

With how many times Viviana had managed to surprise him in the past few days, Ilias should really be used to it by now.

First there had been the automaton trap and dung. He'd assumed he'd never see her again after that, but then, out of nowhere, there she was on the park bench, as if she'd been waiting for him—him and Alissa, that is. Then Ilias had found out that Viviana was not just a Shadowdancer but the *leader* of the Shadowdancers, which made him feel pretty stupid for his earlier actions. Perhaps even more surprising, though, was the fact that Viviana agreed to help them free Lilith. Then she'd stabbed him with a syringe and injected him with a magical transmitter liquid, which he certainly hadn't been expecting. Finally, she'd taken him to the Shadowkeep, which had made Ilias gape like a child.

After all of that, Ilias thought he must be past the biggest surprises by now. And then Viviana introduced herself as his fiancée. Unsurprisingly, Ilias blushed. He had been doing that a lot around Viviana. He recovered fairly quickly from the shock, since he did have quite some practice by this point.

Janos had almost immediately started fawning over Alissa, and Ilias found it to be a welcome distraction. Viviana seemed to view it as welcome entertainment. She stared wide-eyed at Janos for a moment and then elbowed Ilias slightly in his side and made a face that somehow seemed to convey gagging disgust and amusement at the same time. Then, when Janos called Alissa a “virgin moss rose,” Viviana outright snorted. Ilias struggled to breathe as he held back his own laughter.

Is this what being married to Viviana would be like—sharing jokes while planning robberies? he wondered. He immediately pushed the thought from his mind, but not before thinking that a life like that didn't sound that bad, actually ...

Viviana perked up when Janos mentioned the party, and Ilias could see the wheels had already begun turning in her head. She was planning something, and Ilias was a little worried about what exactly it was. *Gaia, I hope there aren't too many more surprises*, he thought, already knowing Viviana well enough to know that *no* more surprises was too much to ask.

“Wait—what?” Ilias interrupted.

Viviana looked up from her detailed plan to steal the Avaril. She’d come over to the Itoriel mansion to discuss the plan and backup plans with Alissa and Ilias. “I’ll put the Avaril in the lumium compartment in my shoe,” she repeated.

“No,” Ilias said, “before that. You said you made the shoes?”

Viviana crossed her arms and shifted her weight to one leg. “Yeah, so?”

“Uh ...” Heat rushed to Ilias’s cheeks. “I just ... I didn’t realize you were actually a shoemaker. I thought it was a cover.”

Viviana furrowed her brow, and then she laughed—a giggle really. Ilias still had a hard time getting used to the leader of the Shadowdancers *giggling*.

“That would be suspicious, don’t you think?” Viviana said with a small, crooked smile. “A shoemaker who doesn’t make shoes?”

“Well, yes,” Ilias said. “But most cobblers spend *years* learning the craft.”

“That does seem an awful lot of time to dedicate to a cover,” Alissa said.

Viviana shrugged. “It didn’t take me that long to learn—six months maybe. And I’m one of the most wanted people in Aracona. Unless I feel like spending the rest of my life in prison or ending up on the chopping block, I don’t really have the luxury to be sloppy with my cover.”

Viviana’s face had grown stony, and one of her hands was clenched into a fist. For a moment, Ilias glimpsed the full weight of her burdens—the nearly constant stress and anxiety she must live with as the Shadowdancers’ leader.

Then, her face brightened once more. “I’m actually quite good too, you know. Delvor Garrot’s wife even has a pair of my boots.”

“What!” Alissa gasped.

“I didn’t want to do it at first, on principle, but it was too good an opportunity to pass up. I went to their mansion to do measurements and fittings, so I was able to update our map of the estate.” A mischievous glint in her eye, she added, “Plus, while I was there, I stole one of his rugs.”

Ilias got a sudden mental picture of Viviana dragging a rolled-up rug out the front door of the Garrots’ mansion all by herself, and he burst out laughing. It was probably the

first time he'd really laughed since the Red Hall attack. He looked at Viviana in awe, because despite the burdens she carried, she managed to be lighthearted, even downright bubbly. Her brightness melted away the tension that had been building in Ilias's back and shoulders for days.

"Okay, now back to business," Viviana said, clapping her hands and diving back into the plan with the efficiency of a practiced leader.

Ilias leaned forward and listened intently. The plan was clever but also risky. He didn't have any second thoughts, though. This was what he had to do to help Lilith, and he trusted Viviana. He startled slightly at that thought, but it was true—he did trust her. Just a day ago, he'd thought she was trying to kill him, but now, he was pretty sure he would be willing to follow this woman anywhere.

After the encounter with Janos, Viviana warmed up to Ilias, and Ilias began having far more fun than he should be having in the midst of planning a *robbery*. Sometimes Ilias forgot about the reason he was doing this: to free Lilith. It was never for long—just half an hour here and there—but every time, he felt guilty. How could he be out here having *fun* when Lilith was wrongfully imprisoned?

What he didn't feel guilty about was stealing the Avaril. It was Ilias's first time ever stealing something, and maybe he should feel remorseful or at least conflicted, but he simply didn't. He believed the Avaril rightfully belonged with the people of Ilesaar. Plus, the Baltors would still have unimaginable wealth even without the Avaril—they'd be fine. Most importantly, in exchange for him helping with this, Viviana was going to try to free Lilith. And after seeing Viviana at work, Ilias was starting to be convinced that if anyone could free Lilith, it was Viviana. So no, he didn't feel guilty about stealing the Avaril, but he still hadn't expected to *enjoy* himself so much.

He was spending a lot of time with Viviana, though, who was arguably one of the greatest thieves of all time, so his enjoyment shouldn't have been too much of a surprise. Viviana was clearly in her element while planning a heist. It was fascinating to watch really. She was clever and meticulous, considering every detail, and she had an easy confidence about her, borne from a lifetime of experience. Viviana was *very* good at her job, and though she didn't consciously flaunt that fact, it was evident in her every move. As easily as a blacksmith could tell good ironwork from bad, so could anyone recognize that Viviana was a master at her craft.

In a matter of days, Viviana had formulated a simple, efficient, and downright genius plan to steal the Avaril, along with *two* backup plans that were still better than what Ilias could have come up with. And if that wasn't enough, she'd already begun puzzling over how to free Lilith. If Ilias had any lingering doubts about Viviana's commitment to helping Lilith, they were gone now. Even while laying out all of the seemingly insurmountable obstacles standing in their way, Viviana seemed more determined than discouraged.

Ilias, on the other hand, was much less confident in his abilities of subterfuge. Back at the Academy, he'd dreamed of having adventures, but now that he was here, about to help steal one of the most important and valuable magical artifacts on Gaia, he was worried. He was an accomplished swordsman and a capable wizard, though not nearly as talented as Lilith. But what if that wasn't enough?

By the time they arrived at the Baltors' mansion on the night of the party, Ilias's worries had congealed into a tight knot of anxiety at the pit of his stomach. Viviana did not seem to suffer the same nervousness. She slipped her hand through Ilias's arm and leaned into him, as comfortably as if they really were engaged. Her relaxed demeanor put him at ease, and he soon fell into his role easily. When she left to go upstairs and steal the

Avaril, though, the knot of anxiety returned. *She'll be fine*, he told himself. *She's a Shadowdancer. You just need to keep Seramis occupied for a while.*

What Ilias had expected to take just a few minutes soon turned into over fifteen, and the knot of anxiety twisted in his stomach. Had Viviana been caught? Did they need to move on to a backup plan?

Finally, after what seemed like hours, Ilias was helping pull Viviana in through the bathroom window, his heart pounding from adrenaline. And then a guard knocked on the door. When the guard asked if he could come in, Ilias hesitantly said yes simply because he didn't know what else to do.

The door began to open, and then Viviana was kissing him. He hadn't though his heart could beat any faster than it already was, but it happily proved him wrong, pounding with increasing intensity in his chest. His mind went blank, and he froze. Just when his brain had finally caught up with the situation, Viviana stepped away from him.

"Whew, he didn't see me," she said, sighing in relief.

Oh, right. Of course ... Ilias remembered Viviana telling him of her earlier run-in with one of Baltor's guards. He remained frozen, though. It was like his entire world had shifted when Viviana kissed him, and he needed a moment to shift back to reality.

Viviana peeked out the door to make sure the guard was gone and then looked back at Ilias with a smile. "You ready?"

Ilias unconsciously glanced down at the lips that had just been on his and thought about how surprisingly soft they'd been. He gulped and looked away. "Yes," he said with as much conviction as he could while simultaneously thinking that he was not at all ready for the spark Viviana's kiss had just ignited inside of him.

In addition to thief and shoemaker, Viviana was apparently also a mechanic of some kind, as she was currently sweaty and covered in grease and oil. Ilias tried not to stare as she walked by. Was there anything she *couldn't* do?

“Isn't she gorgeous?” Korahan asked next to him, legitimately swooning.

“She's pretty, but 'gorgeous'?” Ilias said. Ilias liked Viviana. She was creative and brilliant, a seamless blend of planner and improviser that made her not only a good thief but also a skilled leader. But Korahan wasn't looking at Viviana like one would look at a legendary thief or respected leader. He was looking at her like she was the famous singer Cecile de Sars or a fairy-tale princess.

Ilias only half listened as Korahan and Teglen bantered back and forth. He was looking at Viviana. She *was* very pretty. He thought back to Viviana kissing him at Seramis Baltor's party. She'd only done it to avoid being recognized by the guard, but it had been ... nice. Yes, that was all. Definitely not something he had thought about every night since. Just nice. He wasn't going to let it become anything more than that, because he didn't dare do anything that might jeopardize Lilith's escape. Plus, if Korahan was any indication, Viviana probably had plenty of suitors, and Ilias had already been down that road once with Lilith.

“But are you man enough to be a worthy partner to the future queen of Ileasaar?” Teglen asked Korahan.

Ilias snapped back to the present moment. “*Future queen of Ileasaar*”? he wondered. After he got over his shock, his first thought was that it made sense. Viviana would make a great queen. His second thought was that he *definitely* needed to stop thinking about that kiss. What chance did he have with a *queen*, a very clever, pretty one at that?

Ilias couldn't sleep, and the reason why was pretty clear. Viviana—leader of the Shadowdancers, queen of Ileaasar, and the bravest woman he knew—was in his bed. But unlike a dream he'd once had, she was in his bed for unpleasant reasons. Viviana's experience in the woods seemed to have snapped something inside of her. She'd seemed utterly fearless before, and now ... now she was terrified.

"Vivi," Ilias said quietly.

She rolled over to look at him, curling herself into a ball, one arm clutched across her chest and her knees pulled up. She seemed wide awake.

"Why did you come to me?" Ilias asked, the words tumbling over one another.

Viviana blushed and pulled away from him slightly. "I'm sorry. I—"

"I'm glad you're here," Ilias interrupted quickly. "I just ... Back in the woods, when you disappeared, I was there, and I was completely useless. You were gone before I even knew what was happening. I couldn't keep you safe, so—"

"I don't need you to keep me safe," Viviana interrupted, whispering. "Being safe is too much to ask for right now. I just want to *feel* safe."

"Oh ... and I ...?"

Viviana nodded.

"I still wish I could *actually* keep you safe," Ilias muttered grumpily.

Viviana laughed then, an amused tinkle that immediately brightened the room. She turned back over and snuggled her back into Ilias's chest. Ilias froze for a moment, shocked by the sudden heat of her pressed against him, but then he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her tight.

"I'll try, you know," he said softly into her hair. "To keep you safe."

Viviana didn't say anything at first, and he wondered whether she had fallen asleep. But then, she whispered back fiercely, "I'll try to keep you safe too."

A year ago, Ilias never would have imagined all of the terrible things that had gone wrong in the past weeks. He was terrified too, and yet, here with Viviana, he did feel safe. He slept more soundly than he had in weeks.

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The next night, when Ilias asked if Viviana wanted to sleep in his bed again, he wasn't

surprised that she said no. He was surprised, though, by how much that answer disappointed him.

Lilith needed to recover from casting the protection spells on all of them, and Viviana took the time to continue working out a plan to fight what was increasingly seeming like an omnipotent being. She felt like she had a maze inside her head to match the one that trapped them in Oakdale. She kept taking off on different paths, different plans, but each time, she'd run headfirst into an unsolvable obstacle. Viviana had been scared before, but right now, she was completely petrified. She didn't know if she could do this, if she could beat whatever had taken her in the woods. In fact, she felt fairly confident that she definitely could *not* do it, even with Lilith's help.

"Hey," Ilias said softly, leaning over to her and placing his hand gently on her knee.

She looked up with a start and then looked down at Ilias's hand on her knee. She suddenly realized she must have been jittering her leg up and down.

"Let's go for a walk," Ilias said with a smile.

"Oh, uh, sure, I guess." Viviana was blushing. "Just through the village or ..."

"Actually, I have someplace in mind already. Come on."

Ilias led her through a copse of trees just outside the village. There wasn't really a path, but Ilias seemed to know where he was going. They walked in silence, which Viviana was fine with. She did some of her best thinking while walking.

Eventually, they crested a small hilltop, and Viviana froze in her tracks with a gasp. Dozens—no, *hundreds*—of wild daisies blanketed the meadow in front of them.

"It's beautiful," Viviana said softly, sighing. She let the planning slip from her mind for a moment, and her shoulders relaxed a few notches. She looked over at Ilias, who was grinning.

"Marguerites!" he said proudly, opening his arms wide. "Lilith said you were fond of them."

"I am," Viviana said.

"There are some in the temple too, and I thought about trying to transplant some into a planter for your room, but I thought you'd prefer them like this—growing wild."

"You were right." Viviana closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

When she opened her eyes again, Ilias was still looking at her. "How are you doing?" he asked softly.

“Still scared,” Viviana said immediately, a little surprised at how readily she admitted it to Ilias now. But, she supposed, after breaking down and asking to sleep in his bed, admitting she was scared was nothing.

Ilias was still just looking at her, waiting patiently for her to continue, so she did. She told him how terrified she was that whoever they were fighting hadn't taken the Avaril or the rainbow knife. In most situations the rainbow knife made her feel invincible, but it seemed even this weapon must not be a threat to whoever they were facing. And since the Avaril hadn't been taken either, somehow what they were involved in had to be bigger than the fight for Ileaasar's independence, bigger even than the government of Cania. She felt out of her depth. Big things were coming. Viviana could feel it. Big, world-changing things.

As Viviana explained her fears and worries, Ilias listened, offering a reassurance here and there. Viviana wondered sometimes how he could remain so optimistic, his faith in both her and Lilith never faltering. She still had her doubts, but after talking with him, she started to believe that it really was possible. Things would click into place. They just had to keep trying.

Then, just when Viviana thought this little outing of theirs couldn't get any more perfect, Ilias said, “I think I have an idea.” It was simultaneously one of the most comforting and sexiest things she'd ever heard.

She wanted to kiss him, hard, just like she'd wanted to kiss him a dozen times in the past, but she held back. She'd already kissed him once without permission. Instead, gesturing to the flowers around them, she said, “Thank you. For all of this.”

“It was my pleasure,” Ilias said sincerely, his eyes soft, and Viviana melted a bit further.

She allowed herself one more blissful moment of a fairly empty head, and then she switched back into strategizing mode, inviting all of the stress and worry back in. “Okay, so what's the plan?” she asked as they headed back to the village, a renewed energy coursing through her veins.

Ilias had been finished with his breakfast for close to twenty minutes now, and the others had all long since left, but he was still sitting at the table. He was waiting for Viviana to come down. After kissing him this morning, she'd retreated to her room, and he hadn't seen her since. He should've kissed her back. He'd *wanted* to kiss her back, but Lilith and Ryn were there, and he'd felt awkward.

Just thinking about the kiss made heat swirl in his chest. This kiss had been very different from the kiss at the Baltors' party. Instead of a convincing but reserved kiss, this had been a desperate, passionate kiss that made Ilias's toes curl and hinted at more to come.

After another twenty minutes waiting at the table, Ilias gave up and headed to his room, where he ran into Viviana.

"Hi," he said. "Uh, what are you ...?" He looked around the room. It was definitely his room, not Viviana's.

"I got you something," Viviana said. "Well, I made you something. I was just going to leave it ..."

Ilias leaned to the side to look over her shoulder. Sitting next to his bed was a brand-new pair of shoes—lightweight clogs.

"You really made these?" he asked, walking over to pick them up. What he actually meant was "You really made these for *me*?"

Viviana nodded.

"But how?" He turned the shoes over in his hands. They were sturdy and well made, easily one of the nicest pairs of shoes he'd ever owned.

"Gale Bruadair. He's grown quite fond of me now, actually," Viviana said with a laugh. "He let me use all his tools for free. Tried to give me the material for free too, but I insisted on paying him."

"I ..." Ilias didn't know what to say. He wanted to kiss her, but he didn't want their first kiss—well, the first kiss where he'd actually have a chance to kiss Viviana back—to be because Viviana had given him a gift. He wanted it to be about just them, not about some shoes, however nice they might be.

He could be patient, because he knew it was only a matter of time before he and Viviana took the next step. They spent hours together every day, and she already felt like his partner. They ate together and strategized together and laughed together and even just sat and read in silence together. They'd fallen into an easy domesticity, and it

made his life feel surprisingly normal considering the current circumstances they found themselves in.

He looked up at Viviana, and she said, blushing, "I just noticed you wearing your boots all the time. And you mentioned that your feet get sweaty in them."

Oh Gaia, Ilias thought, mortified, *why did I tell her that?!*

"So I thought you'd appreciate having something lighter."

"I do," Ilias said. "This is such a thoughtful gift, Vivi."

"Wait, here's the best part," Viviana said, having brightened considerably. She took the right shoe from Ilias and flipped it over. "See?" She revealed a small lumium compartment, just like the shoes she'd stolen the Avaril with. "Amos helped me with this bit while his father was out. Now if you ever feel like smuggling magical artifacts, it'll be a piece of cake."

"They're wonderful, Vivi. Thank you." He let his hand rest on hers for a moment as he took back the shoe. "I have to try these out right away. Will you go for a walk with me?"

"Of course."

"Just give me a couple of minutes to change."

Ilias threw on a pair of shorts and a short-sleeve shirt and then slipped on the shoes. They fit perfectly, as comfortable as slippers. He knocked on Viviana's door. She answered it wearing a cute yellow skirt and a blue shirt that brought out the color of her eyes. Ilias's chest flooded with warmth. *Dear Gaia*, he thought, *I love this woman*.

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"You wouldn't mind ... another kiss?"

"Not at all ..."

Viviana wasn't going to wait for Ilias to change his mind. She practically leaped into his arms, knowing that he would catch her. And then she kissed him. And though she'd kissed him twice before, it still felt like the first time, because this time Ilias was kissing her back. And it was amazing.

She couldn't believe it. After what Ryn had said about Ilias being in love with Lilith for years ... well, Viviana couldn't really expect to compete with that. Lilith was the most talented wizard Viviana had ever met and the most beautiful too. And though Viviana had no shortage of suitors as the leader of the Shadowdancers, she was no Lilith, and Ilias was no ordinary man.

Viviana could feel in her gut that, years from now, stories would be told of Ilias. He'd been taught by some of the best at the Academy, and it showed, not just in things like his flawless sword-fighting technique but also in things like his constant attitude of learning. When she'd first met him, he'd lacked quite a deal of needed real-world experience, as evidenced by his blundering attempt to contact the Shadowdancers. But in just a few weeks, he'd already grown into someone Viviana felt she could trust with her life, and he was still growing. Plus, he was so handsome it made her heart drop to her knees. Oh, and it turned out he was a good kisser. A really good kisser. As far as Viviana was concerned, he could go on kissing her forever.

Eventually, though, Ilias lowered Viviana back to the ground, and they ended the kiss, foreheads pressed together and lips still brushing slightly. Viviana smiled against Ilias's mouth and let out a happy sigh. Ilias gave her two more short kisses, pulling her tight against him. Viviana felt almost dizzy when she finally took a step back. Her head felt impossibly light, and her chest felt as if it contained a blown-up balloon.

She was struck with a sudden stab of fear. *What if this is just a dream?* The balloon in her chest twisted and threatened to pop, but almost immediately, she thought, *No, this is real.* She was sure of it. Dreams drew on the past, like how her last dream with Ilias had contained a shadow creature like the ones she'd fought as a girl. The feeling she had right now, that everything was right with the world even when it was terribly wrong, was one she'd never felt before in her life. So this had to be real, not a dream.

She asked Ilias to be her boyfriend. He said yes. Everything changed, and yet nothing did. They joked and teased like they always did. Except now they held hands when they walked, and Ilias called her his girlfriend, which made her stomach do a happy flip-flop. It almost didn't seem right to be this happy, but Viviana didn't care. She didn't know what the future held, so she intended to thoroughly enjoy her present. In fact, she already had a plan in mind for how she and Ilias would thoroughly enjoy the present tonight, and it just might be her best plan yet.