Lieutenant

Eloira spun away from the mirror. Her long braid whipped behind her as she swung her freshly polished, ice blue bow off of her shoulder, wrapping her left hand about the grip while her right flew behind her. She notched a silver-tipped arrow and pulled the string taught, aiming straight at the intruder’s chest. Her eyes flashed.

Valorae propped herself up against the doorframe. Her long, royal purple skirts billowed around her as she settled into a comfortable stance and let out a loud cackle. A teasing smirk slithered onto her face and her green eyes sparkled with mischief. “Ooo, feisty today, aren’t we, Ellie?”

Eloria scowled, lowering her weapon half an inch. The puffy sleeves of her dress slipped down past her shoulders. *Damnit.* She dropped the stirring of her bow and reached around to tighten the top tie that held up the garment. Again. “What do *you* want?”

Valorae’s eyes softened and her features contorted into an exaggerated pout. “Eloira, why must you always be so… suspicious? Can’t the lieutenant simply come by to wish her favorite apprentice good luck on her big day?”

Eloira closed her eyes and let out a long breath. She didn't have to see the sneer curling up the corners of the other huntress’s perfectly glossed lips.

Sure enough, when she opened her eyes and her room came back into focus, Valorae’s cheeks were sunken in as though she'd swallowed a sour raspberry.

Eloira scoffed, her black leather boots thumping against the floor as she crossed to the bed and slid the quiver of arrows from her back. It landed just inches from the baseboard of the bed with a *thunk*. “You may be a year older than me—”

“And *much* wiser,” Valorae cut in.

Eloira exhaled through her nose. *More humble, too.*

“What was that?” Valorae hissed.

Eloira paused. Had she said that out loud? A satisfied smirk danced at the edges of her mouth, but she bit it back. “Nothing.”

Eloria spun around in time to see the taller girl preening her long ebony curls while flirting with herself in the mirror. She groaned inwardly. *Really, Lucia, you had to pick her? Shameless cad.*

The moment the thought entered her mind Eloira winced. She was in no position to question the queen’s decisions, but every time she had interacted with Valorae since they met at the Solstice Ceremony five years ago, she only came off every bit the spoiled, selfish brat as Eloira’s intuition had painted her. Eloria had absolutely no idea how such a prissy princess had managed to climb the ranks so quickly that she and Valorae had ended up on the same level of the royal court, let alone in competition for the same position.

Well, actually, she *did* have one thought, but it was almost too undignified to entertain. Though, maybe not for Valorae. Nothing was impossible when it came to that girl.

“I simply said that I am your equal in rank. Until Lucia says otherwise, you are not the lieutenant, and I am certainly *not* your *apprentice*.”

Eloira scrunched her nose in contempt and snatched the midnight blue shawl from wear it lay on her crumpled comforter, draping it around her shoulders. The bow remained clutched between her fingers as she fumbled with the knot that secured the cape around her neck.

“Yet,” Valorae replied.

Eloria gnashed her teeth. “I have just as much a chance at taking over Amar’s old post as you.”

Valorae let out a short laugh.

Heat rose to Eloira’s cheeks. She pressed her lips together and dug her nails into the frame of her bow, raising it again. “This thing can pierce a whole lot more than that precious ego of yours.”

“Oh, please.” Valorae’s grin grew that much wider and she rolled her eyes. “Your mother might have been a legendary archer, but you?” She snorted and shook her head. “You’re just a glorified servant girl.”

A growl rumbled forth from somewhere deep in Eloira’s chest. She stepped closer. “Want to say that again?”

Valorae shuffled a few steps backward, but her smug smile never faltered. “If you’re so great, *Ellie*.”

Eloria snarled at the moniker and raised her weapon a little higher.

“Why did the queen ask you to host the Solstice Ceremony, instead of letting you find Elderberry yourself, hmm?”

Eloira bristled. “At least *I* have some involvement in the mission,” she spat. “Unlike you. What are you planning to do all day, rest on your laurels? The Hunt isn’t allowed to scout with the beast tamers during the challenge, remember?”

Valorae arched an eyebrow. “Do you really think some silly little decree is going to stop me?”

Eloira relaxed the vice grip on her bow. Her eyes widened and her mouth formed a small “o.”

Valorae grinned. Her gaze darted down either end of the empty corridor before she opened the right flap of her own cloak.

Eloira squinted. Then gasped and did a double take when she caught sight of Valorae’s own quiver slung across her back. “What are you…?”

Valorae sighed, dropping the fabric and stepping over the threshold of the door and into Eloira’s room. “You and I both know more is at stake this year than just a chance to light the Everfrost Tree.” Her voice took on a cold edge that made the younger huntress shiver. “Finding Elderberry isn’t a job for some ametuer trying to worm their way into Lucia’s court. It's a dangerous mission that could alter the lives of everyone in Everwinter.”

Eloira nodded. Her mother’s status as the first hunter ever to successfully capture a Cameleon Dragon after it had disappeared— Elderberry’s father— hung over her like an anvil on a rusty chain since the queen had announced his disappearance two months ago. Everyone in the valley had set out to find him, but so far, no promising leads had shown up. Two weeks ago, Lucia made the executive decision for his safe return to be the challenge that would earn one lucky citizen a chance to adorn the Everfrost tree with its crown jewel.

Valorae’s lips set in a grim line. “If he isn’t found by sunset tonight—”

“There will be no one to light the Morning Star,” Eloria whispered. The color faded from her cheeks and a frigid sweat dampened her palms.

“And Everwinter as we know it will cease to exist,” Valorae finished.

Eloira’s heart hammered in her ears. Her mouth lost all moisture as she staggered backward and slumped down on the bed. Her bow dangled at her side as it slowly slid from her grip. She took a few long, deep breaths before blinking back to reality and setting her gaze on Valorae. “So… What are you going to do?”

Valorae huffed and planted her hands on her hips. “I can’t let some silly stroke of luck determine the fate of an entire realm. After the ceremony, when the *amateur*s’ names are drawn from the lottery and those crazyenough to accept the challengetake off at sunrise,” she pulled the long, purple velvet hood attached to the back of her cape over her head. Most of her face was distorted by shadow. Only her bright, ruby lips were visible in the foggy, early morning light that streamed through the bedroom window. “I’m going after them. If saving all of Everwinter doesn’t secure the lieutenant position for me, nothing will.”

Eloria’s features hardened as she pushed up from the bed. She scooped up her quiver and swung it back over her shoulder. “Not if I find him first.“

A calculating grin split Valorae’s face, her eyes dancing with madness and thirst for competition. She held out her hand and met Eloira’s with a firm shake. “May the best huntress win.”

Eloira smiled. “I intend to.”

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“And Diedren Halsenberg.” Elora let the strip of parchment flutter back into the crystal raffle ball as the crowd parted and the last lottery winner-- a slender girl with unusually tanned skin, fiery red hair, piercing green eyes, and a pretty deadly looking crossbow slung around her back-- came up to stand behind her fellow contestants.

Queen Lucia rose from her throne just to the left of the podium, wishing all six of the competitors luck before bidding them on their way. Valorae and Eloria remained at their posts with their hands folded delicately in front of them, training their eyes on the horizon as the last of the ships disappeared over the hill, the sled blades attached to the bottom of each boat scraping across the icy surface of the frozen river.

“Come now, my huntresses,” the queen called, beckoning them to her side as she turned and headed back up the walkway toward the palace. “Elderberry’s safe return is in their hands now. We shall know the successor by sundown.”

“Yes, Milady,” Valorae replied, bowing slightly and trailing behind the queen.

Eloira mimicked her reply and shot the elder huntress a questioning look as they followed their ruler over the winding path.

Valorae only winked and tightened her grip on the weapon camouflaged by her cape.

Eloria grinned and nodded her understanding. Their plan to join the beast tamers was not squelched after all. If only they could sneak away from the queen.

“Queen Lucia!” As one, the three of them turned in the direction of the servants’ quarters, only to see the newest guard rushing toward them.

He skidded to a stop in front of the queen, leaving sloppy boot tracks in the fresh snow behind him. Eloira smirked as she noticed Lucia put a gloved hand over her mouth to hide her smile. The man dropped to one knee and dipped his head.

“Yes, Chandler?” the queen asked, arching an eyebrow.

“My deepest apologies for disturbing you, Your Grace,” the boy said, “but the captain has instructed your presence in the command room immediately.”

Eloria heard Valorae's boots crunch against the icy snow as she slid closer and nudged the younger girl in the ribs.

*This is our chance,* Valorae mouthed.

Ellora nodded and they slunk away as Lucia followed the guard in the opposite direction, their conversation echoing in the air.

“Did he state the nature of this request?”

“No, Your Highness; only that it was of the utmost importance...”

Eloira shook her head, happy to let the howl of the wind drown out the rest of the guards words. She had other duties with which to concern herself.

Only when they reached the entrance to the palace stables did the sense of guilt return to gnaw at Eloira’s stomach. Even if their quest truly was for the good of everyone in the valley; was it really safe to blatantly disobey Lucia’s orders? She bit her lip and watch Valorae march straight toward the strongest stallion avalible--a midnight black mare— and began saddling her up without the slightest hesitation.

“V-Valorae?” she asked, glancing around at the remaining mounts. “Do you really think we should be doing this?”

Eloria winced as the older girl paused from tightening her horse’s girth and exhaled sharply through her nose, shooting her a glare.

“I already told you--I’m not leaving the fate of my home in the hands of a few lucky strangers.” She shrugged and turned back to her horse. “The lieutenant position is as good as mine whether you follow me or not.” She paused and a sickening smirk contorted her features.. “‘Though, I’m sure your mother would be proud either way.”

Eloria sucked in a breath and clenched her teeth. She balled her fists at her sides and stalked across the hay to the nearest stall. Which held a wild grey stallion that only the old lieutenant had ever possessed the skills to tame. It whinnied and bucked as she unlatched it’s gate, grabbing the lead rope just before it could bolt. “I’m not letting you win without a fight.”

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The fire in Valorae’s gaze as the girls exchanged looks while galloping through the dense, snow-covered pines of the forest and leaving the safety of civilization behind ignited something inside of Eloira. For the first time in as long as she could remember, her mother’s legacy among the Hunt didn’t feel like a looming shadow covering every one of her daughter’s accomplishments, but an unbridled incentive that propelled her forward as they raced each other across the snowy terrain.

At a fork in the road, they split. Eloria cheered internally as Valorae galloped toward an open clearing of trees while she took off in the opposite direction, propelled by towering cliffs and skinny pathways leading up to the entrances of multiple caves. Even from this angle, she could see the glitter of the Prismites— stalagmites that were clear and sparkled like diamonds, casting every color of the rainbow around the surface of the cave.

*Valorae may be older than me,* Eloira thought, *but I’ve spent my whole life studying the habits of Elderberry and his family.* Her mother had taught her everything there was to know about Chameleon dragons— including the fact that they *loved* cramped, colorful places. Most animals used their camouflage abilities to protect themselves from predators, but ever since the royal family had domesticated the Cameleon dragons generations ago in order to harness their powers of fire to protect the borders of Everwinter, they hadn’t needed it in the safety of the castle. And that could make the dragons restless. Legend said if they didn’t use their powers often enough, there was a chance they could lose the ability to camouflage forever. A dangerous endeavour, considering that losing their ability would nullify the power of their fire to hide Everwinter from the mortal world.

Eloira had never believed the queen’s suspicions that Elderberry had been kidnapped; even if he was the last of his breed, his abilities prevented mortals from knowing he existed, and no one in Everwinter would be stupid enough to risk the survival of the entire population. No one had even come forward to post a ransom, and the dragon was too smart to let himself be taken.

She rode her mount as far as it would carry her up the side of the cliffs, then climbed down and continued searching on foot.

*He has to be up here. He just has to.*

She poked around in every crevice, fashioning a makeshift torch out of a broken tree branch and a match that she’d packed in her saddlebag. She swept it around the interior of each cave and held out a handful of the juiciest blackberries she could find-- they were the dragon’s favorite treat. She was almost at the end of the final row of caves on this level of the cliffs and still had no luck. “Come on!” she fumed. “Where *are* you?”

A sudden burst of violet fire lightened the sky above her. She whipped around only to duck as Elderberry’s giant, glittering wings cut through the air. An agitated roar pierced Eloria’s eardrums as a rope shot out of the sky and caught the dragon’s ankle. She followed the length of the rope to the level below hers, only to see Valorae struggling to keep her grip on the other end. Sweat beaded her forehead and her horse panted wildly beneath her.

Eloria gasped and clamored to where her own steed waited before galloping to the huntress's side. “What the blazes are you doing?”

Valorae glared at her and the loss of focus caused her to slump across her horse’s mane. Eloria could see the sting of the rope tearing at her skin.

“We’re supposed to be bringing him home!”

“What does it *look* like I’m doing?” Elderberry reared in the air again. Eloria reached out and braced the older girl before she could tumble into the snow.

“It *looks* like you're torturing him. We’re not poachers!”

Valorae grunted and pulled back with all her strength. The horse stepped back with her weight. “Well, duh! I just *rescued* him from poachers.”

Eloria’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“He had wandered too close to the wrong group of humans and didn't shift fast enough. They had him netted like some fish and were building a pyre by the time I got there.”

Eloria paled. “They were going to...”

Valorae shook her head. “Trust me, I didn't wait around to find out. I cut the ropes as quickly as I could, but I guess he was so scared he didn't recognize me. He took off as soon as he was free. I can't get him to come close enough to calm him down.” She yanked the rope again, but Eloira could see the knot around his foot beginning to fray.

She frowned. “If I help you, will you put in a good word for me with the queen?”

Valorae blinked. “What do you mean?”

The other girl shrugged. “You found him. The post rightfully belongs to you.”

“If Lucia doesn’t skewer me for going against orders first.”

Eloria shook her head. “She won’t. But don't think this means I'm going to make it easy on you, choosing your first in command. Just because Zayia has more years on me…”

Valorae smiled. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

Eloria nodded and wrapped her hands around the rope. “Together?”

“Together.”