

LADY VALANNA'S PLAN

By Chaaya Chandra

On the other world, the image within the geode half would've been crisp and opaque. Terah's unusual difference in arcane energy left the image blurry and slightly transparent. Taleetha could clearly see Lady Valanna and bits of the palace room behind her, but the haziness, as well as the sight of the back of the geode behind it all, made it almost painful for her to gaze through. It was an unwelcome reminder of how far her people had to lower themselves to be here—similar to how she felt every time she encountered native plumbing.

“And this delegation,” Taleetha was asking, “do we know it's purpose?”

The image of the noble on the other end did little justice to the dark elf it was supposedly portraying. One could almost see the lavender of her irises, but it was difficult to tell if that was the real color with the purple of the geode behind it. The gray near the top of the stone made her black hair look like it was graying, though there was no gray on the real person. “It's targeting the vykati leader and his daughter.” Lady Valanna answered.

The liaison didn't bother correcting her superior's mistake. If the leader wanted to think that Sajani was Benayle's daughter, there was no harm in it. Besides, the line of communication was tenuous, and Taleetha thought it best to stick to the topic at hand. "I'll let him know..."

"No," Lady Valanna interrupted, "you'll not. We have no way of knowing how he'll react and any sudden actions on his part could make our enemy suspicious. You'll have to get them properly protected, or at least more cautious, another way."

"The lady general will probably be leaving the capital in a few days. She'd be the easiest target."

"Then you'll have to find a way to keep her protected. Something subtle. Do you know what path she'll be taking out from the capital?"

"My contact here says that she'd arranged an airship to Rhidayar."

"Rhidayar? That makes no sense. Are you sure?"

Taleetha smiled at her boss, she was very sure of the information and said so. "I talked directly with the owner of the airship."

There was a pause. Taleetha was used to such delays from Valanna. She knew from past experience that the Lady was carefully making all

the connections necessary to predicting what course things would run. Some accused her of using divination, but the Vharkylia ambassador knew the Lady knew next to nothing about the arcane. Beyond using basic devices like the one that was allowing them talk now, the Master of Parliament, left magic to others. Her mind had a magic all its own.

“Did that slow wolf get his borders closed yet?”

“Yes,” the diplomat responded. Taleetha again didn’t correct her employer. Benayle carefully cultivated his appearance so that others would under-estimate him. That was a secret Taleetha kept carefully to herself, knowing that someday, it might prove useful.

“Good. That’ll mean they can’t just fly out vulnerable. I’m going to make a guess that the Lady General will stop at one military outpost at least. See about having the major one between Drtithen and the border, it’s directly south, receiving orders to give her fresh horses or something.”

“My lady,” Taleetha interjected, “I can’t just send out orders...”

“Of course not, you idiot,” Lady Valanna said with exasperation. It wasn’t an insult. It was more

of a reproof. "Make it look like it's from her and that way she'll figure something is up and be more cautious."

"I'm sorry, my lady," the ambassador apologized, "I'm not much good at forgery, but I'll do my best."

"You don't have to be, my dear," came the gracious response, "she'll know she's not the one that wrote it."

Taleetha nodded once quickly, "And what of Mr. Benayle?"

"Keep him in the capital at all costs."

That was easier said than done. He'd left his security detachment behind just last night to go see a play in the lower quarter of the city. It wasn't that the guards left him intentionally, they were just unable to follow him.

"I'll do my best," was the only response she felt comfortable giving.

"That will have to do, friend. I have confidence in you."