



Ash Leigh

# TRAITOR

A Tainted Age



*Delle has never had anything against secrets. At least, not until recently. Maybe that was because she didn't realize just how many secrets there are – or who has been hiding them. Until Attis was taken, it never occurred to her that she wasn't the only one with something to hide.*

*Delle is determined to pick up the hunt for her best friend once again – alone. Of course, Keel and Jag ruin her plans by inviting themselves along. As if that isn't bad enough, Magely, the youngest of the Micah children, has decided that she's coming too. Teamwork has never been one of Delle's greatest strengths, so the fact that she agrees to cooperate with a purple-haired Tinker and a mysterious Rebel officer named Mona is a sign that her desperation to find Attis has reached new heights. With the help of one of Delle's least favorite Provincials, she has the chance to finally meet him face-to-face. There's just one problem now. A traitor is in their midst – and if she doesn't figure out who it is, not only will the lives of her caravan be at risk, but the lives of every Taint in the country...*

## Traitor: A Tainted Age

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**TRAITOR**  
**A TAINTED AGE**

**Ash Leigh**

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# CHAPTER ONE

I fastened my necklace and scrutinized my reflection in the mirror. The little electrobullet hanging an inch below my collarbone was supposed to be a constant reminder from one of my old friends about the supposed power I kept hidden inside, but lately it had been acting like a trigger for my most terrifying memories instead.

Every time I looked at the bullet I could feel my heartbeat quicken and I could see Attis, my best friend, falling to the ground. I could feel the panic, thinking that he was dead all over again. The bullet he had been shot with was only a slightly newer model of the one I wore. For days I had thought my best friend and the leader of our tiny caravan was gone forever, but I had been wrong. Attis was alive. We had made that discovery months ago, but we still hadn't found him.

I leaned against the sleek dresser and stared at my hands, glaring at the useless, ugly scar I'd gotten during my last attempt to find him. Since then I had added an irritating ex-Provincial boy to my caravan, been adopted for reasons of legality and protection by one of the richest families in the country, and was currently living in New Capil, the capital province, right beneath The Eye that wanted so badly to exterminate everyone like me. I shut my eyes tightly for a moment before lifting my head and giving my appearance a gloomy once-over. There was no doubt that my life had changed. I had to admit that some of it hadn't been all that bad, but now everything was about to change again in a much less pleasant way.

A knock at the door interrupted my thoughts and I turned around as Lasey poked her head into my room. She had been a Gypsy too, before the Micahs had adopted her, but with her long, pin-straight hair and flawless features no one would believe she had ever been anything but a Provincial.

“The party is starting,” she said with a wink. “Just wanted to let you know.”

I tried to smile even though I could feel my stomach twist in on itself. “Thanks, I’ll be right up.”

She left and I surveyed myself in the mirror one more time. As far as I could recall, this was only the second time I had ever worn a dress. I didn’t enjoy it, but this was a birthday party and the Micahs were weird about those sorts of things. I would stomach it for them. It was the least I could do considering the news I had for them.

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I surveyed the room silently from where I stood by the kitchen bar. The stark white furniture had all been pushed to the corners and the first song had just begun playing; it wasn’t Provincial music though. I knew this instantly because my ears weren’t ringing and my knees didn’t feel like they were about to vibrate into jelly. This music was nice to listen to.

The birthday girl was already twirling around with Sacrif in front of the many enormous windows overlooking a province pulsing with bright lights and far less wholesome parties against a solid black sky. Sacrif and Appy were good parents. I was going to miss them.

A touch at my hip distracted me and I looked down at the little girl requesting my attention. Steffy was looking up at me expectantly – well I guess “looking” wasn’t the right word considering she couldn’t actually see, but she obviously wanted something. I looked curiously at the older girl standing behind Steffy.

“Steff wanted you,” Nanda said apologetically. “I thought it would be okay to let her out of lessons early so she could be part of the dancing up here.”

I used to find it ironic that the oldest of the Micah children felt closest to Steffy, the youngest of my caravan. In fact, I couldn’t think

of any time in the last two weeks when I hadn't seen Steffy's little brown hand clasped firmly in Nanda's slim white one. Sometimes I felt a twinge of jealousy in my stomach, like some insect gnawing away at my guts. I had to remind myself about Nanda's past. Her little brother died several years ago, so her attachment to Steffy as a stand-in younger sibling made sense.

"Okay," I said, smiling at Nanda and trying my best not to appear apprehensive. "The first song hasn't even finished yet, so I guess you're right on time."

Nanda and I weren't close, but to be fair she wasn't close to anyone except Appy.

I picked up Steffy and plopped her on a stool so we were closer to eye level.

"Hey kid."

She smiled and I once again found it hard to believe that this little five-year-old was the same baby Attis and I had rescued from a troop of Runners so many years ago. She had recently lost her first tooth and two more seemed nearly ready to come out as well. I had to wonder what he would think of her now. He had never seen Steffy without dirt all over her and her hair standing in all directions. Come to think of it, he had never seen me without dirt on my face either. He'd be shocked to see me now. I self-consciously adjusted my dress. The music swelled and I had to force my thoughts away from Attis.

"I like your party dress, Steff," I complimented her. "It's beautiful."

Secretly, I thought Provincial fashion was ridiculous. There were two kinds of acceptable dresses as far as I could tell. The kind with an inconveniently long, draping skirt like I was wearing, or the kind with a skirt that stuck out in all directions like a wheel stuck around someone's waist. Both of these styles were lined with tiny strings of different colored lights – because they weren't already attention-catching enough.

Steffy shook her head, making her tight little curls bounce all over the place, pointing to the colorful decorations on her head.

"The ribbons are nice too," I assured her. "Are you having fun?"

Steffy nodded, a little grin lighting up her face.

“Are you excited to give Magely her birthday present?” I prompted.

Another excited nod.

“And you know how old she’s turning?” I asked slyly, wondering if Steffy had actually learned anything about numbers from all that tutoring the Micahs were providing.

She signed the number fourteen, to which I responded enthusiastically, clapping my hands because I knew Steffy would clap her hands too and I loved that. Right on cue, the speakers flawlessly transitioned into the next song and, before I knew it, eighteen-year-old Fil appeared, bowing to Steffy even though she couldn’t see him.

“Steffy, will you please dance with me?” he asked dramatically. “I don’t know what I’ll do if I’m turned down by such a bewitching young lady.”

I rolled my eyes and allowed Fil to steal away my little girl with nothing but a quick wink in my direction and a nod at something over my shoulder. I frowned at these signs of conspiracy and whirled around to see Keel standing behind me. I felt my breath catch, which was ridiculous because Keel and I had known each other for several months now and had escaped several near-death experiences together. I should’ve been bored by his existence at this point – or at least accustomed to it. I knew my current reaction to him was probably due to the fact that he had kissed me a few weeks ago and I had responded by running away and crying in the elevator like the tough Gypsy woman I am. The tension between us might also have been due to the fact that I hadn’t spoken more than five words to him since that night.

“Hi Delle,” he said softly, watching me cautiously, like he wasn’t sure if I was going to run away crying again or simply turn my back like I’d been doing since the initial running-and-crying incident. “Will you please dance?”

I fully intended to say no, but instead I heard myself say “okay” as he took my hand and led me onto the dance floor.

“You look beautiful,” he offered.

I frowned. “You’ve seen this dress before. I wore it to the Provincial party the night Steffy was kidnapped.”

“I wasn’t talking about the dress,” he corrected, looking at me with those piercing grey eyes, probably thinking I would swoon like I’m sure all the Provincial girls used to.

I scowled as he took my hand and led me around the floor to the music.

“So are we ever going to talk about what happened?” he asked after several moments of silence. “Or are you going to keep pretending I don’t exist?”

“I think Steffy’s calling,” I said quickly, trying to pull away, hoping at least a light joke might turn the direction this conversation was taking.

He pulled me back in one motion and laughed. “Steffy’s mute. Besides, she’s having a great time dancing with Fil and you don’t want to ruin that.”

I sighed and resigned myself to the dance. After another moment of silence, he pulled me closer and lowered his voice.

“You’ve been avoiding me,” he accused.

“No I haven’t,” I snapped, even though it was a lie because I had absolutely been avoiding him.

“Yes you have.”

“Why would I be avoiding you?” I asked, doing my best to sound skeptical.

“I keep asking myself the same question and I have to wonder if it’s because I kissed you. Although when I trapped you last week to ask if that was the problem you frantically assured me it wasn’t.”

“I wasn’t frantic,” I shot back, wondering again why I had ever agreed to let this Provincial tag along with us.

He rolled his eyes and said, “My mistake then. I guess you just *looked* frantic.”

I rolled my eyes and in my peripheral vision I could see Jag – the quietest member of our caravan – and Magely whispering to each other, watching us in what was probably supposed to be a discreet way.

“Are you scared because I kissed you?” Keel asked bluntly.

My mouth dropped open as I struggled to come up with a cutting reply.

“Why would that scare me?” I asked much too angrily.

“You’re forcing me to guess, since you won’t tell me what’s wrong,” he finally said, the frustration finally making its way into his voice. “If you’re upset because I kissed you –”

“That’s not it,” I interrupted, fighting the panic rising in my throat. I was still trying to convince myself that the kiss wasn’t a big deal and I didn’t need him ruining all my hard work.

The frustration in his expression was instantly replaced with bitter disappointment.

“We’re being watched,” I pointed out, hoping to distract him.

He raised an eyebrow but followed my gaze when I nodded at Jag and Magely. Jag caught my eye and smirked. Magely instantly turned away when she realized we were watching them in return.

Keel pulled me closer and swirled us around so that they couldn’t see my face anymore. He dropped his voice so our eavesdroppers had no chance of overhearing.

“Can we please be friends again?” he asked, ducking his head to look at me with his light eyes, hopeful like the sky after a storm.

“We were friends before?” I responded dryly.

He smiled ruefully and shrugged. “I like to think so. We were at least getting there.”

I raised an eyebrow at him in response.

He sighed then and squeezed my hand. “I just want to help, but you have to tell me what’s wrong.”

I hesitated, thinking of all the things I wanted to tell him – to tell *anyone* – but never would.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” I finally muttered.

“You don’t want to talk about it *right now*?” he clarified.

“I don’t want to talk about it right now,” I echoed firmly.

“Later then?”

“Okay,” I heard myself agree, even though I had no intention of doing so.

I was suddenly exhausted as I thought about the announcement I had to make soon. I rested my head on Keel’s shoulder out of pure

fatigue, instantly realizing my mistake and trying to convince myself to move. The convincing didn't work though because Keel's shoulder was both comfortable and an excellent hiding place.

Honestly, I was scared of the decision I would have to share with the family who had so kindly adopted me and my caravan. For all his faults, Keel was one of the only people I wasn't afraid of disappointing with my decision. He would probably be upset, but he would understand. Jag was a different matter altogether. I was already predicting the backlash my announcement would incite.

"Okay," Keel said quietly. He slid his arm further around my waist, letting me hide for a little while longer.

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I helped Appy clear away the dishes from breakfast the next morning and box up the leftovers for another day. As far as I knew, the Micahs were the only Provincials who bothered to keep their leftovers and were probably the only ones who would be healthier if they didn't. Considering how burnt these particular leftovers were, I doubted they would ever be finished.

Magely was sitting at the table chatting with Jag while everyone else was slowly drifting off to their own activities. If I was going to talk to the entire family, it needed to be now.

"Appy, do you think I could talk to everyone for a second?" I asked quietly as one of the kitchen drawers slid back into place.

The tall blonde woman must have noticed something unusual in my voice because she turned around and gave me a searching look. I was alarmed to see tears forming, accentuating the blueness of her eyes, but she quickly blinked and turned away again leaving me to wonder if I had just hallucinated the tears.

"Of course, Delle."

I rubbed my hand nervously and followed her out of the kitchen, around the bar, to the couches that Lasey and Sacrif were pulling back into place. Steffy was bouncing up and down beside Nanda while Keel leaned against the window with his arms crossed. He was already watching me, like he knew what I was going to say. I

studiously ignored him as Appy gathered her family around then sat down beside Sacrif, waiting expectantly for me to speak.

I tried to remember the smooth opening I had practiced for this little announcement, but suddenly my mind went blank. I looked around at all of the people who had welcomed me into their lives and dreaded that I was about to give them the impression that I was ungrateful. Before I could think about it anymore I took a quick breath and forced myself to speak.

“I’m leaving.” I guess I expected them to be surprised, but instead they all looked pretty unmoved. “And apparently you already know that,” I said dubiously, realizing then that at least half of my worrying had been purposeless.

“You’ve been acting weird lately,” fourteen-year-old Jorge commented. “More than normal.”

“We knew you wouldn’t stop looking for Attis,” Magely piped up, giving me an apologetic look. “We were just waiting for you to decide when to start searching again.”

“I should never have stopped,” I admitted grimly, sitting down on the arm of Fil’s chair.

“To be fair, a building did collapse on top of you three weeks ago,” Keel said, raising an eyebrow. “I think Attis would understand the concept of recovery time.”

I glared at Keel but was interrupted when Jag’s voice cut through my irritation, sounding both offended and frustrated. “Were you going to consult me at all before we left?”

I swallowed. I hated when Jag was upset with me. Up until recently he had devoted all his time to honing his sulking skills but he was rarely ever angry. He had grown up a lot since Attis was taken. He’d even gotten taller. And he had more opinions.

“I didn’t consult you because you’re not coming,” I said with an expression as neutral as I could manage. “And neither is Steffy or Keel.”

Jag’s lips pursed and I knew we were going to have a loud conversation about my decision as soon as this little family meeting was over. I didn’t even bother to look at Keel, but I could sense his tension and the fact that he remained silent gave me a good idea

about how he felt. Maybe I was wrong in assuming he wouldn't judge me too harshly for this.

"I was thinking," I began with a wince, turning to Sacrif and Appy. "That Jag and Steffy could stay with you until I get back."

"Of course," Appy said instantly, flicking back her perfect hair. "You know that you're all welcome here as often as you want to be here."

"Thank you," I said, hoping my sincerity was evident.

"Do you know where you're going?" Sacrif asked abruptly.

I nodded. "I think so, but I'll need a way to get there."

I could feel the tense energy of preparation starting to build in the room as Appy fixed me with a steady expression and asked, "Are you sure you want to run again?"

I looked back at her, meeting her blue eyes with my own even though her expression was intense and her concern was palpable.

"Running is something I'm good at," I answered coolly, trying to smile like I wasn't nearly as scared as I felt. "Besides, this time I'm not just running. I'm chasing something too."

## CHAPTER TWO

“You’re not going without me,” Jag said stubbornly, for what felt like the twentieth time.

“Once I find Attis we’ll come straight back,” I said, focusing intently on packing my bag to avoid the penetrating eyes Keel and Jag were training on me.

“Right. *We* will come straight back,” Jag said pointedly.

I shook my head and yanked the drawstring on my bag a lot harder than was necessary.

“Jag,” I began, slinging the bag over my shoulder and turning to face him.

“It’s his choice, Delle,” Keel interrupted firmly.

I groaned. “Keel, *please*.”

“He’s right, Delle,” Jag snapped, fire dancing in his eyes like I’d never seen before. “I can take care of myself – and I need to find Attis. I owe as much to him as you do.”

“What if things were turned around?” Keel asked bluntly. “If I had been taken, you would let Attis go with you to find me.”

“You’re *not* Attis,” I snapped, realizing my voice was a lot harsher than was probably necessary. “And besides that’s not the point.”

Keel clamped his mouth shut and narrowed his eyes.

“I’m coming whether you want me to or not,” Jag interjected. “If you try and leave without us we’ll just follow you.”

“I’m trying to protect you!”

“I don’t need protecting!” Jag shouted, surprising me because I wasn’t sure I had ever heard him yell before except during an emergency. “I’m as much of an adult as you are.”

I groaned and flopped back onto the pillows.

“You can’t do this by yourself, Delle,” Keel said stubbornly.

I covered my face with my hands and stayed silent for another moment. I knew I couldn’t do anything to stop them from coming, but I wanted to. I had thought that maybe if I wanted them to stay behind badly enough, they actually would. Clearly, that wasn’t going to happen.

“Fine,” I finally grumbled, sitting up and removing my hands from my face. “I know you don’t need my permission; I was just hoping to keep as many people out of danger as possible.”

Jag sat down beside me and nudged me with his shoulder. “We don’t need it, but we appreciate it.”

Keel didn’t say anything. He just watched me silently, his arms crossed. I flushed and looked away, standing up suddenly.

“Well, I guess you’d better go pack.”

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We were standing by the lift and had already hugged the majority of the Micahs goodbye when a blonde creature whirled across the room and slid to a halt right in front of us. Magely stood there, hand on hip and bag over shoulder. She looked, in one word, determined. I noted the excited gleam in her eye with a frown.

Before I could open my mouth, she announced, “I’m coming too!”

I felt like someone had just slapped me in the face. I turned to the parents in bewilderment, wondering what they would say to their only blood-related child’s announcement. Appy’s arm was casually linked through Sacrif’s as she calmly met my gaze.

“No,” I sputtered, spinning back towards the eager blonde child. “You can’t come, Magely. I’m sorry.”

“Are you going to try and stop me?” she asked, giggling because she knew I wouldn’t.

“Sacrif, you’re condoning this?” I asked in disbelief.

Sacrif shrugged but I could see the tension at the corners of his mouth. He wasn't happy about this either. Maybe if I had more time I could convince him to stop her.

"I wouldn't say I'm condoning," Sacrif hedged, looking down at his slim wife for affirmation. "But we're allowing it."

"Why?" I asked, glancing over at Magely who was busy making steady eye contact with Jag.

Appy smiled at me and even though I knew she was trying to soothe me, I could see the hint of worry in her eyes as well – not as obvious as Sacrif's, but it was there.

"As a former Gypsy myself, I really don't have a leg to stand on here," she admitted with a rueful smile. "If not for Sacrif, I would probably still be a Gypsy. In some ways it's a lifestyle with more risks, but it has its benefits."

I turned desperately back to Magely, stunned that the only Micah child who had never been a Gypsy was the one who wanted to live like one now.

"Magely?" I asked helplessly, hoping she would see the insanity of her decision.

"I'm coming, Delle," she said firmly. "I want to help."

I looked over at Keel. His expression was neutral but I didn't miss the slightly raised eyebrow. Out of everyone there, it appeared that Keel was the only other one who disapproved of this decision almost as much as I did.

Jag interrupted my mental breakdown. "We need to get going, Delle. You can finish processing on the way."

I scowled at him and looked to Keel, hoping for some support in this. He dipped his head a little, acknowledging the rationale of Jag's suggestion. I sighed and let my crossed arms fall to my sides.

"Alright, okay, fine," I surrendered, ignoring all of the protests bubbling at the forefront of my mind.

Now that another person had announced their departure, the goodbyes had to start all over again. In a way it was nice because it gave me another excuse to hold onto Steffy. Leaving her behind was like tearing a piece out of my heart. I knelt on the ground, hugging her tightly, explaining to her where we were going, that we were

going to bring Attis back. I told her how much I was going to miss her and not to forget me and to learn a lot. I had an awful fear that she wouldn't remember me when we returned. That she would adopt Nanda in my place and I would be irrelevant. I pulled her back into another hug and bit my lip to distract myself from the intangible pain so I wouldn't cry. She patted my hair with her little hands and I let out an unsteady breath, trying to regain my composure.

When I finally released her and stood up, Keel was behind me. He met my eyes and I knew that he understood. Leaving Steffy behind was the hardest thing I'd ever done. I did my best to smile, like I was still confident about this mission, but inside I had never felt so unsure.

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“So where are we going first?” Magely chirped as we entered the lift station and waited in line for an empty lift to reach us.

I was busy keeping an eye out for patrolling Runners who might know about me. I had a secret fear that Presid Bertley, the lead Runner who had given killing me his best effort only a few weeks ago, would appear around every corner and shoot us all dead. I had no time to answer Magely's irritatingly cheerful questions.

“We're going to Kilso,” Jag explained to her quietly. He understood the importance of staying under the radar in a way his new girlfriend clearly didn't. “If Attis isn't in Kilso, he'll probably be in Atken.”

A troop of Runners stepped into line beside us and I felt my breath catch and heart start to race.

“He's not with them,” Keel muttered, understanding my silent anxiety. “As far as they know, we're just a couple Provincials on our way to Kilso for holiday. We have our papers. They have no reason to bother us.”

Despite the truth in Keel's words, I couldn't stop thinking about Presid. The man was crazy. What used to be a distaste for us as Gypsies had turned into an uncontrollable psychotic obsession.

“He won't try anything in public if there's another way,” Keel added under his breath. “I know him. He won't do anything that

could damage his reputation – like attacking a group of defenseless kids.”

Recently I had been able to make myself forget the relationship between Keel and Presid. It was times like this though that I remembered Keel knew our enemy better than anyone. Presid was his father after all. I turned around and looked into Keel’s grey eyes. They were similar to Presid’s in color, but they lacked the manic light of barely contained rage and insanity.

“Legally, we now have every right that a Provincial has,” Keel said with a dry smile.

“We’re hybrids,” Magely chimed in. “Gypsies, but Provincials too.”

“We’re mutts,” I answered wryly, wondering with dread how long it would be before the cruelties of the world took away the blonde girl’s persistent sparkle.

Magely laughed and I couldn’t help smiling. I hadn’t really meant it to be funny, but Magely’s happiness was infectious. I noticed Jag watching Magely with a smile, but I got the distinct feeling he was smiling about something completely different than the rest of us.

Keel muttered my name, disrupting my musings. I looked over at him and his eyes flicked to the group of Runners next to us. They had grown silent. It was time for us to do the same. They didn’t need to learn anything about us. I could only pray they hadn’t already heard too much.

A few minutes later, a lift arrived and we climbed inside. As it ascended out of the station I was grateful for the invisible shield around the open top lift, keeping the cold air and the rain away from us. With four of us it actually became warm relatively quickly and I was forced to take off the high-necked blue jacket the Micahs had given me as a parting gift. Even the fake leather it was made out of felt sticky, like it had already soaked in the water from the air around us. The others did likewise with their outer gear. I eyed Magely’s black undershirt with mild surprise. I had never seen the pale girl in anything but white. Although the black was a stark contrast against the rest of the girl, it did help to rough up the angelic-glow she

seemed to cast wherever she went. Her long shimmery hair was pulled back in a ponytail, helping her to look more like the fourteen-year-old she was. Usually, she looked younger. It was hard to remember that Jag was only a year older than her. I stared at the two for a moment, sitting close to each other and talking in low voices. They were just kids. Did they know they were kids? I didn't when I was fifteen.

"It's weird, isn't it?" Keel said to me in a low voice, nodding at the kids sitting across from us, completely absorbed in each other's existence.

"They shouldn't be here," I muttered. "They're just kids."

Keel shook his head and looked at me with mild amusement. "Not really. Life made them grow up a lot faster than they were supposed to."

"Maybe Jag," I admitted with a sigh. "But Magely was sheltered from it."

Keel chuckled and when I raised an eyebrow at his misplaced display of humor, he explained, "As far as Provincials go, Magely knows more about Gypsies than my father does."

"Yeah, well, your father's an idiot," I said grudgingly.

Keel grinned. "I'd drink to that if there was anything to drink around here. Or eat for that matter."

I got the hint and dug out the bottles of water we had brought then passed the bag of skips around. The skips tasted especially stale after the fresh food we had been eating at the Micahs. I watched apprehensively as Magely bit into one of the crackers for the first time. She showed no sign of discomfort and her delicate little nose didn't even produce one wrinkle despite the fact that I knew skips tasted like dirt. Keel nudged me and I nudged him back. Maybe this kid would be okay after all.

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"Who are we meeting here?" Jag asked skeptically, looking around the restaurant, probably the fanciest one we had ever been inside.

“A contact that Sacrif mentioned a while ago,” I said tersely, doing my best not to look out of place around the brightly colored and stick-thin Provincials strutting about and laughing in their high voices. “I used Appy’s Tab to track her down one day on The Eye’s main database.”

“A Caretaker?” Magely asked curiously.

“Unlike your parents, not a Caretaker,” I corrected. “She doesn’t take Gypsies in and feed them, she’s more like a freelance informant.”

“She?” Keel asked.

I nodded. “She’s meeting us to give us information about Attis’s current location as well as the best way to reach him.”

“She’s just giving this information to us freely?” Magely asked.

“Of course not,” I responded, glancing towards the door as it opened and closed, admitting a woman with pastel purple hair and a dangerously low dress, practically dripping off the arm of a large man in a multi-hued suit.

“How are we paying her?” Keel asked skeptically.

“She heads a research division on Taints,” I said as casually as I could, anticipating the backlash this would receive.

“She’s a Tinker?” Jag asked grimly, his dark eyes flashing unhappily.

I nodded. “Supposedly she’s both respected and shunned by her colleagues for certain experimental methods of research she uses exclusively.”

“Well that sounds promising,” Magely commented nervously. “What’s a Tinker?”

“Where to start?” I asked dryly, looking at Jag who shrugged in response. “Tinkers are best known for dissecting people with genetic mutations,” I explained shortly.

Magely’s mouth made a small “O” shape as she realized the significance of this.

“Like Delle?” she asked in horror.

I nodded and leaned back in my chair to look at the door again. The woman should’ve already appeared. I was starting to fear that she wouldn’t show up at all. Or worse, that she had sent a troop of

Runners to arrest us and was just biding her time until we left the restaurant.

“So what’s her price then?” Keel asked, trying to make eye contact with me even though I was busy monitoring the door.

“She wants a demonstration of my powers,” I said, doing my best to convince them as well as myself that this wasn’t a terrible idea.

“That’s a terrible idea.”

“You realize that dissection is where all business with the Tinkers eventually ends up?” Jag asked incredulously.

I shook my head. “Not this one. Sacrif is the one who told me about her. I wouldn’t say she’s a friend, but she’s not a direct enemy either. She’s just interested in the science behind how we do what we do. Besides, supposedly some of her methods aren’t technically legal. I doubt she would involve the law in any of this because it would shine a light on that.”

This was a speech I had repeated to myself over and over again since I first sent my message to this mysterious woman. I was trying to make myself believe it. If we were caught, she would be caught too. I had to hope that would be enough to convince her to treat us fairly.

Jag pushed his water glass away and scowled. “I think we should leave.”

“We’re not leaving,” I snapped, knowing this might be our only chance to gather any relevant information about Attis.

“You should have told us about this,” Keel commented, watching me with a strange expression.

“This is the only lead we have,” I insisted, leaning forward, addressing my whole caravan. “If we want to find Attis we need to talk to this woman. This is my risk to take and my choice. If anyone has a serious problem with it, then —”

Suddenly a cool presence at my shoulder warned me to stop talking. I slowly turned around and looked up to find the woman with the purple hair watching me with a sly smile. Her eyes were a startling shade of yellow to match her dress, clearly covered with the fake irises that were so popular among Provincials now.

“I do hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she said in a wispy voice.

“Dr. Reece?” I asked, unable to stop myself from raising an eyebrow at her fluorescent dress.

“Yes. And I assume you are Delle? I might have guessed that blonde child, but she is, after all, a child and I wasn’t under the impression that I was meeting with children,” the woman said with a breathy laugh and toss of her hair. “I’m not meeting with children, am I?”

I simmered and was about to retort when Keel placed his hand briefly on my knee under the table, warning me to stop.

I sighed and gestured to the empty seat, saying, “Please sit down, Dr. Reece.”

Jag kicked the chair out for her rather than getting up and pulling it away from the table. I shot him a look, hoping he would behave himself even though he clearly hated this situation and didn’t approve of my decision. He was clearly still miffed about being kept in the dark.

Dr. Reece slipped into the chair and sipped her water before wrinkling her nose and waving at a server to bring her some sort of alcohol more to her taste.

“Now let’s see,” she began in her mildly croaky voice. “I know one of your names, but I am afraid the rest of us remain estranged from one another.”

“You don’t need their names,” I intervened. “We agreed to an exchange of—”

“Power, my dear,” Dr. Reece said with a tinkling laugh. “Knowledge is power after all and I am exchanging knowledge for a glimpse of your pure power.”

I frowned, wondering how this vague creature was supposed to be one of the smartest humans on the continent. She laughed again, seemingly at nothing, as the server gently placed her curved glass of alcohol on the table.

“Where is the man you came in with?” I asked abruptly, suddenly remembering that she hadn’t come alone.

She raised an eyebrow at me as she sipped her drink. “I left him at the bar, of course. He has no part in this.”

“Who is he?” Keel asked, his eyes glimmering darkly.

She waved a hand dismissively. “You Gypsies, always so distrustful. That man is merely my bodyguard. He accompanies me everywhere as I have made some enemies as of late and require protection.”

“How did you make these enemies?” Keel asked suspiciously.

Dr. Reece rolled her eyes. “My, what hostility. I am not referring to your kind. My enemies are more powerful than that, within the government. There are those who question my research methods and claim I am too lenient with my subjects.”

I squirmed at hearing Taints described as test subjects, but swallowed my discomfort and nudged Keel’s ankle with my toe, indicating that he should shut his mouth. Before I had a chance to open my mouth and try to pursue the topic of Attis, Dr. Reece suddenly seemed to snap to attention. I tensed instantly and followed her sharp gaze to Keel. Now she had the expression of a scientist, focused and alert, far different from her languid expression from a moment before.

“Do I know you?” the woman asked, cocking her head, some of her pastel hair covering her eye as she examined him.

Keel ducked his head and I loudly clattered my plate on the table to divert her attention.

“You’re not here to meet my caravan,” I said sharply. “If you don’t have anything of value to say then we’ll leave right now.”

Dr. Reece flipped her hair out of her face and turned to me with a dry smile. “Or I could call the nearest troop of agents to arrest the Taint travelling through this beloved city.”

I tensed at the threat.

“But then, of course, I wouldn’t have the privilege of seeing your powers at work, so I think I’ll not do that. I’d rather hold to our original agreement, wouldn’t you?”

I pulled my chair closer to the table and crossed my arms, leaning on the table. When I arranged this meeting I knew there could be consequences, but I had already decided they were worth it.

This woman had the answer to the one question that had been consuming me.

“Dr. Reece, where is Attis?”

## CHAPTER THREE

“Well he’s not here, dear,” the neon woman said flippantly, tossing her disturbingly purple hair again.

I felt the gentle pressure of Keel’s hand on my knee again, a warning not to lose it with this frustrating woman.

“Well where is he?” I responded through my teeth.

Dr. Reece smiled at me. “I want to know why this young man is so important to you, dear.”

“He’s lead my caravan for as long as I can remember,” I snapped. “That’s all you need to know.”

“So he’s your friend then?” she said with interest.

Attis’s face flashed in my mind for a moment. I had to get information from this woman. I had to get Attis back. I needed him. He was my best friend.

Suddenly, a light seemed to reach Dr. Reece’s eyes and her smile broadened, stretching across her plastic face.

“No. He’s more than a friend, isn’t he?” she said coyly.

I stared at her, trying to understand exactly what she was implying.

“Come now, dear, you can confide in me. Just a bit of gossip between girls,” she said with a wink. “This Attis is quite dear to you. You love this young man, isn’t that so?”

“He’s my friend,” I responded hotly, trying to stamp down the surge of emotions rising in my throat. “He’s family and we’re just trying to get him back.”

The woman laughed her tinkling laugh and rocked back in her seat like I'd made a fantastic joke. "Oh, he's family is he? Well, that makes your being in love with him much dirtier, doesn't it?"

Keel's hand was on my arm now. I just stared at the woman with the purple hair, watching me with an amused expression. I wanted to declare that I wasn't in love with Attis, but the words wouldn't come. I opened my mouth to try and spit out all the rebuttals I could think of, but I didn't have any. I glanced down at my hands and saw them shaking. I immediately dropped them into my lap. I didn't want it to look like she had struck a chord with me, but she clearly had. It had never occurred to me... Not really.

"May I ask you a question?" a light voice interrupted my frantic thoughts.

I raised an eyebrow at Magely who was looking curiously at Dr. Reece.

Dr. Reece seemed amused. She cocked her head and considered the dreamy-eyed blonde child. I sighed. At this rate, the woman would never take us seriously.

"You're the youngest Micah child, aren't you?" Dr. Reece said, leaning forward and placing her chin on her hand, her long-nailed fingers tapping her lip. "You're just adorable, aren't you?"

"What is your name, Dr. Reece?" Magely asked, sitting up straighter, giving no sign that she felt patronized, although personally, I was insulted on her behalf. "Your first name," she clarified.

The doctor considered her for another moment before sighing and resuming her former posture. "My name is Jayni."

Magely smiled like this was the best name she'd ever heard.

I rolled my eyes and was just about to stop this nonsense when Magely's voice took on a more serious tone.

"Jayni, you didn't come to toy with us," Magely pointed out, meeting the colorful woman's gaze evenly. "Per your agreement with Delle, unless you divulge all relevant information you have, she is under no obligation to display her powers for you. You won't call any agents to your aid, because as soon as they discover that you were voluntarily meeting with us, you too will be under arrest. So,

let's dispense with this meaningless conversation and continue on to the matters we're all here for."

I blinked. The blonde girl sitting so placidly across from me didn't seem capable of reasoning with anyone, much less a woman like Dr. Reece. She had done it though. Magely's words had somehow managed to stop Dr. Reece's never ending stream of pointless words.

Dr. Reece pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at Magely for a moment before sighing and raising a hand in surrender.

"Well now, you children are no fun. Fine then." At this point she turned back to me and sipped her drink again. "What do you want to know, dear?"

"Where," I began frostily. "Is Attis?"

"Currently your friend is here in Kilso, but tomorrow he moves to Laylen," she said calmly, a smile twitching at the corners of her lips, which were painted with the same color as her hair, hinting that she was still thinking about my relationship to Attis.

"Where is he being held in Laylen?"

"I don't know if 'being held' is the right choice of words for —"

"Just answer the question," Jag interrupted.

Dr. Reece sighed dramatically and continued. "Attis will be staying in the Office of Retrieved Commodities."

"Where is that?"

Dr. Reece shrugged. "I'm not one of the many hapless fools who go on holiday in Laylen. In fact, I've never been there, so I don't know where it is. That's something you dears will have to discover for yourself."

"How long will he be in Laylen?"

Dr. Reece shrugged again. "It all depends on how cooperative your friend is. A week at minimum."

"What do they want with Attis?" I asked, voicing the question that had been burning me the most. "Is he imprisoned?"

Dr. Reece laughed again. "My dear, if your Attis was in prison he would be staying in Kilso or Atken, not going to Laylen. There is no prison in Laylen. If they're taking him there they want something special with your special friend."

I silently fumed against her insinuations about Attis and I, but swallowed my pride and tried to think if there was anything else of importance that I should ask.

“Will he be guarded?” I asked, glowering into the brilliant fake-yellow eyes of our doctor.

She grinned at me. “That is just another piece of information I’m not privy to.” Suddenly she clapped her hands and the server walking by immediately set down a glass of murky blue liquid in front of Dr. Reece. She picked it up in two fingers, drained it, and then smiled at me again with her unnaturally white teeth.

“Now then, I have told you everything I know about your young man. I am a scientist, not a politician, therefore I don’t have the clearance to gather any more detailed information than I have already given you.”

I frowned and sat back in my seat.

“I have completed my part of this deal,” the woman said calmly, holding my gaze. “Now, it is your turn.”

\*\*\*

Ten minutes later we were standing in the crumbling basement of an abandoned building. Dr. Reece’s bodyguard waited outside the building upon her request as the colorful woman took out her Tab and opened a new screen, hovering in the air and flickering with its bluish light, waiting to be filled with incriminating information about me. Apparently Dr. Reece was preparing to take notes on what she was about to witness. Keel was concerned that she might try and record a video that showed me using the powers, so I told him to keep Jag and Magely with him and they could watch over her shoulder to make sure she didn’t.

“Whenever you’re ready, dear,” Dr. Reece said in her wispy voice, though the attentive gleam in her yellow eyes made me wonder if she was much smarter than she seemed.

By some weird instinct I looked over to Keel, wanting assurance that I was doing the right thing, not making a terrible mistake. It briefly struck me how strange it was that I wanted Keel’s approval. When our old mentor, Richy, had asked me to let Keel join our

caravan I hated the idea. Somewhere along the way I had come to respect the former Provincial – at least a little bit – even if his father was the person who had ruined my life and taken Attis away.

Keel nodded ever so subtly and I let out a breath I'd been holding. I shut my eyes for a moment, emptying my thoughts and feeling the warm rush of blood through my arms as my fingertips began to tingle like they'd fallen asleep. I opened my eyes and felt my vision tighten as everything around me came into clear focus and the colors became more vibrant.

I lifted a hand and stretched out my fingers, watching as five streams of blue light appeared, curling through the air like smoke. I raised my hand above my head and the lights followed, growing taller. I curled my hand into a fist and the lights swirled around each other, forming a sphere. I tightened my fist as hard as I could and the smoky blue lights condensed and formed what appeared to be a dark glass-like substance before shattering. The shards of the sphere fell to the cracked ground beneath me before dissolving into a fine mist and disappearing altogether. The sharpness of my vision faded back to normal and the pins and needles in my fingers gradually eased until I couldn't feel them at all anymore.

I looked up to find Dr. Reece tapping furiously away on the projected screen of her Tab as Magely stared at me with an awed expression. I had forgotten that she had never seen my powers before. Keel was looking at me with another one of his unreadable expressions. I remembered the unexpected kiss he'd given me and I frowned to conceal the nervous twisting in my stomach. I looked away from him and crossed over to Jag who was quick to step by my side, like I needed some sort of protection. I didn't know why Keel had become such a constant visitor to my private thoughts, but it would be great if that stopped.

We waited for the purple haired woman to finish her typing and when she did she turned to me, intrigued.

“I must say, I've never seen someone with abilities at your level exhibit so much control before. How do you manage to control and suppress the powers as much as you do? And how much energy do

you feel is used up when you use your power? Also can you sustain the second form of those powers for any significant amount of time?"

Jag nudged me and Keel closed in on my other side, probably trying to give me a completely unnecessary warning about the dangers of answering this woman's questions.

I shook my head and beckoned for Magely to join us, leaving Dr. Reece standing several feet away, isolated from us.

"I showed you the powers," I said firmly. "And you gave us the information we needed. This deal is over."

The woman sighed dramatically and rolled her yellow eyes at the ceiling. "Fine, fine. I'll relent for now. But next time I'll be insisting upon some answers, my dear."

"Hopefully there will be no need for a next time," I responded frostily.

We trailed behind the florescent woman as she ascended the crooked stairway. Upon reaching the top of the stairs, she took her bodyguard's arm and clung to him like a wet cloth from that point forward. As we exited the building and turned to part ways, I heard a soft gasp from behind us and whirled around to see Dr. Reece staring at us with a surprised expression. I quickly scanned the area for a sign of anything threatening, but came up blank. I narrowed my eyes suspiciously at the woman.

"You there," she said, fluttering her hand at my caravan. "The attractive dark-haired one."

Keel raised an eyebrow at her and I in turn raised an eyebrow at him.

"What do you want?" he asked warily.

She laughed her obnoxiously high laugh and smiled at him in what was probably supposed to be a charming way. "You're Presid's boy, aren't you?"

My breath caught in my throat and I could feel my hands forming tight fists as I instinctually stepped forward, ready for some sort of fight. This woman was the first person we'd run into who recognized Keel. If she told his father she had seen him here, he would be on us before our lift even made it to Laylen.

“My, I must say, you have his eyes, dear,” she continued with a smug expression.

I glanced over at Keel and noticed that his jaw was clenched. If I felt this sort of anxiety hearing Presid’s name, whatever Keel was feeling was probably much worse.

“Oh don’t worry,” Dr. Reece said breathily, winking at him. “Your father and I are rarely on good terms. I won’t mention our meeting to him. The more trouble I can make for him, the better.”

“Am I supposed to thank you for that?” Keel asked tightly.

Dr. Reece’s bodyguard stepped forward in response to Keel’s threatening tone, but Dr. Reece put a hand on her man’s chest and stopped him with another laugh.

“Well, yes, dear. I certainly think it’s something to be grateful for.” She paused for a moment, watching us with amusement as if enjoying her own private joke.

Without another word, Keel turned to go. I followed him without a moment of hesitation. Usually I was the one who initiated the movement of our caravan, but in this situation I was happy to let him lead.

Dr. Reece’s ringing laugh followed us, haunting us like an obnoxious ghost. Then she was calling after us.

“Life is full of cruel ironies, isn’t it, my dear?”

At this point I wasn’t sure who she was talking to and I didn’t care. We kept walking and we didn’t look back. No one spoke for several seconds before Jag piped up.

“Hey, at least you’re attractive, Keel.”

Keel snorted and I smiled. Magely burst into a fit of childish giggles and Jag put his hands in his pockets, content for the moment in his ability to make Magely laugh.

I let out a deep breath. With Keel’s emotional distress somewhat resolved, I could focus on what we needed to do next. Somehow we had to get to Laylen and infiltrate the Office of Retrieved Commodities. *No problem.*



*Delle has never had anything against secrets. At least, not until recently. Maybe that was because she didn't realize just how many secrets there are – or who has been hiding them. Until Attis was taken, it never occurred to her that she wasn't the only one with something to hide.*

*Delle is determined to pick up the hunt for her best friend once again – alone. Of course, Keel and Jag ruin her plans by inviting themselves along. As if that isn't bad enough, Magely, the youngest of the Micah children, has decided that she's coming too. Teamwork has never been one of Delle's greatest strengths, so the fact that she agrees to cooperate with a purple-haired Tinker and a mysterious Rebel officer named Mona is a sign that her desperation to find Attis has reached new heights. With the help of one of Delle's least favorite Provincials, she has the chance to finally meet him face-to-face. There's just one problem now. A traitor is in their midst – and if she doesn't figure out who it is, not only will the lives of her caravan be at risk, but the lives of every Taint in the country...*

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