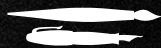


AMBER
&
DUSK

LYRA SELENE



Scholastic Press · New York



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ONE



The sun had not set on the Amber Empire for a thousand tides. But that didn't mean my world knew nothing of darkness.

Or violence.

The Skyclad platoon bore down on the convoy beneath a sky spackled with blood and charcoal. Bright metal armor glistened red in the twilight. Hoofbeats on packed earth echoed the drum of my heart against my ribs. I reached for the amulet at my neck, letting the familiarity of its skin-warmed planes calm my twisting nerves.

I wasn't the only one who was afraid. Voices of laborers and free travelers rose in panic as the soldiers approached. Women drew tight the curtains of their wagons. Men shouted for children scurrying among the mess of tents and cook fires and freight drays. Livestock brayed and squawked.

Only Madame Rina was still. She stood in front of the biggest transport with feet planted wide and dark braids dancing in the hot breeze. She didn't flinch as the platoon drew close enough to see the wild eyes of the mounts and the silvery dristic armor protecting the bodies of the soldiers.

"Luca!" I called, although I couldn't drag my eyes away from the approaching platoon. "Luca, where are you?"

"Here, Sylvie." The gentle touch on my shoulder reassured me, but when I turned toward my friend, his normally laughing face was tense and serious. His hazel eyes darted, barely

registering his mother's stalwart figure at the front of the camp. "Where's Vesh? Have you seen my brother?"

"He was playing with the other children, last time I saw," I murmured. Vesh was younger than Luca by nearly twelve tides, and rarely strayed far from his older brother's protective eye. "Luca, I'm sure he's fine."

"Fine," Luca agreed. The certainty of the word didn't reach his eyes. "Listen, you stay here. Don't move. Let Maman do the talking. I'm going to find my brother."

"Luca, wait—"

But he was already gone, swallowed up by the permanent twilight. I breathed deeply through my nose and tried to calm the thrumming of my heart. The Sisters of the Scion—the religious sect who raised me—swore my unsanctioned journey to the Amber City would be cursed with misfortune. But I never imagined that menace might come from the Amber Empire's own troops. The Skyclad—the Amber Empress's elite force—were said to be born with a weapon in each hand. Unflinchingly trained. Merciless. Their famed armor was bright and pale as the azure heavens above the distant Meridian Desert.

The platoon thundered to a halt at the front of the camp. The captain dismounted in a flurry of dristic and blue, tossing her reins to a lieutenant and dragging off her helmet. She was a tall woman near Madame Rina's age; grey threads sparked in the brown hair knotted at the nape of her neck. Laugh lines etched her face, but her eyes were forged of hard metal.

"You." The captain glared down her nose at Rina. "This is your convoy?"

"Aye." Rina's voice rang with authority. "Chartered and bonded, these last seven tides."

“Your papers.”

Madame Rina thrust a sheaf of parchment into the captain’s gloved hand. I hadn’t seen the documents since I’d first joined the convoy, but I remembered what they looked like, inked and beribboned.

Madame Rina’s bond permits and Charter Writ.

“Everything is in order, I assure you,” said Rina. “What quarrel could you possibly have with me or this convoy?”

“No quarrel,” the captain grunted, not looking up from her rough perusal of the documents. “We search every convoy with free travelers in this quadrant.”

“Since when? My charter grants both bonded laborers and free travelers right of passage along this route.”

The captain fixed Madame Rina with a stare. She raised a slow hand toward one of her soldats, and bent a finger.

The soldat broke formation. Shifting patterns of light and shadow danced across the pale metal of his armor. One swift kick sent an iron cook pot lurching off its stand. Boiling water poured across livid embers. Steam billowed to the sky, wafting the stench of seared meat and wet wood across the camp. Somewhere, a child wailed.

I clutched harder at my pendant, biting down my fury. Anything I said would only make this worse. Until I got to the Amber City, my words meant nothing.

Worse than nothing, since I was technically a refugee. The Midnight Dominion—the darkness beyond the reach of our static sun—had been creeping into the Dusklands for tides, sending shadows to swallow light and drive frightened Dusklanders from their homes into the Amber Empire.

But I wasn’t running from the darkness at the edge of

nowhere—I was running toward the light at the heart of the empire. I was going to Coeur d’Or, the imperial palais in the Amber City.

But that wouldn’t matter to these Skyclad soldiers.

“My orders are not your concern, Dusker,” the captain said. “But by all means, continue to question them.”

Rina’s eyes narrowed to slits, but her expression relented.

“Better. Now, tell me—where did this convoy originate?”

“Piana. A village near the edge of the Dusklands.”

“Its destination?”

“The Amber City.”

“Purpose?”

“It’s an ore convoy. Our freight is ambric—a little dristic and kembric too, for trading.”

“And who are these folk?”

“My bonded labor, mostly. The rest are free travelers—merchants and herdsman who have paid for our security and company along their passage west.”

“Any Dominion refugees?”

Rina hesitated for barely a second before shaking her head no. But the captain saw her hesitation. Everyone did.

The captain swept back her pale cloak and planted her palm on the hilt of her sword.

“Who?”

For one awful moment, I didn’t know what Rina would say. The metal clasp of my amulet dug into my palm, but I didn’t take my hand away.

Finally, Rina clenched her jaw and shook her head again. “No refugees here, Captain.”

A cold smile crept across the captain's face. "We can do it that way too."

The captain raised a gloved fist. Her soldiers snapped to attention.

"There are refugees here," she barked. "Find them. Anyone who stands in your way is in defiance of Imperial Law."

Swords rang from scabbards. Helmets snapped down. Booted feet stamped hard-packed earth. The platoon of armored soldiers bore down upon the camp.

Panic sprinted ahead of the Skyclad onslaught. Parents rushed for their children. Free travelers reached for meat knives and shovels: anything that could be used to defend themselves. But the soldiers were more interested in terror than violence. Laborers were shoved aside to sprawl in the dust. The canvas sides of ore transports tore beneath steel, scattering glowing nuggets. A keening scream splintered the air, then ceased abruptly.

I dived for Rina, who was standing frozen amid the chaos. I grasped her shoulders and yanked her gaze away from the scenes of cruelty and destruction.

"Madame Rina!" I hissed at her. "You have to do something!"

But her gaze was blank and terrible.

"Vesh?" she asked. "And Luca? Are my boys safe?"

"I don't know!" I fought the urge to slap the older woman. "But they're not the only ones who could get hurt if we don't stop this!"

"How?" she asked, and turned away, as though she knew her question had no answer.

I gritted my teeth so hard I thought my jaw might crack. I pushed away from Rina, casting my gaze toward the Skyclad

captain. She stood a few strides away with her back to me, arms loosely clasped behind her cloak. Calm. Contained.

I couldn't contain the rage boiling up inside me.

"You!" I shoved all my anger into the word and threw it at the captain, closing the distance between us. "Stop this! Stop it now!"

"I will stop," said the captain. "When someone tells me which of these groveling mongrels was puked up by the Midnight Dominion."

"You're sick." My words rang harsh. "There are no refugees here! Why would you do this to innocent people?"

"I'm doing my duty," she said, turning at last to look at me. "No one is truly innocent. And innocence certainly doesn't pay a soldier's commission."

Fury painted fire along my bones.

The Sisters always swore the Scion would punish me for my sins: my anger, my ambition, my tenacious dreams. But I always thought those features made me stronger.

My secret unfurled gauzy wings inside me.

I caught my lip between my teeth and chewed. Standing up to a Skyclad captain was dangerous. But so was running away from the Sisters, choosing uncertainty over mediocrity and power over poverty. So was traveling halfway across an empire with barely more to live on than crusts of bread and Luca's kind smiles.

There were many kinds of danger. And there were worse things than facing it.

I knew what I had to do.

I squeezed my eyes shut and reached for a single glowing memory: the moment that changed my life.

A dingy, frigid room. Dull, livid light illuminating a sheaf of parchment lined in handwriting so elegant I barely

recognized the language. And the Imperial Insignia, ornate and unmistakable—a sunburst bigger than my hand, stamped in amber wax and gilded with kembric. I concentrated on the memory until I could see nothing but the seal, glowing in the bruised dusk.

I forced my eyes open and swallowed down the scorching tang of fear. I stepped toward the Skyclad officer.

“Stay your men, Captain,” I snapped, threading my voice with as much command as I could muster. “Your business here is done.”

The woman’s brows slashed together. Dread kicked my ribs with dristic-toed boots.

“Do you wish to die, girl?” A smile wove the lines of her face into a savage tapestry. “They say it is a great honor to die on a Skyclad’s sword.”

“And yet, an honor that is beneath me,” I snarled, drawing myself up to my full height. I held out an imperious hand, and made the captain see something that wasn’t there.

A sheaf of parchment appeared in my hand. An illusion, fashioned from memory and forged in the kaleidoscope crush of my heart. The ink glimmered blood-red and the paper rustled in the breeze, densely woven and fine. And the Imperial Insignia of the Amber Empire glared from the top page, heavy and solid and glittering like a tiny sun.

I held my breath, ignoring the low humming in my ears and the strength sapping from my limbs.

The Skyclad captain took one look at the seal. Her face drained of color. She swept into a bow so low the hem of her silvery cloak stirred up puffs of dust.

“My deepest apologies,” she gasped. “I had no idea someone of your station was traveling with this ore convoy. Forgive me!”

She saluted briskly, spun on her heel, and strode forward into the melee.

“Stand down!” she shouted. “Our authority here has been revoked! Return to your mounts at once!”

The order rippled outward through the camp. One by one, soldiers lowered their weapons. Free travelers fell back with gasps and cries as the armored men and women turned away to their horses with blank, impassive faces.

I sucked in a deep breath of smoke-smudged air and glanced down at the document in my hand. The edges of my vision curled like flame-eaten parchment as the illusion evaporated, bleeding into wisps of color and form. Within seconds, nothing remained of the Imperial Insignia. Panic burst hot in my veins, but the Skyclad officer kept her gaze diffident and her back angled toward me. She hadn't seen the official seal of the empire melt away into nothing.

I shoved my hands into my pockets, praying to the Scion I'd done enough.

The captain swept me a final salute before mounting her horse. Within moments, the Skyclad platoon was gone, shards of bright metal choked beneath a billow of yellow dust.

Dizziness clutched at me. I forced myself to turn and face the camp.

The damage was bad. Broken glass glittered along the edges of gaping transport windows, mixing with shattered chunks of ambric ore. Tents were nothing more than shredded wisps of canvas. Livestock lay slaughtered and broken, dank blood dampening parched earth. The guttering tongues of scattered cook fires licked at the debris of wagons torn to pieces.

I was so transfixed by the wreckage that it took me a moment

to register the heavy press of a hundred eyes. I lifted my gaze, dreading what I knew I would see.

Laborers and free travelers were scattered across the campsite, crouched between overturned transports and cowering in the comfort of one another's arms. And everyone—man, woman, and child—was staring at me. Suspicion gave their eyes sharp edges.

What had they glimpsed, amid the chaos, to make them look at me like that? Had they seen a nameless Duskländer conjure an Imperial Insignia from thin air? Or was it enough that they had watched a penniless orphan singlehandedly banish a platoon of armed Skyclad soldats into the dusk, and walk away unscathed?

Humiliation tinged with old resentment caught in my throat and choked me. Whatever its cause, their palpable suspicion felt all too familiar—I'd spent my life glimpsing it in the grimaces of superstitious Sisters and the sidelong glances of dirt-smudged villagers. Hearing it in the voices of cruel children who couldn't understand where I fit into their narrow worlds.

Freak. Witch. Monster.

A hand fell on my shoulder. I spun, my heart vaulting.

Madame Rina.

"Come, child," she murmured. Her face was unreadable in the dusk. "You've done nothing wrong. We'll find a way to fix this."

I gave a slow nod. But as Rina turned to pick her way through the ruins of her precious convoy, I didn't have the heart to tell her that what the captain had said was true: No one was truly an innocent.

Especially me.

And nobody could fix that.