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A Small Step

Ada looked around wildly as she was pulled along. The underground river gurgled expectantly from unseen depths below. One push and she would be washed away.

O Mother Levia please, no!

Ada thrashed and writhed. She screeched. Her captor paused to shift his grip on her: a giant arm squeezed tighter around her chest and the fleshy hand blocking her mouth shifted to pinch her nose shut. Her lungs heaved but no air came. Her throat began to burn. In panicking strength, she threw her body this way and that. Her feet kicked the air, bounced against his legs, then found the wall. She pushed off the stones hard.

The man staggered but caught himself. He shook her and a voice rasped into her ear, "Careful or you'll have us both in."

Pulling her closer into his crushing grip, he plodded along the walkway, onwards into the dark, dogged by the rushing voice of the invisible torrent.

I'm going to die down here. I'm going to die. But it's too soon – too soon!

They turned into a large chamber, where a pale gleam of distant daylight was barred by rows of thick columns. Light meant a way to the surface. Ada struggled afresh but could only jerk feebly.

A shadow detached itself from one of the columns. Voices spoke but they were lost in the rushing throb of her ears and the all-consuming burning spreading down inside her chest.

Air...air...she needed...

The giant released her. Ada sank to the ground gasping, her senses reeling.

Before she could get her bearings, something rocketed past her and the giant crashed down with an angry yell. A fresh pair of hands scooped Ada up and tossed her sideways, sending her flying like a rag doll. She hit the ground heavily, driving out that precious first lungful of air.

Behind her an ear-splitting yowl echoed and re-echoed against stone. The air wrestled with fury and sound.

Gulping breaths, Ada scrambled onto all fours and crawled further into the thick darkness, trying to get away.

The ground ahead vanished: her arm and wrist jarred against the stone edge of the drop. Her fingertips caught rising spray. A new roaring rushed up from below. She had found the water channel. If she fell down there, she would be sucked underground to drown. Ada backed away, tried a different direction and hit a wall.

“Get out of ’ere,” snarled a voice.

Ada looked back. Against the pale stretch of light, she saw the two silhouetted figures of her attackers running

away. The victor stood, motionless as the pillars, watching them long after the sounds of their retreat had faded.

He turned his whole body towards her.

Ada stiffened.

“Are you all right?”

She didn’t answer, she couldn’t. Her voice was frozen, locked inside.

The stranger leapt into her darkened patch. She flinched backwards into the wall.

There was a sharp scraping, a flurry of sparks, a flicker of light and a flame spurted into life. The stranger held it up close to her face. She squinted in the sudden dazzle and cocked her head away from the brightness to get a better look at him. He followed the motion with his hand, blocking her line of sight with the flame.

“You’re not hurt – not seriously.” The voice was level, almost bored. “Don’t move. Wait for them to find you.” He tossed the burning wick away. She caught a passing glimpse of his face: not young, but not old; his glass skin was nearly as smooth as hers, catching the flamelight and refracting it into faint ripples of colour. He was gone.

It was dark.

“No, wait!”

Ada stumbled upright and stopped. Everything immediately around her was in utter blackness: a great slab of rock blocked the hint of daylight from reaching anything near her feet. Ada inched forwards cautiously. Her foot felt the edge of a step – or was it a drop? She tentatively reached down but felt only air. If there was a step it had

been intended for someone with unnaturally long legs. She stared hard, willing herself to see. Her eyes ached with the effort but she remained as blind as before. She continued feeling the ground until she was reluctantly convinced that she was on a square island cut off by water channels and a wall. Her rescuer must have known this chamber inside out to throw her here, never mind crossing the channels twice in the dark.

Cold air rushed through the tunnel, merging with the sound of the churning water. A drip plopped methodically. No other noise broke the silence.

She stood irresolute, feeling appallingly helpless. No, it wasn't merely a feeling, she *was* appallingly helpless. Both her kidnappers and her rescuer were evidently masters of navigating these dark regions; she was useless. She wondered about her rescuer again. He hadn't been overly helpful, abandoning her. He hadn't even left her with the light, but had instead casually tossed it away into the water.

"Don't move. Wait for them to find you," Ada muttered in mimicry. As if she had a choice, with the death trap of water channels surrounding her. Or perhaps that was his intention, that she should be trapped here, ready and waiting to be collected by slavers or...or...

"Lady Ada?" The voice was stretched thin by distance but recognisable.

"Meruda!" Ada cried, unable to mask the relief in her voice. "I'm here."

Meruda began to bless every known dragon but was overridden by a deeper voice: “Don’t move, my lady! Just keep still and keep calling and we’ll come to you.”

As Ada continued calling and Meruda’s replies grew more distinct, a faint glow crept along the walls until it burst around the corner with painful brightness. Ada quickly shielded her eyes and turned to examine her now visible surroundings. Her deductions had been largely correct: although she was backed against one of the columns and not a wall, she was boxed in by deep water channels. Those channels, while certainly wide enough to fall into (Ada was glad she had not attempted anything in the dark) were narrow enough to be covered by a short jump. Feeling some energy return, she gathered up her skirts and leapt neatly over.

Meruda shrieked in alarm and ran up scolding, only to laugh and cry and begin to check Ada over for any injury. The people with her – Ada recognised her coachman, while the rest wore the uniform of the Watch – raised their lanterns high to help her. They were gloomy lights, casting everything in a greenish grey, or was it that everything down here was a greenish grey, even Meruda’s face? Her maid’s naturally rosy countenance was blanched. The effect was increased by the light from a lantern streaming sideways through her outer glass skin, which made half her face luminescent. If not for her physical touch, she could have passed for the phantom at the gates of death.

Ada quickly brushed Meruda aside. Relief was threatening to turn her legs to jelly. Best keep going. She smiled at the attending crowd.

“Thank you everybody for coming to look for me,” she said with gracious condescension. She had long ago learnt that her voice was less likely to wobble when speaking with gracious condescension. “I am so sorry to have put you to so much trouble – thank you Meruda, that will do. Now, I assume we don’t intend to remain here all day?”

“Sorry, my lady,” said the coachman, stepping aside. “This way my lady.”

“Yes, come on dear,” Meruda said, attempting to wrap her arm around Ada’s shoulders.

Ada shook her off and turned to the leader of the Watch. “Are you familiar with these tunnels?”

He deferred the answer to another man, who apparently knew these passages like the back of his mother’s hand. As he clearly meant that to be a reassuring statement, Ada enquired if there were other exits to the surface.

“There’d be half a dozen of those, ma’am.”

Ada allowed herself an indulgent smile at the misuse of the title. Ma’am indeed! The man probably had no idea of the correct terms of address for the nobility, or perhaps he didn’t know exactly who she was. That would be almost too good to be true.

“Very well then, choose one that comes out onto a quiet thoroughfare. Then one of you go with my coachman and bring the carriage around to meet us there. I prefer not to be a spectacle for the marketeers.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

Everything worked beautifully, better than Ada thought possible. The few minutes blurred by: walking through

the dark passages; up the steps into beautiful fresh air; waiting in an alcove in the miraculously quiet street; the carriage rumbling towards them; quickly climbing up and in; throwing a purse of coins at the Watch with a last word of thanks and trundling homewards.

Ada pulled the curtains shut over the carriage windows and flopped back, sagging into the cushions, trembling.

Meruda copied her example by closing the other window, then leant forward and began trying to remove the grimy marks left on Ada's dress. Ada let her get on with it, staring into the curtain. She tried to reel her thoughts in, but they would keep running and rerunning over the events in the tunnels, growing ever more frightened and confused.

"A paddle is meant to paddle, not fill your boat with water."

Startled, Ada looked up.

Meruda grasped her hands.

"Look at me, my lady. Breathe. That's it: deep breaths... slowly...good. You are drowning in your own thoughts. When you are ready, speak and direct them; don't let them overwhelm you."

Ada inhaled deeply. Her shoulders slowly dropped. Her thoughts calmed. Yet she resented needing the help: she was a Dura!

"Do you always have to quote Vlainshai?"

"You needed distracting and the proverb seemed appropriate," Meruda replied, unruffled. "Would something ridiculous have been better? Dolphins dancing down the street?"

Ada half-choked on a laugh but it warped into a sob.

“That’s better: let it out. You’ve had a shock.”

Ada yanked a hand free to brush her cheeks dry. If she were going to talk, she would be cool and collected. She built an imaginary wall to block out the feelings, breathed slowly, and waited until she was confident that her voice wouldn’t wobble.

“I feel such a fool for letting it happen and I’m terrified my father will find out.”

“Why? He’s your father, one of the most powerful men in Aven. If you describe what your attacker was like and –”

“There were two of them,” Ada interrupted. “One was a giant of a man, but I didn’t see either of them clearly; I was seized from behind and it was dark when the other man scared them off.”

“Other man?” Meruda echoed. “But you were alone when we arrived.”

“He left before you came.”

“Well, perhaps we can track him down: Lord Dura will want to reward him.”

“I don’t want father to know anything about it. My father...” Ada trailed off, unwilling to explain. In the six months that Meruda had served her, Lord Dura had scarcely visited. Even now that he had summoned Ada from their southern home to the capital city, Casida, she had only seen him twice. How could Meruda know what he was like? But Ada knew how he would react if he heard about today’s little excitement: a scathing lecture, guards set to watch her every move and Meruda would probably be blamed and dismissed.

“But surely we ought to find the culprits?” Meruda persisted.

Ada laughed bitterly. “Assassins aren’t usually easy to find.”

“Assassins!” Meruda snorted. “They were far too sloppy, and why drag you away captive? It’s more likely they were common scoundrels who took a chance. Did they take anything?”

“Only that ugly purse Lady Humber gave me, which was empty anyway. If they had simply robbed me of that I should have thanked them.”

“There you are then: clumsy thieves. And provided you don’t go wandering off like that again you needn’t worry about them. Thank the dragons that child spotted you being taken and the Watch were so nearby, not to mention your mysterious rescuer. Perhaps he’s a secret admirer?”

Ada rolled her eyes, happy to play along with the teasing.

Meruda began unfastening the curtain tassels. “Now after all that, I think you could do with some fresh air and talking about happier things.” Her cheerful chatter ran on unabated. Ada enjoyed the sound without listening as she looked out of the window.

There were too many unanswered questions for her to feel truly calm, questions not only about her kidnappers but her rescuer: his identity, his sudden appearance and the haunting familiarity of the face she had glimpsed. Was that imagination or had she seen him somewhere before? Vague suspicions gnawed at her gut.

Ada shook herself. She couldn’t think clearly now: she would only make herself sick with worry and wouldn’t solve

anything. Best come back to it with a clear head. Pushing away the circling doubts, she concentrated on the passing sights instead. The distraction was successful.

She watched the passing city of Casida mesmerised, dizzy with seeing so much so quickly. Winding streets opened out into large paved squares, invariably centred around a water feature; market stalls were crammed into every conceivable space; people rushed, shouted, babbled; the dome of the dragnoss loomed –

The carriage turned sharply. With a jolt, Ada realised that they had already reached her father's mansion and were entering the gates.

She was relieved to see that her father wasn't waiting for her on the threshold, but if he was mercifully absent, nobody else was. The house was a hive of organised chaos. Servants were feverishly polishing every solid thing in sight, tapestries were being examined, floors scrubbed and boxes were being carried here and there.

Ada frowned as she picked her way through the entrance hall. Someone ought to have at least formally acknowledged her return.

"Lady Ada," the household chamberlain hurried up, bowing as he came.

About time too. Ada stood still, chin raised, and waited for him to come to her.

He halted in front of her and offered her a letter. "Your father left this for you and the seamstress will be with you within the hour."

Why should her father be sending her a seamstress? She had enough dresses. Ada broke the wax seal, read and understood. The paper trembled. Ada refolded the letter with deliberate care. The paper stilled.

“Meruda, go to my chambers and ensure all is ready for the seamstress.”

“Very good, my lady.”

Ada turned to the chamberlain. “Where is Master Kessler?”

His lip curled an unforgivable fraction. “The high steward is on the lower terrace. He asked that no-one disturb him.”

“Good. See that no-one does.” She stalked down the hallway towards the garden, clutching the letter. After all the years of waiting, this was why her father had finally summoned her to Casida. She should have known it would be something like this. What would her dear old Kessler say?

She found Kessler pacing below a tall hedge, out of sight from the house, not that she trusted anything in a city to be truly private.

Kessler halted at her approach, hands clasped behind his back, his eyes grave under a careworn forehead. He appeared to have aged since she had gone out this morning, his locks more grizzled and his habitual stoop exaggerated as if he were carrying a heavy weight. His eyes met hers. He knew. In that instant she realised that he had always known why they had been summoned.

And he had never told her.

Silence.

“I believe you are meant to congratulate me,” she finally said. His eyes flickered to the letter.

He stirred, slowly drawing himself up to his proper height, a kind, sad smile on his face.

“Yes, yes...I wish you all felicity on your engagement, my lady.”

She glanced once more up at the house and the garden, before sitting down on a bench. The flat stone had been in the shade all afternoon; the cold quickly penetrated her dress. She looked down at her lap. Despite Meruda's best efforts, she saw traces of the tunnel grime. She was back there now, back in the dark, struggling to breathe, struggling for freedom, only instead of a giant, a seamstress was coming to entrap her, not by a strangulating hold but in a dress for a betrothal ceremony.

And Kessler had known and not told her. The betrayal numbed her. She longed to confide in him as she always had, but hurt paralysed her voice to a stone.

In the past when she was upset, Kessler would have sat beside her and said something comforting, just one kind word at which her thoughts, fears and pent-up emotions would come flooding out. He would have listened patiently for however long she needed, before soothing and calming her with some wise and tested truth. That was what he had done for as long as she could remember. If only he would act normally now and help her to confide in him again. But he did not. Instead, he remained rooted in the same spot, keeping a respectful distance. This was the new life, was it?

“I expect you have duties to attend to,” she eventually said.

He murmured assent and took his leave.

Ada stared past him into empty space and continued to stare. It was several minutes before she realised that she was crying.