

The Shift of Freedom - Zoe, Year 9, QLD

Go. Go. Go.

Run. Run. Run.

Those were the only words Seren Brokheart thought as she fled into the cover of darkness. Everything was falling into place. Her bag was full of the essentials, her twin, swords polished and sharp as ever, strapped to her back, and her timing was precise. Rain from the heavens poured down in thick streaks that clouded her vision and saturated her dark clothes but increased her concealment, just as she'd planned.

Seren dashed down the alleys of her town, tucking a loose strand of hazel hair into her damp hood, and replayed the two words in her head repeatedly. She had not cared for this village and its inhabitants for a while, so why should she stay any longer? Maybe age was an issue, but fifteen years in this place was far too long. Plus, she knew how to wield her swords and hunt for food in the forests of Xrailea.

Surely that was enough.

As she ran, she thought through her reasons of escape. To flee the town where her parents abandoned her mere hours after her birth; the one that her two oblivious adoptive parents had raised her in. The one in which she was bullied and nicknamed 'little birdie' after she shifted into the tiniest bird at the age of seven.

Magic was not accepted here. Since *Umbers*, *Glows*, and her kind, *Shifters*, were believed to be blessed by the Goddesses Sheyda and Iluma, and the people here had no tolerance for such beliefs, the two didn't meld well.

Seren approached the outer walls, readying herself to climb the large tree that grew towards the barrier. The townsfolk were meant to keep the gardens clean, especially near the walls, but no one had the heart to cut down this ancient jiora tree that, because of its age, bore the most delicious jiora fruit. Instead, they stripped the lowest branches so no one would attempt to climb.

But here was Seren, attempting to climb it. Using her satchel to extend her arm span so she could reach around the circumference of the tree, she propelled herself off the ground, steadying her legs on the trunk. The girl continued climbing, rapidly making it up high enough that there were branches she could grasp. She settled herself on one that felt sturdy enough to support her and leaned casually against the tree's trunk, savouring the cover it provided.

As the girl caught her breath, she relocated the wall and promptly identified the branch that would take her closest to it. Next, she would jump.

Seren shuffled along the thick tree limb, picking a singular ripe red jiorta fruit and stuffing it into her bag on the way, until it grew thin and bent with the force of her weight. Checking that her satchel was shut tightly, securely positioned on her shoulder, and tied to her belt, she lined up and prepared to launch herself onto the wall. Or that was the plan. In her preparation, she had tested to see if she could jump the six-and-a-half-foot gap onto a short landing surface, with no run up and on a beam like the branch she stood on now. But she had forgotten to factor in the obstacles. The excess leaves and branches posed an additional challenge, since they limited her visibility further. *As if the rain, clouds, and darkness of the night weren't enough*, Seren scoffed.

With scrutinising eyes, she assessed the extra hurdles. Most of them were weak little things, only a few were sturdy, but they were just out of reach not to be cared about.

With a hop, skip, and a jump, Seren was flying.

Past the cover of the old jiorta tree, she landed with a faint thud on the outer wall. Instantly, she ducked, her body flush against the top of the barrier in case anyone was watching. She was certain somebody was watching; they always were.

Ever since a man named Dunstan Wardler forced and enslaved most of Xrailea into a single kingdom, destroying all sense of freedom and peace, most villages concealed themselves, attempting to blend in with their legends. No one wanted to venture into Klerin, the kingdom that Dunstan created, because no one came out. Many small towns had become just as restrictive: people could enter, but no one was permitted to leave for fear of discovery. Even after Dunstan's death many years ago, terror still reigned, for his son Gunnar continued the tyranny.

Seren sprang off the wall into freedom, bracing her body and rolling at the last second to absorb the impact.

Crunch. First, she heard it. Then she smelled it. Citrusy and floral. Mayplia bushes. When crushed, their fruit released a strong fragrance that could be smelled for far further than it should.

Crap, Seren seethed, for surely the scent alone would alert the guards. She sprang out of her crouch and started her run.

She was free, but that would not last long.

As she ran, she heard shouts ring out from inside the walls, and Seren knew they had discovered her escape. She ran faster, putting as much distance as she could between herself and them.

When Seren could just make out the sound of their running through the heavy rain, she slowed to a jog and readied herself. She knew that she couldn't outrun them for too long, but she believed she could put up a decent fight. Until Seren finally saw them. There was more than she'd wished. Four guards ran towards her, weapons drawn, every speck of hope dissipating with the closing distance.

At least if she died, she'd die free.

As they advanced, and she could see their faces through the hazy darkness, Seren drew her swords from her back, the metal reflecting her ashen look, and took a shaky breath to steady herself. *I can do this, stay optimistic*, she chanted in her head.

She would not leave this realm without a fight.

The guards were so close, and she couldn't help but assess their faces. Seren knew them, their names, Elin, Jandar, Meira, and Aymon, their families, and their friends. She used to look up to them for protecting her home, but once she first shifted, they turned their backs on her, just like everyone else. Seren scowled at the reminder, using the bitterness to fuel her.

One of them was going to die, but at this point, Seren did not care if it was her. She hoped it wouldn't, but the outcome was practically inevitable.

The guards were silent as they crossed just outside her range, prepared to attack. One of them – Jandar – lunged, and the fight for freedom began.

Seren was easily outnumbered, but she used her ambidexterity and her dual weapons to her advantage. She tried to separate the parts of her mind that controlled each arm and acted on instinctive defence. The clang and screech of metal broke sharply through the dull repetition of the downpour as she parried their attacks. Agilely, she twisted and dashed to escape the other blades as they slashed. She landed a couple of blows on her pursuers, and they were enough to force them to slow to a manageable pace.

As Seren rolled to evade a lethal strike, another sword bit into her left arm, forcing her to drop one of her tools. The wound burned and bled, but she would not give up yet. She kept on moving, dodging and weaving, until she reached the attacker's unguarded area, his side.

Jandar whirled to defend the vulnerable spot, but Seren drove her blade into it before he could try.

She extracted the weapon from the lethal wound and dashed away from the bleeding body. The others, Elin, Meira, and Aymon, stood partially frozen as they stared at the corpse. She, too, was in shock, horrified to end someone's life for the first time.

Her attackers recovered from the loss quicker than she did. They used the distraction to crowd around her, circling her with no escape.

She was trapped.

Seren was going to die.

As the three raised their weapons to deliver the final blow, a bright light ripped through their victim, forcing them to shield their eyes before the blades could land. Then they were forcefully hurled backwards, and away from Seren. Iluma and Sheyda must have been watching over the girl, for she had just shifted into one of the only things that would help her now.

A dragon.

The beast was dark as the surrounding night, with a subtle blue shine and the size of a barn. The girl was astonished at her transformation, because this was the greatest and most undoubtedly the coolest creature that she had ever shifted into. Seren used her newfound tail to swipe at the guards once more, and her expansive wings to take off into the night, high above the clouds.

She was bruised.

And she was bloodied.

But she was *free*.