

❧ PROLOGUE ❧

BOEDDA

Boedda, do not dally, Odessa Helipatilliga's voice rang clear as a chime in the sprite's head. If you do not find one we seek soon, you shall be left searching alone.

The final word echoed inside Boedda's skull for a few moments, but he persisted in dancing joyfully along the wet rooftop, his bare feet splashing amid the cold puddles of melted snow. "Divine Mistress, it is already too late," he responded aloud, as if she were physically there beside him, his sleek voice permeating the soft *click-click-click* his toe-claws made while he danced. "Boedda shall be sufficient alone."

He could easily imagine the dark expression on her face—but he was not lying to her, and she had to know it. When Odessa cast the Silver Door three days earlier, she sent him through the portal while the city of Romantiqua was blanketed with a gown of ankle-deep snow. Then, the volume of her voice had pained him as he ran through dark alleyways and traversed rooftops of this ancient city, futilely

searching for the unfortunate one who unwittingly carried the magical relic inside of him. But Romantiqua sat beside the Great Sea, in a clime unfamiliar to the harshness of northern winters, and the warmth beneath its streets and within its edifices contained the snow into a few remaining drifts.

Odessa's power was a slave to the caprice of nature, hinging on the rigor of winter precipitation. Her voice was substantially weakening with each passing moment. *Do not make a mockery of my will, little sprite. Long after my voice is silent shall I be watching you.*

The suspicion was obvious in the nuance of her voice, bringing to Boedda's mind the dark gaze of her ice-blue eyes, half the world away. She knew how much he despised her, and how he wished to be utterly rid of the omnipresent whisper-bond, the hated link between them she had placed in his mind so many centuries ago.

His stick-thin legs carried along his round torso and large head as he ran, belying a supernatural lack of weight in his body. He moved along with a bizarre lack of momentum, hopping to the next rooftop and landing on both feet without any shift in balance. He opened his huge round eyes and scanned the flat surface of the rooftop, showing Odessa through his eyes that he was performing the task she'd laid out for him. Even in the dark cold of night, the temperature had already climbed too high to keep the few drifts of remaining snow from slowly melting away.

Buffoon, there is no time for this. I cannot wait any longer--not when we are so close!

He shrugged his shoulders, than cast his skinny arms up in frustration and began to run once more. As if he had an ally in the clouds themselves, the heavens opened up and cold rain started to pour. The water that landed on Boedda's skin restored its shiny luster and deepened its blue, each beating drop sending waves of pleasure through his body. He could not stifle a laugh at his good fortune. "Divine Mistress," Boedda said with a smirk. "I have some distressing news."

He immediately felt the anger and frustration coursing through the whisper-bond. She all too aware of the rain, and she caused a wave of pain to explode in his head, making him grimace. She was reminding him of her power before there was not enough snow near enough to him for her to do anything else. To underscore her urgency, she spoke her last command: *Find the shard and bring it to one of the mountains in the north, where winter never dies. You will be forgiven then. Curse this city and its pitiful snow!*

Her voice was dwindling quickly, as the drifts of snow nearest him vanished in the torrents of rain that were now falling around him. "Bring the shard where? Mistress, I fear I no longer understand you. Who would you have me curse?" Boedda smiled at his ingenuity and deception, and leapt to another rooftop.

Idiot—I know you hear me. I have yet many punishments you cannot conceive. Find the shard and do as I say and then you are free to roam the earth. Cross me, and...wait...

Boëdda realized the foolishness of his deception at once, but he was happy the moment her threat ended. He had confused her words in his head with what his ears would have heard. When the force behind her words weakened, it was not the same as silence and it was not ended. Now, he could do what he wanted, and see what and hear what and go where he wanted without her demonic rant going with him. The whisper-bond between them was never gone, but wherever she had lost her power, as happened wherever there was no snow, she could neither see with his eyes nor hear with his ears. She could not cause him any more pain.

Boedda was weary of the pain. After eight centuries of servitude to his Mistress, he could not remember any previous existence. He was immediately grateful for the respite from her machinations, and he stopped running to gather strength from the falling rain.

The rooftops in this quarter of Romantiqua were generally flat and bare save the occasional stovepipe gasping thick smoke from the hearths within warming the denizens below. Boedda found a large stone block on this roof that appeared to have been left there inadvertently by the builders centuries ago, and there he sat, dangling his spindly legs and opened his eyes and mouth to the torrent. But after a moment, he tiniest voice rang in his head and his stomach knotted one final time.

Fortune is kind to you. The one we seek is very close to you, probably below you. I can sense the shard he

possesses—only a shout away from you. Your duty is simple... What are you doing? I cannot see...

Finally, her voice faded into nothing, and Boedda knew for certain Odessa was gone. He was getting very old and careless. He had defied Odessa while she could still be aware of his actions. He considered briefly that if he dallied a bit longer that she would forget her anger once he returned with the object of her desire. But such thoughts were foolishness, her memory was long, while his was short, and her anger was endless and it held no bounds. She would still know to punish him eventually, no matter how distracted she was to have the final shard.

Still, she had promised his freedom, and Boedda knew that promises could not be broken once they were made. Whatever punishment she could have in mind for him, it could not possibly counter freedom, whatever freedom held for him. He would keep his end of the bargain. He would merely do it in his way and time.

Boedda felt the raindrops beat against his skin, the sensation revitalizing him. He looked at the vibrant blue that was returning to his harms and hands, the gray pallor of deprivation nearly vanished. For the previous twenty-one years, Odessa kept him locked him in a box, not allowing him any water except for the saline liquid from the North Sea, barely even quelling his scathing thirst. He was a lake-sprite, a lagasiddi, and water was his entire reason for being.

He opened his huge mouth wide to take more rainwater in, and gurgled a laughed as he gulped it down. When Boedda's lips were at their full extent,

his head appeared cleaved in two from ear to ear, the top half attached like a box-top to the bottom. Had a human been on the roof that moment, the pink-skinned creature would run in fright, not speak of it to anyone and attempt to forget it even saw the spectacle. Humans lived their lives blind to the existence of creatures of the Higher Orders, comfortable in their simple and mundane definitions of the world around them.

In the human's defense, Boedda thought with a rare empathy, it was easy for them to ignore his kind. Whoever was left of the Higher Orders remained securely hidden in the far reaches of Earth and in the darkest shadows of depths beneath the ground, beyond the limits of mankind's exploration.

In actuality, Boedda had only a vague recollection of his appearance, although he had opportunity enough to see his visage those times that he was freer to roam his Mistress's lair, for Odessa kept mirrors by the thousands spread out in every corner of her domain. But Boedda loathed mirrors. They created all sorts of problems.

His focus turned to the unfortunate individual somewhere below him and to his responsibility to Odessa. Although the sprite had gone through this task many times before, the duty of luring a human into Odessa's sphere of power never got any easier. Unlike Odessa, the sprite had no power over a human's will. He had to create the illusion that he was one of them and with guile and cunning he had to convince them to travel somewhere that Odessa could reach them.

The rain let up some, and Boedda stood and walked to the edge of the rooftop. Here he watched small groups of people gathering in the city's forum, some braving the elements for their rallies or meetings, more than a few huddling beneath a small number of open-air tents erected for the weather. He had been to this city hundreds of times over the years. Its people were notoriously selfish, arrogant, and self-gratifying. Many of those unfortunate enough to become embedded with a shard found Romantiqua an easy place to blend in.

The Empire that the city governed was once huge and vast, spreading out from one end of the Great Sea to the other. Nowadays it was the seat to a small kingdom that barely spanned half of the peninsula on which it called home. The city had always been another world in itself, however. No matter the size of country it governed, Romantiqua's people thought themselves the center of the world, leaving its walls only to spend a day in the country or by the sea and never further than a horse could travel in half a day.

In spite of the dark, Boedda's vantage afforded him a view of much of the forum, three city blocks away. As the rain began to pour again, he could see the elite running alone or in small groups in the hopes that the rain would not overly soak them give them a shivering illness. Their clothing had changed from the last several times he was here, and the time before, although they all continued to dress in a uniform fashion. Simple white togas of yesteryear appeared to have evolved into an elaborate ensemble. This consisted of a black angular over a loose-fitting

frock that easily disguised the poor physiques of these members of the non-working class, while on their heads they wore the silliest of boxy hats. There was an eternal commonality in the designs, and with his keen eyesight he was able to distinguish colors and designs of elaborate silvery edging on the capes, showing that some of these belonged to the same family, political entity or guild. Some wore brightly colored but damp, drooping feathers in their hats—these were likely the senators or whatever passed for governing officials in this day. It was, for the most part, the ones without the feathers who dared the run; the older, graying and cane-bearing feather-capped women and men hid in the dark shadows adjoining buildings, dry and protected, lest disease bring them to an untimely end.

He raised his arms to the heavens to praise the rain once more, and he rejoiced in his momentary freedom. The rain told him that spring was ready to arrive in this land. Boedda undoubtedly had at least a full three seasons to perform his act, most of a year before his Mistress would be able to retrieve him. He would therefore take his time and enjoy himself. Let the Mistress be anxious. For no matter how much the capture of this last shard would please her, she would still punish him at his freedom's end. He already knew that he could not escape it. She hated him and took every opportunity to remind him that he broke the mirror and only he could retrieve the shards for her.

He had known by the tremors running through the foundations of her frigid lair that she had determined

the locale of the final one, her shouts of malicious joy shaking ice from the walls. Only moments later she was coaxing Boedda in soft, silky tones, letting him know she was about to free him from the iron shackles and the tiny box she kept behind her throne. He had not wanted to listen to her lies and remained crouched against the back, as far from the grip of her talon-like nails as he could be. Her desire for the mirror's completion must have softened her, for she had promised him anything if he would just retrieve this one last shard. Boëdda only wanted freedom from Odessa, and told her so. "So it will be," she had responded, grabbing his neck with the precision of a farmer selecting a prize goose and yanking him out of his imprisonment, while the shackles at once fell apart. But even as Boëdda struggled to stand on his weak and unused legs, she began to boil with fury. By the time she had cast him through the portal to Romantiqua, she was her old miserable self.

But Boedda did not wish to think of her at all. Unless fortune was unkind, the sprite would not have to bear her scrutiny until the following winter. He free to take carefully plan, take his time with the human and make a game of the deception. He would savor the progress, earn the human's trust, and lead it through all sorts of treachery.

He reached his arms down the side of the building, spreading his fingers apart to cling to its holes and crags, and crawled down the parapet like a spider, searching the telltale glow that only a being of the Higher Orders could sense. The shard resonated a

melody that Boedda felt in his mind's eye, its mercurial tune growing stronger as he closed in on it. He looked through a window now, briefly admiring the flat glass that sealed it to the elements, a novelty since the last time he had been to this ancient city. It was not perfectly clear, flawed as it was with bubbles and misshapen by the process of manufacture, but it was transparent enough for Boedda to see a nude matron within, her pale, thick body lying amidst a pile of pillows, holding up a chalice in some toast.

But the matron did not set the chalice down, and Boedda could see a look of strain on her face—the shard? No, he realized as he dared move his head further over the window, it was a cramp in her arm for holding the chalice in the same position for too long. Her pained salute was being performed for a painter, an obese man, who was studiously taking the color and lines of this matron's body and transforming them on his canvas into a colorful but gruesome rendering. His features were dark, he was bald atop his crown and the remaining halo of thick black hair was tied back in a braid. His robes were gaudy and bright, and he was so meticulous in his strokes as he brushed paint on his brush to avoid adding the dismal colors of his painting to the crimson and teal of his dress. This was not a man of Romantiqua, but a Farsian from the desert regions much further to the east. A trim beard on his chubby, olive face surrounded a tiny mouth its corners drawn down in a severity of emotion. This was the man Boedda sought—even if the sprite had not discerned the secret glow of the shard in the man's heart, the

intensity of the frown on the painter's face belied the persistent misery of hopelessness.

A sudden squeal turned Boedda's attention toward the matron again. The chalice slipped from the woman's hand and her gaze was focused on him, the bizarre face in the window. The sprite grinned and retreated from view as she pointed. He had the knowledge he needed.

The language of *Romantiqua* had changed sufficiently to be difficult for him, but Boedda understood enough of the words and expression in the ensuing argument to know that the painter was more concerned with the wine spilled on the pillows than whatever the matron imagined she saw. The window opened and Boedda shrunk against the wall, but the Farsian painter's head barely emerged before the man closed the window again and shouted angrily at the matron in what sounded like a demand for her departure. The matron remained surprisingly silent, she was likely so unaccustomed to being treated in this manner that she had no response save to obey the painter.

Moments later, the slam of the door and the ensuing silence told Boedda the matron was gone. He peered in the window again and a smile formed on his face. The painter had already returned to his easel and was performing the final touches of the matron without her present. The likeness on the canvas was obscene. The figure was streaked with heavy greens and puce, and appeared superficially less like the matron than a flesh-eating phantasm. But Boedda immediately recognized some part of the woman's

essence in the ghastly rendering—that part of her soul not normally visible to the mundane eyes of humans.

The painter was furiously completing the rendering while Boedda looked on with fascination. Around the room were other, similarly bizarre renderings—the matron must have had full knowledge of how she would inspire him.

Boedda could not stop laughing at the irony. The sprite had almost always found those possessed by the shard lying in gutters, locked in institutions, or secluded in mountainside hovels. Here was the final shard, the last piece of Odessa's puzzle, possessing a man who seemed to have thrived because of its influence. Boedda laughed so hard he nearly lost his grip and fell off of the side of the building.

He calmed himself for a moment lest he give himself away. The painter had not yet seen him outside, but it was time for Boedda to retreat once more into the shadows and plot the painter's downfall. The sprite had plenty of time to create his own masterpiece, a great weaving of treachery and deception. He was truly going to savor it.