

"You? Why are you here?" Jana's eyes narrowed as she examined her cousin across the room. "Grandfather sent for me."

Ranisa sighed and leant back on the recliner on which she was seated, meeting her cousin's eyes from beneath her rose-brown hair. "Cherren sent for me, I could ask you the same thing."

The two girls glared at each other in silence as the door slid shut behind Jana; a stifled sneeze from outside interrupted the otherwise quiet murmuring of the household around them. As the seconds ticked by Ranisa pushed her hair back out of her face and tucked her feet under the recliner, smoothing her kimono over her legs. Jana gestured for her girl to wait by the door and moved across the room, scuffing her feet, until she reached a chair opposite her companion. Sitting, she broke the silence.

"You came from <town>? How was the journey?"

Ranisa held her gaze for a few more moments before leaning forwards, grinning. "Not bad. The palanquin bearers complained about the heat and seemed determined to make us late until Mother reminded them just how... replaceable... they were." Ranisa's girl, kneeling next to her, winced and stared even more earnestly at her knees. "So..." she let the word hang for a moment, "how are you?"

Jana shifted in her seat and looked away. "Fine."

Ranisa clapped her hands, "Good, I'm so glad! And tell me," she arched an eyebrow, "how is Dalen?"

"Dammit you \*bitch\*!" Jana leapt from her chair, fists clenched, "I \*knew\* you wouldn't be able to leave it alone!" She turned and paced across the room.

Her cousin watched her, still sat on the couch. Her lip quivered for only a moment before erupting into a laugh. "Oh Jana, you're so easy! Look at you, months later and still fit to explode whenever his name is mentioned!"

"Shut your mouth, you have no idea what you're talking about. You messed up something s-"

"Special? No, I don't think so." Ranisa folded her hands in her lap, her brown eyes glittering. "He was a nobody, a patrician. You're seventeen years old; you have no idea what 'special' is." She paused for a moment before continuing, "I am amazed you managed to entice even that trash, though; you still look like a boy."

Jana glanced down at herself and reflected on her cousin's barb. She was wearing a white waistcoat and matching half-skirt worn over golden trousers. Large brown boots topped off the ensemble. She ran her hand through her short, dark, hair and was suddenly envious of Ranisa's ruby kimono and fancy jewellery.

"I'm willing to help you, Jana, you know I am. Just give me the word and I'll make you something to be proud of." She snapped her fingers to emphasize her point.

"Something to be proud of? Did you somehow miss the stories that went round after what you did? I do \*not\* want to be like you, cousin."

Ranisa's face clouded over. "You bring those up again and I swear to you my family will hear of it."

It was Jana's turn to grin as she advanced across the room. "Of course,

poor little Ranisa, the family saint. You think they don't know what you get up to? I'm sure half the Isle does by now. No Exaltation, no prospect, no future," Jana jabbed her finger at her cousin to emphasize her points, her voice raising with each thrust, "throwing herself at anyone with the first inkling of power and hoping something sticks! Well bravo, cousin."

Ranisa drew herself up on the sofa, holding her head high to meet Jana's onslaught. "You're one to talk. We're the same age and, in case you have forgotten your own sad predicament, we are in much the same situation. Which of the Dragons has chosen to bless you, dear cousin? I don't recall there being a Dragon of dirt and blood to explain the state you all too often seem to find yourself in. At least \*I\* have spared a thought for the future instead of burdening my House with my existence!"

They locked eyes for a few moments, cold anger radiating from Ranisa's placid face and raw fury from Jana's snarling features. Outside another sneeze rang out.

"Argh!" Jana threw her hands in the air and span on her heel, storming away from Ranisa and around the room, "Why do I ever bother with you? Why are you here, why you?! Why am \*I\* even here? What the hell is going on?"

Ranisa watched her cousin stomp around the opulent room for a few moments before returning her attention to her surroundings. She had never been so far in to Cherren's wing of The Fallen Crucible before and suspected the same was true of her companion. The room was spacious and well furnished, clearly designed to impress those who waited to meet with Ragara Cherren himself. Alongside the recliners and cushions spread around were a number of trinkets, both from popular artisans of the Realm and oddities collected from the tribes and peasants of the Threshold. The message was clear: what Cherren wanted, Cherren got. The furniture and decoration was, as she had predicted, predominately red and gold; a perfect match for her outfit. She took a moment of quiet pleasure from the fact her research had paid off and she fit, unlike her cousin who was busy treading mud into the embroidered rugs.

Jana soon gave up pretending to be interested in the room's decoration and, for want of anything to do other than return to speak with her cousin, made her way towards the door, gesturing for her girl to rise. "Find out what we're here for. Go, go!" The girl, around seven or eight, bowed meekly and turned towards the door, jumping back and squeaking in fright as it slid open before her hand could reach it. In the doorway stood Begus, Cherren's manservant.

"The Master will see you now."

The girls donned their slippers and padded down the corridor after the aging man, their maids trailing mutely a few paces behind. Jana initially tried to keep up a facade of disinterest in the face of her cousin's obvious curiosity, but soon dropped the act and joined her in looking around in wonder at the elegant corridors in which they found themselves. Cherren's preference for the grandiose followed them from the room in which they had been waiting and was on clear display in the corridors connecting them to where the elder Exalt, the head of the household, waited for them; ornate statues of gold and

red jade lined the corridors and flickered in the light from the torches lining the corridor to supplement the small amount of light that penetrated this far into the manservant. On their approach the household's retainers and staff moved to one side and dropped to their knees, bowing as they passed and murmuring their names deferentially. Begus held himself rigidly upright, keeping his head straight forward as they progressed, but Jana spotted Ranisa watching the servants and touching a few on the shoulder as she passed, sharing a secret glance with them.

"What are you-"

"Quiet." Begus didn't look round, but Jana's skin prickled anyway as she imagined the man's firm stare boring in to her. "I am familiar with the fact that you seem determined to embarrass your family in any way possible, but whilst you are in my household you will conduct yourself with a little dignity and decorum. Master Cherren does not deign to meet with every scrap that is born into his House, especially those with as little in their favour as you, so I suggest you make the most of this opportunity and put your best... least filthy... foot forwards."

Jana bristled and almost managed to bite her tongue before spotting Ranisa grinning wolfishly and watching her from the corner of her eye. "Bite me, you old foo-"

The strike came so quickly Jana had no time to see it coming, let alone react. Her head span to the side and she stumbled into her cousin as stars blurred her vision, only Ranisa's hands catching her stopped her from falling.

"I said \*quiet\*, child!"

Jana pushed herself away from her cousin and span towards the old man. "How \*dare\* you! Do you have any idea what I can have done to you for this?!"

Begus had turned to face her, his arms crossed, and was regarding her down his nose. "I do. Nothing. You are a guest here, child, this house is my domain." He gestured at the nearby servants kneeling around them and staring silently at the floor. "You think anyone here will speak out against me? The only one who may back up your story is your cousin, and I think she has the good sense to stay silent."

Jana glanced at her cousin, who was staring straight ahead with only a twitch of a smile on her face.

"You are demonstrating, as you apparently so often do, your lack of understanding of how this House functions. Learn your place. You are very close to being a total disappointment to your parents through your blood as well as your actions; I suggest you make the best of what options you have left to you. Learn from your cousin: be silent, be gracious, and do not make a scene in front of Cherren." Begus turned on his heel and fell back into his rigid step down the hallway.

Jana stood fuming for a few moments, running over ideas of revenge, until she noticed Ranisa heading down the corridor after Begus, mimicking his stiff, formal stride and keeping her eyes pointing straight ahead.

"My Lady?" She turned and found her girl staring up at her, a confused look on her face, as Ranisa's maid slipped past her to following her charge. Taking a deep breath Jana swallowed her pride, for the time being at least,

and quick-stepped to catch up with the procession, the girl stumbling to keep up behind her.

They proceeded down the corridor in silence, Jana staring daggers into the old retainers head and stealing glances at her cousin, watching for any signs of amusement. Ranisa seemed to have settled her face into a calm mask, with no flicker of emotion crossing her features as they advanced on an ornate door that, Jana guessed, led to Cherren.

Begus halted outside the door, raising a hand to bring the procession to a halt behind him.

"I don't know why you have been called here today, but I recommend you \*both\* take whatever he has to say to you seriously. Your parents were summoned here before you and I believe them to still be present now, it is likely your future awaits you inside." He turned to face them, meeting each of their gazes in turn. "Dragons bless you both. Good luck. You two," he gestured to their maids, "wait here."

Turning again he pushed the double doors open and stepped through, his voice booming across the chamber beyond, "Lord Ragara Cherren, I present Lady Ragara Cherren Ranisa and Lady Ragara Cherren Jana."

Jana blinked in the sudden light flowing from the room, standing still as her eyes took a few moments to catch up with the change. When she managed to focus again she saw Ranisa walking down the ornate the carpet that led from the entrance where she across the room to a raised dais at the far end. She dropped to her knees a distance from the dais and bowed deeply, her head resting on her hands placed on the floor in front of her and a few strands of her neatly styled auburn hair brushing against the ornate matting. A sharp cough rang out from just inside the door where Begus stood eyeing her. Jana quickly stepped onto the carpet and moved up alongside her cousin, the doors banging shut behind her as she mimicked Ranisa's pose. As the echo of the doors died away silence filled the room.

"Ranisa, rise."

The voice, whilst soft, rumbled across the room in a deep tone that made the hair on Jana's neck stand on end. She shut her eyes and pressed her head more firmly against the floor, taking a few deep breaths to get her nerves under control. She heard the shuffle of fabric next to her as Ranisa sat up, followed by a sharp, surprised intake of breath.

"Ranisa, I am pleased with you," the voice spoke again with a slow, deliberate pace, "you graduated from Juen Ko Academy with very fine grades. I am told you are well versed in politics and the arts, a combination that will serve both you and this House well in the future if properly channelled. Your first attempts at political machination both within this family and without have also been noted and, whilst we may not be happy with every decision, or every enemy, you have made you do show both spirit and willing. This pleases me."

The voice died away with no hint of an echo, the room falling into a seemingly unnatural stillness in its absence. Jana opened her eyes and peeked sideways at her mute cousin. Whilst she couldn't twist her head far enough to see Ranisa's face, she could make out her hands clenched in her lap, the knuckles white.

"Jana, rise."

Jana closed her eyes once more, then with a deep breath pushed herself from the floor into an upright position, again mirroring Ranisa's previous pose as her cousin bowed back to the floor. She faced towards the origin of the voice, and slowly opened her eyes. Immediately she was locked, her gaze meeting two dark wells set deep within a flat, impassive face. Cherren held her gaze in silence for a few moments and Jana got the feeling her soul was being weighed deep within the depths of his eyes. Slowly, Cherren blinked and the spell was broken. Letting out the breath she didn't even know she'd been holding Jana looked the head of her House over. Cherren looked as if he were carved from the same stone that comprised his throne; his face was a rectangular slate with features roughly chiselled in it and his entire body made of angles, square shoulders, straight back, arms braced at right angles on the arms of the seat in which he rested. His skin had a yellowish white tint to it, and Jana thought she could make out small crags of rock bursting through his knuckles and bristling under the cloak across his shoulders.

Sparing a brief look around him, she also spotted four other figures kneeling two either side of the dais that held Cherren's throne. To one side knelt her parents, both with their hands folded in their lap and staring at the floor, their faces impassive; to the other Ranisa's parents in much the same repose.

She spotted from the corner of her eye one of Cherren's large fingers rising, then falling to the arm of the chair with an audible clack of stone on stone, and quickly brought her attention back to the older Dragon Blood. Their eyes met once more, and a flicker of amusement briefly lit deep inside his eyes.

"Jana, I am pleased with you. Like your cousin, you have graduated from Juen Ko Academy with very pleasing grades. I am told your primary skills lay with weapons; be they your own hands and feet, the implements of war you are given, or even the angry bark of your voice. 'Reduced him to tears without her even having to lay a finger on him', I believe the quote was? Very impressive! Like your cousin, you also have made maybe more lasting enemies than you yet realise through your time at the Academy, but you too have pleased me with your progress and will go on to do well for this House if we can but channel you correctly."

Cherren's voice died away to stillness again and Jana, realising that like Ranisa she was frozen stiff, shifted her position slightly to relax her muscles. However, she no longer dared look to her side to see Ranisa's reaction. Her eyes flicked back across to her parents, still staring ahead with no emotion gracing their faces, then at the walls, the ceiling, anywhere but back into the depths of Cherren's eyes as the silence began to stretch.

A hiss reached Jana's ears from a few feet to her left, Ranisa. "Bow, you cretin!" Taking her cousin's advice she quickly leant forwards, placing her head on her hands.

"However," Cherren's voice resumed, still as a soft rumble but now holding an undercurrent of threat that was not there previously, "you have both failed your families... failed me... in a very important way. For all of your

varied and colourful achievements, there is one thing neither of you has done that would make you invaluable to me. Your parents all carry the blood of the Dragons in their veins, their greatest gift to you, and yet where are the signs of your acceptance!? Why have neither of you Exalted as one of the Dragon Blooded Host!? Without their blessings you will forever be barred from the echelons of power and society that you should both be aiming to achieve. This does not please me."

Cherren's voice had risen to a crescendo during his tirade but fell once again to unnatural calmness as he finished.

"Speak, one of you. Tell me your excuses."

Silence reigned the room, but not for long. Jana, for all the awe and fear she had for the head of her House, had been seething under the accusations falling on her shoulders. She bolted upright and met Cherren's stony stare, her own eyes now alight with the anger she felt.

"Lord Cherren, that's not fair. It's not our fault! It's not like we have chosen not to Exalt, there is nothing I would wish for more, but it has not happened, not yet at least. You cannot blame us for that!"

"Watch your tongue, girl!" Begus' voice snapped from somewhere behind her. He seemed about to start something else when Cherren raised his hand to silence him, his eyes never leaving Jana's.

"Very astute, Lady Jana. You are quite wrong, of course, that it is not your fault as it very clearly is, but you are correct that there is still time."

"My Lord," Ranisa murmured, "I do not understand how you can blame this on us. You said yourself that we have both excelled in our studies and have left Juan Ko as prodigies; how much more can we do?"

Cherren chuckled at this, a sound akin to the echo of a rock fall. "Lady Ranisa, I'd thank you not to mince my words. Prodigies? I said no such thing. You have graduated well, but that is all. You have dabbled in the games of mortals, and yes, you have both had your share of arguments, battles and victories along the way but you have not, either of you, stepped far outside what is expected and required of you to succeed. You have both done well at what was placed before you, and both have had somewhat admirable extra-curricular pursuits in various \*childlike\* ways, but you have done nothing spectacular. You have not pushed yourselves, and have not overly pushed those around you. The adversity you have faced is that of children, not Dynasts! Until you are willing to put yourself above and beyond your kin, willing to put yourselves in dangers others around you shy from and willing to face more than you think you can handle the Dragons will not grace you because you are not worthy. Now tell me, what \*exceptional\* things did you do in your time at Juan Ko? Ranisa, I do not ask which teachers and students you have wrapped around your fingers, and Jana, I do not ask which particular whelp you have last ground into the dust, though both are admirable in their own right. Now tell me, or agree that this is your fault!"

"My Lord," Ranisa murmured, "it is my fault!"

"No!" Jana's voice rang out across the chamber, "I will not admit that this is my fault!"

Cherren stood from his throne, his voice booming. "Girl! When I was your age I had faced adversity! I had survived assassinations, I had battled

Exalts and demons and triumphed! I had run rivals out of business and home and toppled powers far in excess of my station! You have bloodied a few slightly important noses, that is \*nothing\*! But..." he sighed and stepped down from the dais and walked to stand just in front of the two girls, his voice calming again, "you are not without hope." He placed his hand on Jana's head then, dropping to one knee quickly, pushed it forward and back onto the floor forcing her into another bow. "Even if only a little."

Jana pushed against the hand holding her down but was unable to raise her head. The fingers now clasping the back of her skull felt cold and rough against her skin and seemed as immovable as the earth itself, as if she were being held in place by a statue. After wriggling fruitlessly against her constraints for a few moments Jana subsided and relaxed and, as quickly as it had come, the hand was removed as Cherren stepped back up onto the dais and re-seated himself.

"I have made preparations for the two of you. The time has arrived at which I would have liked to be deciding which of the secondary schools on the Isle you would be attending to further your education as a member of the Dragon Blooded Host but I do not yet have that luxury. However, I have not given up hope. You have not been placed into any of the usual schools for Dynasts like yourselves, as I believe you are meant for greater things than you have so far demonstrated. Instead, I am sending you both somewhere different, somewhere not many know about." He paused, letting the words sink in. "I am sending you to Whispering Rock, a special academy for individuals who are yet to... live up to their potential... such as the two of you. Your immediate families have been informed of this decision and no convincing arguments were raised against your attendance at the Rock, so as we speak your passage is being arranged, you leave tomorrow. Do you have any questions?"

"My Lord, as you say few have heard of this academy. May we know where we are travelling to and what we will be studying on arrival?"

"Neither piece of information is forbidden, Ranisa, and indeed perhaps some forewarning will stand you in good stead. Whispering Rock is located on a small island to the west of the Blessed Isle; not far away enough to be considered the true West but at enough of a distance and in enough isolation to be unknown to all but the most persistent mariner. The exact location is unimportant, just know that whilst there you will be removed from most of the luxuries you have come to expect. You will travel with one trunk of belongings, though exactly what you may decide upon yourself. As for your studies, you will continue with a general education as you would at any other secondary school but with additional activities designed to..." Cherren broke off and drummed his fingers on the arm of his throne, emitting a clacking noise. "I will be short with you, Ladies. This academy is designed to push you to your limits, to Exalt you, or break you in its efforts to do so. Your attendance is a risk, but a calculated one. The House believes you will triumph; do not disappoint us, as it may be the death of you. Now," he raised his hand to silence Jana as she bolted upright again and opened her mouth, "you have an hour to discuss this arrangement with your families before they return to their homes to give you time to prepare. Be ready at mid-morning tomorrow, your

staff have been briefed on where you must go. You are dismissed."

Jana's arguments with her parents were met with stony formality and no ground was given. As she raged at them they remained impassive and unimpressed with her outbursts and remonstrations. It was, they said, for her own good that she was being sent and that this was the best chance she had for living out a long and prosperous life as a Dynast. As a reward if she were to return Dragon blessed she would be placed in one of the four great academies for young Exalts and she would be showered with gifts and accolades from the House; no mention was made of what would happen were she to return still just a mortal. Once they had retired to their own section of the complex and she was sequestered in her rooms with just her maids for company Jana beat her hands bloody on the walls and stormed around her rooms until she had no energy left. As she exhausted herself her servants began to pack a trunk for her, meekly questioning which outfits, tools and accessories she wished to take with her until she tired of their pestering and dismissed them, finishing the job herself. It wasn't until late she finally made her decisions and sealed the trunk, ready for the morning. Sleep found her easily, even amongst the turmoil of anger, fear and betrayal that swept around her heart.