

## CHAPTER 1

### Sheera

The Baron of Embran's mansion looked like a castle. It stood on a green hill, far removed from any towns or villages and a good two-hour walk from the border with the Realm of the Humans.

In honour of his daughter's engagement, the Baron had invited all the High Maras from the surrounding area to a celebration. I watched from the shadows of the forest as they drove by in their carriages along the torch-lit path. The music and laughter blaring out from the mansion were enough to scare away all the forest animals. All except me. As far as the High Maras were concerned, I was no more than an animal myself.

I was, after all, a Night Mara. Unlike many of the Maras who resided in the borderlands, I had no High Mara blood in me. I was a creature of darkness to my core. My hair was black, my skin as pale as the moon and my eyes like those of a cat. High Maras, whose blood was not tainted by that of humans or of my kind, regarded me with disgust or even fear. This was one of the reasons why Night Maras were an increasingly rare sight throughout Farhir. Many of my kind had chosen to live their lives in the forests—and over the years, they had become the animals the High Maras considered us to be. Others had bleached their hair and entered into mixed-blood marriages in order to spare their children the fate and curse of the Night Maras.

Why my parents had not done that was something I would probably never know. Perhaps it was because they saw this heritage as more than just a curse. But certainly not because they wanted me to use my ability to see in the dark and move silently through the night to become a thief. What would they say if they knew what had become of their daughter without her parents' care? Would they be proud? Not likely.

But it had been a long time since that thought had bothered me. I had survived and made the best of my fate. I proved that to myself, night after night, and this evening would be no exception.

I crept up the gentle slope of the hill as if I were a part of the lengthening shadows and made my way around the courtyard in front of the mansion. I kept low to the ground as I pressed forward, careful to avoid spooking the horses, whose hooves were so close I could have touched them. I reached the tower of the east wing without being noticed.

As I had already ascertained, the Baron had guards stationed at all of the entrances apart from the narrow windows high up on the towers. Nobody would think anyone capable of scaling those walls, let alone getting in through one of the windows. After all, they were scarcely wider than a hole in a trellis.

A trellis would have been very useful at that precise moment. I stood at the foot of the tower and looked up. The joints between the stones were narrow, the brickwork smooth. It had looked rougher from a distance. But there was no going back now. I took off my leather gloves, crouched down and rubbed the dry, sandy earth between my fingers. Then I started to climb.

Night Maras were ridiculed about our size, but it had its advantages. Most High Maras were almost a head taller than any of us. Even humans were taller. And Night Maras were very slight—I weighed little more than a twelve-year-old. It was said that the wild Night Maras who lived in the forests could move silently through the treetops. I had the ability to scale stone walls effortlessly without my own body weight dragging me down.

Climbing this tower was more demanding than I had anticipated, however. I was only half way up when I started to run out of breath. I bit my lower lip. I struggled to keep my grip on the wall and searched desperately for a groove between the stones that I could use to pull myself up. My fingertips were burning and my arms were beginning to tremble—I had almost reached my limit.

I had to keep my breathing under control or I would have been discovered in an instant. I glanced down and saw, to my relief, that I was only around three metres above the ground. From this height, I would still have been able to jump off and land silently in the grass. But giving up was not an option. Anyway, I'd already invested too much time preparing for this evening. With renewed resolve, I fixed my gaze on the window above me and pulled myself up, inch by inch.

When I reached the window, I had to turn sideways and hold my breath in order to fit through the narrow opening. I slipped through like water through a crack in a vase and found myself in a darkened room inside the tower.

Against the walls, tables strained under the weight of the riches piled on top of them. And the chests in the middle of the room were bursting with so much treasure that it was no longer possible to close them.

I chuckled in satisfaction. So, this was where the Baron stored his treasure. Unlike most of the wealthy High Maras, who kept their riches hidden away in basement vaults, far from the clutches of greedy strangers, he put his on display. My sources had been reliable. The Baron was a vain man who used every opportunity to show off the riches he had amassed. No doubt he visited this tower regularly with his lovers. I could easily imagine the sparkle in those poor farm girls' eyes when he brought them up here.

The thought repulsed me. I knew enough about men of his ilk to gain a certain satisfaction from relieving one of them of some of his oh-so precious possessions.

I ran my fingers over the many jewels, golden necklaces and precious stones. Wealth like this could feed an entire village for a year. I had committed countless burglaries over the past ten years, but it was usually just rich ladies' jewellery boxes and their husbands' wallets. It disgusted me to see how much a single High Mara could accumulate. It was more than he would be able to spend in his entire lifetime. Not far from this estate, there were children starving on the streets, but the Baron didn't seem concerned about that.

I stopped in front of a chest, crouched down and opened it. It was filled to the brim with gold coins.

This was more useful to me than rings and jewelled necklaces. I knew from experience how difficult those were to sell. The more valuable the piece, the greater the dealers' fear of the Blood Maras—the Queen's soldiers.

I pulled an empty leather bag out of my corset belt, filled it with coins and tucked it away again. With a bit of luck, the Baron wouldn't even notice he had been robbed. I would be able to come back for more as often as I liked.

Maybe this was my chance. This could be an end to the dangerous jobs, an end to sneaking out night after night to meet up with sketchy characters. An end to the constant scheming and the ever-present fear that my next break-in could be my last. And all thanks to this vain creep, the Baron of Embran.

I hardly dared to hope.

All of a sudden, my thoughts were interrupted by the sound of voices outside. I stood up, crept to the window and threw a glance beneath me. Two farmhands were standing at the foot of the tower with a group of horses. "The Baron will beat the living daylights out of us if he finds out!" one of them hissed.

"What are we supposed to do when there isn't any room left in the stables?" asked the other. "Anyway, he doesn't need to find out. We'll stay here and watch over the beasts. Then nothing can go wrong."

I was so angry I could have screamed, but instead, I looked up at the sky. "Thanks, Muraya!" I snapped. Who could have sent these men if not the Goddess of the Albas herself? So this was the punishment for my arrogance. So much for an 'easy game'! I could no longer go back the way I had come. Even as a Night Mara under cover of darkness, there was no way I could get past the loitering farmhands without being seen. I would either have to find another way out, or wait here in the hope that the farmhands would disappear before the Baron brought his guests to see the room. And, if I had sized him up correctly, that was only a matter of time.

On tip toes, I crept from window to window. I hadn't chosen my entry point at random. The front of the tower was illuminated and there were treacherous cliffs to the rear, making an exit through either of the other windows just as dangerous as climbing down in full view of the farmhands.

Frustrated, I walked over to the door. It was heavy, made from solid oak with iron fittings. It looked like it would easily hold out against a dozen men, and it led to the one place I wished to avoid at all costs: the inside of the mansion, which was humming with the Baron's guests and his armed guards. The mere thought of sneaking down brightly lit corridors made my heart race. But I had no choice.

I pulled out a small, laced-up leather bag, unrolled it and took out two worn skeleton keys. I got down on one knee and was busying myself with the lock when a shadow fell across the crack under the door. I heard footsteps.

This couldn't be happening! It felt like the entire evening was cursed. So much preparation, such easy access—and then everything went wrong. I snorted in anger and frustration,

gathered up my skeleton keys and only just had time to dart behind the door as I heard a key turning in the lock.

'A torch!' a harsh voice commanded.

The door was pushed open and torch light fell across the room. I held my breath. Each time I was this close to being caught, I would mentally run through what would happen to me if I fell into the hands of the Blood Maras. The gallows would be a mercy. Torture, public flagellation and chopping off limbs were par for the course. It was enough to give me the courage to keep quiet, even in the diciest of circumstances. Panicking would lead to mistakes, which I could ill afford.

An elderly gentleman, unusually plump for a High Mara, entered the room. His velvet garments were trimmed in mink, a gold circlet adorned his thinning silver hair and he held a torch in his beringed hand. Its light fell on the treasure, making it sparkle. The man was followed by two giggling young girls.

'Feel free to take a look around,' he encouraged them. 'Choose a piece of jewellery each. You can wear it all evening.'

'Really?' asked one of the girls in disbelief.

'Really,' he promised, and brandished his torch in order to illuminate every last corner of the room.

The two young High Maras squeaked in delight and threw themselves at the treasure like starving dogs on a pile of bones.

One more step, I thought, praying that Muraya would be merciful this time. I closed my eyes, listened, and waited patiently. Finally, I saw my chance. I heard the Baron take another step into the room, opened my eyes and scurried behind him, unnoticed, and out through the door, in the full knowledge that at least one of his underlings would be waiting on the other side.

I gave a hurried look around and saw the sentry. Contrary to my fears, he had his back to me, and I ran in the opposite direction. It had been pure luck. I knew that. I could just have easily run directly into the man's arms. But the close call made it all the more exhilarating.

I could still hear the sound of the girls giggling as I reached the stairs. I descended the staircase and found myself deep inside the mansion. My path led me to the ground floor and past a cloakroom. Unnoticed by the maid, who was guarding the visitors' cloaks and mantles, I took the most inconspicuous cloak I could see and wrapped it around myself.

I no longer stood out and was able to pass several guests and servants, eventually reaching a window I thought could serve as my exit.

Relieved, I was just putting one knee on the windowsill when I heard a familiar giggle. My body immediately tensed up. The Baron and his companions were making their way towards to me. I could already see their shadows moving across the floor and knew they would reach me before I could climb out of the window.

I took a step back and turned in the only plausible direction. Straight towards the festivities, towards the music and the voices of the High Maras.

I made a dash for it just as the Baron was rounding the corner, took the stairs into the big hall, which was packed with hundreds of guests, and zigzagged my way through the crowd.

Nobody but me was wearing a cloak. Let alone over their head, pulled down way over their face. Even if the crowd offered temporary protection, it was only a matter of time before I was noticed.

I looked around hurriedly but found no open window through which I could climb and attempt to flee across the courtyard. Running past the staff out there would have been risky anyway. There were no unguarded doors either. I pushed through the crowd towards the main entrance. Two guards were posted there. I considered trying to create a diversion in order to get past them. But one of them had already spotted me. No wonder, since I was the only guest hiding their face. The man hadn't yet left his post but was craning his neck in an attempt to identify me among the many Maras. I turned back, disappearing once more in the safety of the crowd, thoughts racing. There had to be a way out. There always was!

The scent of freshly baked bread, herbs and boiled meat reached my nose and I located the buffet on one side of the hall. I was no longer fazed by the sort of treasure I had encountered in the tower room. But an excess of food like this was something else entirely.

The long table was almost sagging under the weight of the many dishes. Desserts, fruit, even suckling pig—my mouth started to water, the delicacies mocking me.

Again, I cast a glance at the exit. I couldn't tell whether the guard was still looking out for me. My cloak would give me away if I went near him again. And I couldn't take it off. After all, I was a Night Mara, surrounded by nobility, who would run away screaming if they knew what was hiding beneath the cloak. Perhaps that was exactly what I needed in order to escape. A smile played across my lips and I made a decision.

With fresh determination, I strode over towards the buffet, snatched a piece of bread and tore it in two with my bare hands. This alone drew people's attention. I let a fork clatter to the ground, whipped around and gave the table a shove, all while clutching half a loaf of bread against my chest. Now all eyes were on me.

I looked around me in agitation as someone grabbed my arm and tried to tear the cloak from my head. Some of the Maras were actually screaming, others were backing away from me.

The man who had caught me stealing was none other than the Baron himself. His hand closed tightly around my arm.

'Please!' I begged, my voice trembling, hoping he would buy my little performance. 'I am so hungry.'

'You thieving piece of dirt,' he hissed and he shook me so hard that it hurt. 'How did you get in here?'

‘Please!’ I cried out again, biting my lip and looking at him beseechingly. I made every effort to look as confused as possible.

The Baron showed no sympathy. He dragged me through the crowd, straight towards the guards at the exit.

‘I’ll do anything!’ I swore. ‘My Lord, believe me, I’ll do anything!’ The bread dropped from my hands as he steered me towards the door. I fell to my knees and he held me down with both hands when I tried to get back up. I pawed at his clothes like a small child at its mother’s apron strings.

‘Anything,’ I repeated emphatically, and looked up at him. I was sure he understood what I was getting at. His eyes narrowed and he looked me up and down. I knew what he took me for in that moment, and I also knew there was no way he would take me up on it in front of his guests.

‘Did you steal anything else?’ he asked.

I shook my head and allowed him to pull me to my feet and push me against the wall. He tore my cloak from my shoulders, took a step back and gave his guard the nod to search me. He probably wanted to make sure that I really had only taken bread—and not a pouch full of gold, for instance.

The guard didn’t hesitate, making a grab for my corset belt. Without thinking, I grasped the man’s hands before he could undress me. He eyed me distrustfully. It probably wasn’t the best idea to resist a search. Reluctantly, I lowered my hands and allowed him to tear open the cord of my belt with a powerful yank. It fell to the ground, and I stood before him, dressed only in a linen shirt. The flimsy fabric of my top offered little protection, and I was forced to silently endure the guard frisking me from top to bottom as an entire hoard of nobles looked on. It was all I could do to accept this without a fight.

After what felt like an eternity, he stood back. I folded my arms across my chest, so as not to feel completely exposed.

‘She is clean,’ he said.

‘You were lucky,’ said the Baron. ‘If you had stolen more than bread, I wouldn’t allow you to escape unscathed.’

The hall had become quiet, a circle of nobles had formed around us, whispering quietly. One of them approached the Baron: ‘She should be delivered to the Blood Maras.’

The Baron didn’t respond. Instead, he turned towards his guests. ‘The poorest residents of Farhir are starving,’ he declared loudly. ‘I don’t know how this poor scrap got into my house, but I cannot ignore my responsibility. None of us can.’

There was a loud murmur of approval and applause from a few of the guests—just as I expected, the Baron was practically basking in their admiration. To cap it all, he picked up the bread from the ground and pressed it into my hands. Then, he grabbed my arm and pushed me

towards the exit. I was close to asking if I could have my belt back, but I didn't want to push my luck.

The guards opened the door and the Baron pushed me outside. A broad grin danced across his lips. 'Tell all your friends about your Baron's generosity and kindness,' he invited me.

'I will,' I promised and attempted a curtsy. I wasn't sure whether I was laying it on too thickly but he seemed to buy my gratitude.

'Good girl,' he said, and a moment later the guards locked the door. Darkness enveloped me and I stood back up. Now it was my turn to smile. 'I most certainly will not,' I said confidently and turned to go.

It could have gone very differently. I knew that... I had relied on the Baron playing the benefactor in front of his guests. And that is exactly how it had played out.

But it had been a game of chance. I could just as easily have found myself sitting in his cellar. Even so, my narrow escape gave me an unparalleled feeling of exhilaration.

I crossed the courtyard, leaving light, voices and music behind me. Only once I was sure that nobody was watching did I tear the half loaf of bread in two. From inside the loaf, I removed my skeleton keys and the leather pouch, which was filled with gold. Pleased with myself and my acting abilities, I threw my pouch in the air and caught it again. If I had my way, every robbery would end like this.

It was already late when I reached my home town. Silent and grey, Bashtana seemed almost tranquil in the darkness. I had spent almost my entire life in this place and it was where I returned after every break-in. It was like I was leading a double life. By day, I was a simple orphan who had been taken in and raised by a kind old man, and by night, I was a thief. Both lives were an integral part of me.

I placed the bread and a few of the gold coins on the steps of the Temple of Muraya, then walked along the main street to the market place.

I hadn't got far when an uneasy feeling came over me. Something wasn't right. I just didn't know what. I surveyed the tall, crooked houses, huddled up tight against one another on both sides of the street.

Silence. The lights were all out, and most of the shutters and curtains were closed. But here and there, I could see shadowy figures standing at the windows.

My heart started to beat faster. This was what was unsettling me. Why was it that some of the residents were still awake, and why were they looking out onto the street through darkened windows?

I quickly sank into the shadows cast by the houses beside me and stayed close to the wall as I crept along to the nearest side alley. It led me to the market place.

An abandoned carriage stood by the disused fountain, parked at an angle. Was this why everyone was so intrigued? It was a noble horse and carriage. Not a common sight in Bashtana. Perhaps a well-heeled High Mara had got lost and had chosen this run-down border town, of all places, to ask for directions? If I had been a careless thief, I might have tried to rob these people while their carriage was unattended. But I had tried my luck enough for one night.

'Open up!' I heard a man shout.

I scanned the rows of houses, but it wasn't until I had completely emerged from the alley that I saw where the strangers were trying to gain entry. A group of men was standing in front of Baldur's house. The house where I lived.

Frozen to the spot, I stood and watched as Baldur opened the door. His grey hair was dishevelled—he had been asleep. Eyes barely open, he stood in his nightshirt, looking at the strangers' faces.

These weren't just any old travellers, and it certainly wasn't a High Mara with his entourage. These were Blood Maras. The Queen's soldiers. There was no mistaking their red boots and dark uniforms, even from a distance.

My heart hammered in my chest, my thoughts immediately beginning to race. I took a step backwards.

'There!' screamed one of the men, pointing at me.

I didn't hesitate. I turned on my heel and fled.