Grammar Tendencies:

* Long paragraphs. Oftentimes the topic changes entirely, justifying a new paragraph, but the sentences keep on in a big wall of text.
* “This”, “Those”, “These” where “The” works perfectly fine.
* Early on in the story there was a tendency to have sentences be “overwrought.” By that I mean, they had lots of awkward connector words like “which”, “that”, “who”, in cases where a comma or some clever rephrasing would’ve done just fine. I ceased to see this tendency past the first couple of original chapters (chapter 3 did not have this problem).
* Very often someone’s action is put with someone else’s words. I’ve said “next paragraph” or “previous paragraph” on each location this happens when the next (or previous) paragraph has that someone’s speech. Having someone’s actions with their speech can negate the need for speech tags completely.
* You love “in response”, “then”, and other statements that, while functionally correct, are completely unnecessary. In addition, it “fills in” explicitly something that implication states very well. Take advantage of the fact that later in the text = later in time.

*Prologue*

 *A long time ago, the humans and Starlings’ fates were intertwined. The humans gratefully allowed the Starlings free access to their land, and awarded them great honor and respect. In exchange, the Starlings swore to protect the humans from those who would wish them harm. But long ago, the Alliance shattered.*

*The Starling people withdrew from Earth, forsaking the feel of the wind on their face and the warmth the sun brought, retreating to their own realm high above. The humans were angry, and rightly so, but neither side would admit their faults.*

*Out of respect for the friendship they once shared, the Starlings continued to watch over the humans, protecting them from afar. Time passed, anger faded, and the race of the Starlings became a legend told to reassure frightened children when sleep had evaded them.*

*The human race has long since forgotten the significance of the stars. They have forgotten that the stars were celestial cities, home to the Starlings. So when the stars began to go out, the humans were not worried. Little did they know that it was a herald for the beginning of the end and the catalyst for change.*

Chapter One

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 The hallway was much like any other corridor in the castle: wide enough that four men could walk side-by-side, its walls made of large ndrayen blocks. Moonstone in the common tongue. Throughout the corridor were scattered paintings, tapestries, and other adornments. The decorator had instead prized the stone’s rough beauty, and had chosen to display it.

The floor was covered with a rich green carpet, mimicking the patterns of treetops seen far below on Earth. The carpet was not just for beauty.; No, like all things in thise castle, it served a practical purpose:. hHelping to muffle footsteps and absorb sound, it prevented loud echoing fromand ultimately overwhelming the occupant’s’ sensitive ears. And instead of candles ensconced in the walls, tThe corridor had windows every so often, letting the natural pale light create its dim atmosphere.

 The hallway was much like any corridor in the castle. Its peaceful atmosphere had been shattered, the quiet hum of daily life absent. Debris littered the floor, the once beautiful carpet filled with scorch marks. Large black stones lay scattered across the hallway’s length, cloven in two. The enemy’s assault was relentless, adding more every minute. Relentless…and effective. In some places, the breach extended to the floor, making the unstable hallway all the more treacherous to navigate.

 A young Starling picked her way through the rubble as she made her way down the hall. She had an aura of grim determination, much like war-weary soldiers.

For the past month, the castle had been bombarded,tThe surrounding town of, Jay’naldra, had become deserted in the face of the onslaught unseen enemy’s onslaught. All iIts people were now crowded in the castle’s bowels, hoping and praying the projectiles couldn’t reach themfor the bombardment to end. What fighters they had leftremained patrolled the castle’s hallways, constantly alert for any traces of the enemy, but they consistently found none. The enemy seemed content to bombard their safe haven and tear down morale.

A fortnight earlier, a small band of fighters had left the castle’s relative safety and gone in search of the enemy, seeking to bring back information and weaknesses, or at the very least, force the enemy to fight hand to hand.instead of continuously bombarding the castle. What was left of them had been unceremoniously dumped in the castle’s courtyard, their final screams unheard. No one knew how this had been done, especially since no one had seen anything. The Starling people began to suspect they were being toyed with and fear crept into themFear began to creep into the Starling people . Those in the lowest levelsas they lay huddled together and did not speakin silence.

arling had seenThe images haunted the young Starling, but she did not force them away., for sShe was a healer, tasked with treating illness, mending the injured, and reassembling the dead. It was grim, depressing work, and ill-suited for her, as the princess according to her father the king. But she stubbornly insisted. iIt was her responsibility as a healer, and no one could not argue thatthe argument always stopped there.

 Princess Annalydessa suffered without complaint alongside her people. Her once bright innocent eyes had faded till nothing but a dull lifelessness remained. Her once expressive face became like a stone’s, a sad, pensive beauty replacing youthfulness. Her long silver hair was bound tightly, though strands had worked free from their restraints and now hung limply down her back. Her white dress was simple, the belt encircling her waist cinched tight. And though no enemy had breached the castle’s interior, she looked about with wary, searching eyes, a hand straying down to the dagger on her belt.

 It took some time, but Annalydessa made it to her father’s audience chamber. The two wardens opened the large double doors at the sight of her, giving abbreviated gestures of respect. She smiled wanly, a gesture they did not return. She entered the chamber, the heavy doors closing behind her.

They had been relieved of their normal duties and told to go down into the castle’s depths with the others, but they had replied that it was their duty to guard any room the king and queen occupied and not even a war would stop them. Such dedication was admirable, but then, the royal family was well-liked, being both just and fair.

 Within, she saw the king and queen tiredly arguing with a dozen different advisors, some military, some not. Raising her voice so that she could be heard over the noise of war’s destruction, she asked, “You summoned me?”

 Another projectile hit the castle, shaking the foundations to their very core.

 “Anna!” the Queen said with relief, her sense of formality long since forgotten. “You took so long, I feared the worst…”

 “You worry too much, Mother. I’m not a helpless child.” Anna blushed at her mother’s overprotectiveness. “Besides, the North Corridor has been rendered impassable. One of the stones tore through the floor. I had to go the long way.”

 The advisors finally quieted, as they absorbed the news, then began arguing on what it meant for the defenders. How to reroute what little foot traffic they had, and simply what to do in general.

 “Our daughter’s right, my dearest. That is why we agreed to let her go on this mission,” the King said, ignoring the loud argument.

 “What mission?” Anna asked. She had never before been allowed to go on a mission, or even leave Jay’naldra. They finally trusted her as a princess, able to handle the mission they would set before her. She just hoped it wasn’t some boring diplomatic entreaty for help, meant to place her out of harm’s way.

 “What? She’s not ready!” said an advisor, breaking off the argument midsentence. “Not when so much is at stake! My lord, I must insist-” The king’s angry glare silenced the objection, forcing him to mumble a vague apology before scurrying out of the room.

His words only stirred Anna’s her interest more. If *the advisorhe* thought it wasn’t for her, then maybe it *wasn’t* some simple diplomatic mission. Maybe sShe was being given something much more important. She held back an excited smile.That thought excited her.

 The King turned back to his daughter. “As you well know, our people protect the humans below, insuring their safety from those who would wish to do them harm. We have done this for many millennia, even as we hide our presence from them.

“But this time is different. Our enemy is too great and knows far too much about us. It will take some time, but we will fall.” He hated to reference his kingdom’s last failsafeadmitting it, especially in front of his wife and daughter, but he was merely speaking the truth and felt that such an occasion required such brutal honesty.

 “Father! Don’t speak of such things! It will not come to pass! Our people will-”

 “We will stall,” he interrupted. “The people below must be warned. They must know that we can no longer protect them. That is your mission: to inform the human king. But beware, the humans are fickle and self-absorbed. You cannot trust most, if not all, of them. Keep your wits about you, remember your training, and don’t tell anyone who you are except for the king. Do not be afraid of his response. We are a legend to them, but you must convince them. Do you understand what I ask of you, my daughter?”

 “Yes, Father, I understand. But if we fall, will I ever see you again? Or will I be stuck among the humans?” She spat out the word ‘humans’ as if it were a disease.

Her parents exchanged nervous glances. She would have to overcome her unconscious ideals of arrogant superiorityif she were to succeed and they didn’t know if she was up to the task. “We do not know,” the Queen said. “You may be unable to return. And we may perish in this war.”

aAll color drained from Annalydessa’s face.

 “That would be a fate worse than death!” she said, yelling to be heard over another explosion, each closer than the last. Soon, they would have to evacuate the audience room or risk becoming entombed within it.

 “Nonetheless, you will go,” the King said. Seeing his daughter’s face, he added, “It won’t be so bad, and I will feel better with you down there instead of up here in danger.”

 “When do I leave?” Anna asked. There was no use arguing with her father, not with that tone of voice.

 “Very soon. But first, your name does not sound human. You shall have to go by another. I believe Anna Lydia is close enough to pass muster. Second, here are your sword and supplies.” He handed a belt and bulging knapsack to her. “Do not lose them!”

 “I, too, have a gift for you, my daughter,” the Queen said. She passed Anna a necklace as intricate as it was delicate, the jewel crafted into a starburst. Looking closer, Anna realized that it wasn’t a starburst but an *ayonai*, a starlily. It was a priceless gift, a key to almost everything in the human realm. To anything a Starling had once touched. “So you never forget us, no matter what happens.”

 “Oh, Mother! Such a thing, it isn’t possible!” Anna said, tears threatening to spill down her face. She was surprised at the tears; she thought she had cried until she could cry no more.

 “Annalydessa!” her mother gently admonished. “You are a princess; remember your place.”

 “Don’t show fear or indecision. Show that I have the courage to lead my people.” Anna recited, her mother’s mantra burned into her mind.

 “Good girl,” the Queen said, smiling as she embraced her daughter. Anna inhaled her mother’s sweet, familiar scent, committing it to memory. Her mother pulled back, and Anna was shocked to see the tears running down her mother’s face. “May the stars shine their light upon your path and hold you forever in their favor.”

 “May they bring us back together.”

 “Now go, Anna, and fulfill the task before you,” the King said, glowing with energy. “And be safe.” And in that brief moment, he was once again the tenderhearted father she loved.

 The room faded away as the King used his magick to send Annalydessa to the world below. She felt as if she were falling, yet not. Familiar sights flashed before her as she fell slowly through the clouds to the planet far below.

Her eyes closed against her will. They did not want to see the ground rushing up to meet her, nor did they want to see the stars slowly fading out of sight. A wind current caught her, buffeting her around at its whim, and her stomach lurched in protest.

openShe forced her eyes open, andthen she wished they she hadn’t. The sight was disorienting and again, her stomach protestedcontinued to writhe. Her ears, too, began to protest screamed for relief, unused to the wind rustling rushing through them. After what seemed like an eternity, the sensory overloadsensations became too much and she blacked out.

 When she regained her senses, she found herself lying on soft, spongy ground. Ground that was still much more solid than she was used to. She sat up, her head spinning, pounding, and finally settling into a headache. She groaned at the pain and looked around, trying to gain her bearings. And though she had studied this land’s geography as part of her schooling, nothing looked familiar.

On one side stretched a rolling sea of grassy plain, its end far beyond her keen sight. But she knew from experience that appearances could be deceiving. It was possible thatMaybe the distance was not quite as vast as it seemed. Behind the plains, forbidding looking mountains loomed, keeping a watchful eye over the vale below.

On her other side was a vast lake, sparkling a deep blue and purple. Its waters were ever shifting, caught in invisible tides and currents. The sight of it was breathtaking. to her, for s She had never seen such an immense body of water, nor had she seen such vibrant colors. Her own home existed mostly inFar above were whites, greys, and silvers, with occasional muted shades of blue, green, purple, and brown.

She frowned, pushing aside the thought of home. Then her frowned deeperned. To her, the lake was impassable;. Sshe couldn’t swim. And even if she had somehow contrivedcould contrive a way to get across, the far shore couldn’t be seen,. ensuring that sShe would almost certainly tire out before reaching it.

 She sighed. She had no idea where the human king was, or how she could find him. Noticing movement by her foot, she plucked a blade of grass, surprised by its silky texture, before looking closer. A small insect was crawling up the blade. The insect, though small, was clothed in vivid shades of red, with the occasional black spots. She watched it curiously, the first sight of an insect filling her with wonder. The little red bug spread its back into wings and took flight, causing her to shriek in fright as she tumbled onto her back. Heart, she closed her eyes and breathed deeply, inhaling the earthy scent to calm her racing heart.

 Then she stood up, slinging her pack across her back and fastening the belt around her waist. But her mother’s necklace was missing. She began to panic, but caught sight of it lying among the blades of grass. She snatched it up and inspected it for damage. Finding none, she wiped off the dirt and placed it around her neck.

She looked around once more, weighing her options, before and heading toward the mountains. They, at least, were passable without requiring extensive detours or ingenuity. And if she remembered correctly, humans often lived at the base of mountains. The chances of her running into a human who could possibly point her way to the king were far better, if that were indeed the case.

 The grassy plains were monotonous and she soon grew tired of looking at it, despite its foreign nature. It felt like she wasn’t moving at all, with nothing to visibly mark her progress. She walked for hours, encountering no one. She didn’t even see animals, which she found odd. Hadn’t her tutor told her that the human world abounded with animals and teemed with life?

Yet she saw only grass and just the one insect. She thought on that oneabout it for a while, but then shrugged it off. Maybe Laerna had been wrong. Or maybe she was looking in the wrong places, or for the wrong things. Whatever the case, she soon became bored with merely looking at the landscape and her thoughts began to stray, turning toward home. A crippling wave of homesickness and fear tore through her, her breath coming in short gasps. But she was a princess and her father had entrusted a mission to her, . so she allowed herself fifteen minutes to be homesick and thenShe forced herself to push past the pain, bury the thoughts, and keep walking.

 As soon as the sun set, she dropped to the ground, completely spent. She wasn’t used to so much walking, even though she walked considerable distances every day. In her realm, you had to. In a realm where one misstep meant falling to your death, horses were impractical. If you wanted to go somewhere, you walked there. And since towns sprawled over vast areas of land, you walked often.

 She looked up into the dark night sky and saw far fewer stars than there should have been. Searching the sky, she located Jay’naldra, the capital city, and breathed a sigh of relief. If it was still there, shining brightly, her parents must be alright, alive, and well. Or so she convinced herself as she spread out on the hard ground and fell asleep, dreaming of home and of hope.

 Awakening as soon as the sun spilled its rays across the land, Anna dug through her pack, realizing that she had absolutely no idea what her father had packed for her. A quick inventory check showed that she had all the essentials: food, water, clothing, both formal and traveling, and personal toiletries. Much to her surprise, her art bag and favorite book, *Rekoía ni Rikarean e Kathryn*, were there too, hiding beneath her gown. There were also a few odds and ends, like herbs and bandages just in case, but she didn’t pay much attention to them. Instead, she smiled at her father’s thoughtfulness.

 She ate a quick, but tasteless breakfast and continued walking, slowly making her way to the mountains. What she would do once there, she had no idea.

 Near midday, the ground rumbled beneath her feet, breaking the monotony. Anna covered her ears and stopped walking. The noise made her head pound and ache even worse than yesterday. Closing her eyes, she wished the thunderous noise would stop or go away or both, but instead, it got louder and louder. The sound became unbearable, her head ferlinh like it was going to cleave in two. Then it stopped. Overwhelmed, Anna fainted once more.

 Closing in on her was a group of eight or so men, all garbed in metal astride great horses, . A shout went up from the men when they saw the woman fall and they picked up the pace. The woman before them was quite young and most unusual. She was alone and far from any villages, yet looked well-fed. Not that most villages in the kingdom would be able to feed her. Their suffering under the king’s wars, both actual and threatened, was great..

 The woman’s hair was long, black, and loose, her dress a style they’d never seen before. And remarkably it was still white, untainted by dirt. To the knights, it was painfully obvious that the woman wasn’t from this kingdom or any kingdom they knew of. Their worry grew at the thought; their many border wars and had angered many kingdoms. And though she didn’t look like one, she could be an assassin.

 Anna revived suddenly, and was startled by the men surrounding her. Given their garb, she knew they were knights. She found herself thankful that her father had insisted she learn about the strange land and its peoples. She wished she had paid more attention to Laerna, for she hardly remembered anything. As it was, she was terrified. She had never seen a human before, nor the great beasts they rode upon. They weren’t like the Starlings, not at all. Her terror only grew.

 “Are you alright, miss?” a knight asked, offering his hand to help her up. She looked at it distastefully and stood up unaided. Puzzled, he withdrew his hand while she ignored them all.

 “Which way to your king?” she asked. Her voice was strange, a gentle lilt hanging in the air when she spoke. It was a quality that clearly marked her as a foreigner, though from where they didn’t know. A deadly assassin once again crossed their minds.

 “Er, why?” the knight asked.

 “Commoners aren’t allowed to have an audience with the king,” said another, the leader. His very presence assured her of that, screaming it out for all to see.

 “I am *not* a commoner and I have a *very* important message to deliver,” Anna said.

 “Then give me the message. If I deem it important, I will permit you to see the king.”

 “I don’t think so. My orders were to deliver the message to no one save your king.”

 “My lord, perhaps knowing her identity would solve this issue?” suggested another knight, his bright orange hair poking out of his helm at odd angles.

 “Good idea, Raúl.”

 “Thank you, my lord.”

 “So what is your name?” the leader asked.

 “Annalydes-Anna Lydia, Princess of-” She broke off, remembering her father’s words. “As where I’m from is absolutely none of your concern!”

 “You’re no help at all!” the leader said, throwing off his helm in order to rake his hands through his long hair.

 “And who might you be? You who thinks to command me?” she asked, trying not to stare at the man. Humans were like rainbows, full of colors. It was quite unnerving.

 “I am Lord Dayne of Nesworth, nephew to the king.”

 “Oh, is that all?”

 “What is your problem?” he exploded, his patience worn thin by his men’s constant bickering and the long journey still ahead. Not to mention the arrogantly infuriating woman who seemed to care little for titles and common courtesy.

 “My problem is *you*,” she said, looking at him like he was filth. “I’m stuck among you inferior humans when I should be helping my people fight.”

 “Inferior?” Dayne half shouted, too angry to care that she had called him human like she wasn’t one.

 “My lord, this is getting us nowhere,” interrupted Raúl. “If anything, take her to see His Highness. He’ll get a laugh, at least.”

 “Yes, listen to the little carrot man. *He* speaks sense,” Anna said.

Raúl’s face went tomato red, causing Dayne to glare at her. Insulting him was one thing, insulting his men was something else entirely. Especially with Raúl’s hair.

 “We haven’t the rations, my lord,” said Grissom, the knight who had offered his hand. “There are few places where we can replenish our stores between here and our destination. But our orders were clear. We can’t go near those places.” The man rarely spoke, but he was trying to be helpful. He was also trying to get rid of Anna. He resented her strange intrusion into their group. Much like a close-knit family, they were encouraged to drop the formalities and titles in each other’s company. But add an outsider, and all the titles were required. “I have my own food,” Anna said, jerking Grissom from his thoughts. “We are wasting time and *time is of the essence*!”

 “Very well, you can come with us, but pray! Hold your tongue!” Dayne said, giving in to her for two reasons and two reasons only. For one, it would shut her up. For another, it seemed wise to take her with them. It was rare to see a young woman traveling alone. In fact, it was rare to see *anyone* traveling these days.

Women rarely carried swords and much less knew how to use them, yet this womanshe seemed both familiar and comfortable with the weight on her hip. He decided not to take any chances. “I’ll need your sword,” he said, earning a scowl.

She wanted to protestand vehemently, but she was smart enough to understand that this might be her best chance of getting to the king quickly. Otherwise, she might blunder around aimlessly until it was too late and the last star went out. So, sShe unbuckled her sword and handed it over, keeping quiet without a word.

 Especially about the dagger hidden safely in her left boot.

 “So, how do we get to your king?” she asked, but he didn’t answer.

He was too busy studying her sword, the long, slender, gently curving blade with strange runes etched down its length. He had never seen such a sword or even such craftsmanship. No kingdom around could craft it. “Hey! Earth to human! Are you listening to me?”

 “Ah, sorry, what?” he asked.

She glared at him in exasperation.

 “We’re going to exit this valley and pass through the mountains you see over there. It will take a week, at least,” Raúl said. She looked around, studying the surroundings. They didn’t look much different than they had before.

 “Surely there’s a faster way?”

 “No, there is not,” Raúl said as his horse shifted beneath him. Anna took a step back.

 “I don’t believe you. There is always a faster way. Perhaps you are just not aware of it yet,” she said, trying to hide her uneasiness at the horses. “How long until we reach the mountains?”

 “A few days, if we make good time and the weather holds.”

 “Then why don’t we get moving?”

 “After you,” Dayne said. Anna smiled coldly and brushed past him, all the while staying away from the horse he rode. If all the humans’ animals were this big, she had no desire to see any more of them. Dayne followed, cursing his nonexistent luck, while the rest of the group kept even further back, gossiping worse than old women over who this strange girl could be, with her cold demeanor and her stubborn insistence that she was better than them. Not to mention her fear of horses.

 It was a long, quiet day. Anna Lydia refused to talk to anyone, even when asked a direct question. The only one she seemed to like was Waydin, the company’s mage, who had dismounted and fallen into step beside her. He didn’t seem to mind her lack of conversation.

She wouldn’t talk to him, wouldn’t look at him, but tolerated his presence beside hers. Throughout the day, she kept looking at the sky, as if she were looking for something, but no one knew what, nor could they see anything unusual. The sky was a bright blue with only a few wispy clouds and the sun shone unhindered. There was no sign of a storm or anything out of the ordinary. The men simply couldn’t understand her fascination.

 But what was the most straining and stressful on their march was the lack of noise. There was, of course, the normal noise of men in steel, their swords and packs clanking against one another. There was also the sound of horses as they walked over the hard dirt. And there was the occasional curse when a horse tripped or stumbled, but there was no conversation.

No laughing or teasing. The men were used to acting like brothers, and the silence was killing them. Most of them decided then and there, if they hadn’t already, that they did not like the strange woman Anna Lydia. But if they were completely honest with themselves, they resented her intrusion.

 As soon as the sun began to set, Dayne called for a halt and dismounted. “It’s past time to call it a day.” The men silently agreed, , instead glaring at Anna Lydia as they went about tending to the horses and setting up camp.

Anna sat down outside the edge of activity, observing. But she soon became bored and began writing in a bound book she had pulled from her pack. She became so absorbed in her writing, and didn’t seem aware ofshe missed the sun’s setting. In fact, the lack of light didn’t seem to bother her at all. She simply acted as if she could see just fine, as if the sun were still shining brightly. She stayed that way late into the night, and it wasn’t until the second watch,only four hours after dusk, that did the men seeaw her move at all, and lie on the ground, using her skirt as a blanket and her elbow as a pillow.