth the stomachache it would bring. She had already gorged herself on the nearly-countless courses of raw and cooked fish, seaweed soup, spiced kelp salad, and all of the other parts of the feast her parents had cooked up for her and her sister. She placed a hand on her distended belly and let out a luxurious sigh.

"Well. If you're not going to eat it, then I will," Melodika said, eyeing Harmonia's plate.

Harmonia quickly stabbed the last morsel of cake with her fork and shoved it in her mouth, its spongy texture melting against her tongue as she chewed. "Not a chance," she said, her words sneaking through a stuffed gob.

Melodika laughed. "Fair enough," she said, looking around the upper home of the Hartvane home.

Like most of the buildings in Shadecoral, the lower level of the Hartvane's home, where they slept, talked, and kept all of their water-fit belongings, was filled with water while the upper level was kept dry by a combination of dwarven technology and merfolken magic. It was here they did their cooking, as well as housing their private library and storing anything that would be destroyed or diminished by staying in the water. The low hum and dim glow from the runes and wards along the doors and windows

was a pleasant background noise in many merfolken homes' "landwalker part."

"You two are full, yes?" Father Hartvane said.

"Oh, most certainly," Melodika said, rising from her seat as she balanced on her tail, a posture just as comfortable for her as standing is for most landwalkers after years of practice. While merfolk were more comfortable in the water, sliding across the ground didn't give them too much trouble, but it was tiring. "Here, I'll take your plates, everyone," she said, sliding along the ground in a serpentine manner.

"Oh no you don't," Papa Hartvane said. "We're doing the dishes tonight."

"Please, I need something to clear my mind," Melodika said, still holding out her hand. "I thought far too hard today."

Papa Hartvane let out an exaggerated groan. "Well, fine, if you insist, then I *suppose* that you can clean up," he said, handing over his plate and utensils.

"Thank you for this most benevolent honor," Melodika said, mirroring his tone as she collected both of her parents' things. "Monie? You done?"

"Yes, thanks," Harmonia said, handing them off to her sister before leaning back and unbuttoning the bottom button on her vest, taking in a heaving breath of air and letting it out with a contented sigh. "Hoo, that was delicious! I hope you'll eat half that well on the road, Mel."

Harmonia watched as her parents shared an uneasy glance. "Or, uh, both of us, maybe!" she said. "But if I don't get picked, then I hope Melodika eats that well."

"Of course," Father Hartvane said. "And if you don't get picked, then—"

"Ah, fishshit!" Melodika said, her exclamation punctuated by the sound of water hissing out of the sink. "...Sorry. The drain's busted again."

"Time for me to get to work, then," Harmonia said, rising from her seat.

"Are you sure, Monie?" Papa Hartvane said. "I might be able to fix it."

"It's a drain, not a field to plow, Papa," Harmonia said, slither-waddling as she made her way to the portal leading down to the lower level, one hand on her distended belly. "Oof, my stomach... Y'know, it's the outtake valve, I bet. It's been finicky the past few days. I've been trying to give it a quick fix, but looks like it needs a full rebuild. Shouldn't take more than half an hour."

"Half an hour?" Father Hartvane said. "On your celebratory night?"

"It'd take five minutes for a patch job, but I want to make sure I get it right," Harmonia said as she dipped her tail into the lower level's water. "After all, I don't want it breaking with just the two of you fuddy-duddies here to fix it."

Before anyone could get in another word, Harmonia lowered herself out of sight to fix the problem.

Papa Hartvane and Father Hartvane shared glances. "...Fuddy-duddies?" Father Hartvane said.

"Hey, she didn't learn that one from me," Papa Hartvane said.

Melodika, despite her best intentions, couldn't hold back her laughter.

"Oh, you think you can just laugh at your poor old dads too, then?" Papa Hartvane said, putting on a false air of outrage.

"Absolutely," Melodika said between laughs. "I can't imagine growing up in a house where I couldn't."

"And we're glad you don't have to," Father Hartvane said, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and pulling her close. "Is there anything else you need, Mel? Any vests you need scrubbed? A fresh top or two for the trip?"

"...I could use a new backpack," she said. "The one I have is threatening to leak."

"Well, that won't do," Papa Hartvane said, his eyes almost disappearing behind his cheeks as he smiled. "C'mon, then, let's go see if anyone's still willing to sell us such a thing, dear."

"After you," Father Hartvane said, turning from Melodika and making a grand gesture towards the portal.

"You're so sweet," Papa Hartvane said, planting a kiss on his husband's cheek.

"Fuddy-duddies!" Melodika said, smirking as she watched her parents head out of sight with a pair of splashes into the water.

Leaving her alone.

With the quiet of the kitchen.

With her thoughts.

About how she would soon learn if she had been chosen.

If the last twenty-four years of preparation, from her birth until now, had been worth it.

And, for that matter, if Monie would be chosen.

But that wasn't her responsibility. None of it was for the moment, in fact. Coronith would grade their results, and tomorrow morning, they would—

Ring-ring!

A small bell beside the portal rang. Melodika glanced over to it. It was connected to the front door, which meant they had a visitor. Did Papa and Father forget their keys? Unlikely. Did Harmonia? Also unlikely, but possible.

The possibility of one of the other townsfolk trying to interfere with her preparations also crossed her mind, but as she headed for the portal, she hoped that they would know better than to tempt the wrath of Coronith. In any case, Melodika headed into the lower level's main room, swam to the door, and found the last merfolk she expected on the other side as she opened it.

"Coronith," she said, finding the High Cleric waiting for her.

"Good evening, Melodika," Coronith said, smiling benignly. "May I come in? There is something I must say before tomorrow."

"S-sure," Melodika said, making room for them to enter. "Sorry, we just finished dinner, so I'm a bit—"

"No need for apologies," Coronith said. "Might I get something sweet to drink, though? I have had a craving all day."

"We have some sandberry juice left, I think," Melodika said, swimming toward the portal.

"Lovely," Coronith said. "I apologize for imposing."

"Not at all!" Melodika said. "Should I go get Harmonia? She's out back fixing the drain."

"No, I think she should stay where she is," Coronith said. "I know what ears need to hear the words I have to say, and when they need to hear them."

"You mean...?"

"Why don't we get that juice, please, Melodika?" Coronith said, following her to the portal.

"Of course," Melodika said, rising back into the kitchen to retrieve a clean glass. "The grading went well, then?"

"Your sister must set out from this place to save us, Mel," Coronith said, rising up out of the water behind Melodika.

Melodika froze mid-reach, her fingers brushing against a glass.

"I'm sorry?"

"As am I," Coronith said, taking a seat at the table. "I am sorry that I need to tell you this news, but I need you to be ready for what is coming in the next day. You will not travel with your sister tomorrow. She must find her own path, without you."

Melodika was still facing away from Coronith. She felt her lower jaw trembling as tears welled in her eyes, her hands beginning to shake as she retrieved the glass and poured the juice. "Why are you telling me now?" she said.

"Because if I waited until tomorrow, when everyone was gathered and with so much fanfare, then the result would be..."

"Mortifying," Melodika said.

"Not the word I had in mind, but true enough," Coronith said, nodding.

Melodika sighed. "You can't bend the rules, can you?" she said, bringing Coronith their drink.

"You know the answer to that," Coronith said. "Thank you for the juice."

"Of course," Melodika said, sitting down opposite the person she had always viewed as her third parent. "So what will I do?"

Coronith considered this question for a moment, taking a luxurious sip of the juice. "You will still have a part to play in these affairs," they said. "An important part. Crucial, even. Perhaps larger than your sister's, when all is tallied. And I believe that you will be ready when you are called, though you may not expect it."

"When!?" Melodika said, leaning forward.

Coronith smiled. "If I could tell you that without ruining everything, then I would," they said.

"Yes. Of course," Melodika said, sitting back. "Will I know what to do in the meantime?"

"Stay ready. Do not give up hope. Be prepared for whatever comes next. For today, I needed to share this information with the correct ears, and I have," they said, rising from their seat. "Thank you for the juice."

"I... Can I tell Monie?" Melodika said.

Coronith pursed their lips. Melodika could see them mentally weighing the pros and cons. "I will leave that up to you," they said at last. "You have sound judgment. There are advantages and disadvantages both ways, and neither one is wrong. I trust you to make that decision."

"Right," Melodika said. "Thank you, Coronith."

Coronith smiled. "Thank you, Mel. And do not be ashamed to listen to your emotions. They lead you well."

With that, Coronith dipped out of sight, leaving Melodika in the kitchen, alone with the dirty dishes, the leftover food, and the broken drain.

The broken drain that, at the moment, stood open.

That opening left a clear channel for sound to pass from the kitchen to the exterior drain, where Harmonia was now treading water, her ear to the outlet, her mind not believing the words she heard.

All of this resulted in a tremendous amount of nervous energy, which could only have one possible outlet.

Harmonia vomited up a massive glob of lightly-digested cake, seaweed, and fish, which drifted away from her as she watched, disgusted.

"Well, that stomachache's gonna be lighter, at least," she said to herself.

Please look forward to the next 19* chapters,
coming soon**!

*Pending edits adding/removing chapters

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