

Nadia: A Peaceful Protest
Chapter 4

Spending the night by Zsanette's fire gave Nadia flashbacks of her childhood. Stories told around the very same fire, the laughter of her childhood friends and the smell of roasting chestnuts filled the hazy dreams that she kept phasing in and out of. Many a time she woke up, expecting to see herself surrounded by Traveller children sleeping on the same straw cot, but finding only Zsanette curled up in her own bed in the corner.

When she found herself wide awake, she noticed that the fire had died down to embers. She tried to remember the dream that had woken her up this time, but couldn't remember it. Then she realized it wasn't a dream but a sound- a soft creaking, like a door closing. *Someone is sneaking into the house!* Her thoughts immediately went to the dark creatures she had seen in Sandor's tea cup. Holding her breath, she felt her way in the darkness towards Zsanette's bed. Her fingers followed the wooden wall, and after what seemed like hours, finally touched fabric. She dared not call Zsanette's name, for fear of alerting whoever might be in the house. *Pillow, she felt. Blanket. Mattress. More blanket. Where is Zsanette?*

Then it dawned on her that the closing door hadn't let anyone in. It had let Zsanette out.

Nadia wrapped her shawl around her shoulders and ran outside. It was not difficult to spot Zsanette walking in the distance, a small dark figure in the dying moonlight, moving against the light dusting of fresh snow. Nadia went after her, stepping briskly but silently. She wanted to find out where her friend was going at this hour, but she had a feeling Zsanette might not appreciate being followed.

Zsanette led her out of the town, across the field where the Travellers used to camp, and into the surrounding woods. Nadia winced. It did not take a Traveller's wisdom to know that walking into the forest alone, at night, was a bad idea. There could be anything out there. Bears, bandits, even hungry wolves this time of year. *What is she thinking?*

Her thoughts were answered shortly, when Zsanette stopped in a spot where the trees were so close together that no snow had reached the ground. Nadia let out a faint gasp. There were several figures lying motionless among the tree roots. Oddly enough, she smelled no blood, and the bodies appeared untouched by the scavengers of the forest. She saw Zsanette bend down by the figures, then heard a faint rustling sound behind her. Startled, Nadia turned around sharply, only to notice that her shawl had caught on a branch. As she turned, the branch came loose with a snap.

At the same instant, Zsanette's eyes snapped towards the sound. When she saw Nadia, the cautious expression on her face morphed into one of annoyance. "I *thought* I had made a quiet exit," she commented. "Perhaps I'm getting old."

"Travellers sleep with their eyes closed and their ears open," Nadia replied.

"You shouldn't have come," said Zsanette. "You are putting yourself in danger that is not meant for you."

"Danger meant for my tribe is danger meant for me," Nadia retorted.

"Your tribe is lost," Zsanette whispered.

"Which means my friends are my tribe now." Nadia walked up to the bodies lying on the ground. "These men are the hunters, aren't they? They are Sandor's family."

Her friend nodded in silence, scanning the darkness around them with her eyes.

“What happened to them? They seem to have no wounds. Nothing I’ve ever seen can kill a person like that.”

Zsanette put a hand on her shoulder, not taking her eyes off the surrounding darkness. “Nadia, there is more to this world than what you see every day.” Her breathing was shallow, like a rabbit sniffing the air for the scent of a predator. “And in this case, it’s not anything you *want* to see.”

Nadia shook her head. “Then explain this much to me: what can kill a living thing without damaging the body?”

“Something so evil that it doesn’t have to touch the body. Something that can kill simply by corrupting the soul until it disintegrates, like living flesh that rots away from disease.”

Nadia shuddered, her eyes wide with horror. “That’s the most awful end I’ve ever heard of.”

Zsanette shook her head. “Not as awful as the alternative. Death, at least, *is* an end. Those that survive get to live with a soul tainted by darkness. They become an empty shell, a shadow of the person they once were, vicious and unable to think or feel. A beginning that’s worse than the end, if you ask me.”

“But who... what is the source of this evil?”

“It’s a demon called Dolgrath. He’s responsible for all of this.” Zsanette motioned towards the bodies. “He can control the shadows, and the forest gives him shadows aplenty. I’ve been suspecting his presence here for a long time, but now I *know* he’s here. And there’ll be no peace for the town until he’s driven away. First it will be the hunters and the children that play by the edge of the forest. Then his minions will start spreading the shadows closer and closer into town. They will not rest until they tear it apart and devour it with their darkness.”

The more Nadia heard, the more she was full of questions. “How do you know all this, Zsanette? And who will drive this demon away? What’s...”

She never got to finish asking. Zsanette grabbed her arm suddenly. “Listen... Did you hear that rustle?”

Nadia listened. It was the same sound she had heard behind her, when she had inadvertently revealed herself to Zsanette. “It’s the wind,” she whispered, but immediately knew that she was mistaken. She felt no breeze. Not a leaf moved around them.

“They are here,” said Zsanette hastily. “I can see them moving in the distance.”

Nadia looked around, her eyes used to the darkness by now. “I see nothing but shadows,” she said, though they did appear to be moving. An unsettling notion.

“Exactly. Shadow’s Hands, they are called. They are the survivors I was telling you about. If they are here, Dolgrath can’t be far. We have to leave, Nadia. Right now.” She broke into a brisk walk, pulling Nadia along by her sleeve. “We have to get away from town as fast as we can. If we are lucky, they will follow us, and leave the townspeople alone.”

“What is it that they want, anyway?” Nadia asked anxiously, struggling to catch up with her friend’s steps.

“They want the Dreamweavers,” Zsanette breathed. “They want me.”