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Regicide

A
THESIS

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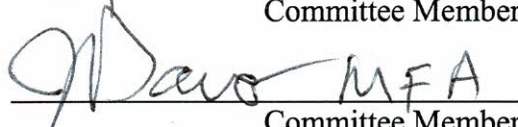
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THESIS ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Robert D. Abel

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REGICIDE is a Young Adult fantasy novel inspired by the works of Sarah J. Maas, Cinda Williams Chima, and Brandon Sanderson. It follows three different young adults as they struggle to come to terms with who they are versus how they present themselves in society. This novel confronts issues such as: accepting responsibility for one's actions, how far familial bonds can stretch without breaking, preconceived notions of class, femininity in a dangerous and male-dominated slum, what it means to be strong, and how to live with weakness.

Structure and pacing are some of the largest issues facing a plot driven work told from multiple viewpoints. This novel is structured based on the advice in Jessica Brody's *SAVE THE CAT! WRITES THE NOVEL*. To combat the difficulties inherent in creating an enticing new story within an established genre, this work's characters were developed and revised with Lacanian ideas of gender and sexuation in mind. REGICIDE will be an important addition to Young Adult fantasy and will contribute to the health of the genre with its infusion of new approaches and ideas.

REGICIDE

by

ROBERT D. ABEL

Prologue

Several years before the reign of King Malkai the Third:

The Girl with green eyes stabbed the bad man hurting her mam. She hated that she hadn't done so sooner. She vowed to get big and protect her mam. She would get out of that muddy part of town and move them somewhere nice. Somewhere with grass.

Yes, that would be nice.

#

The Brothers fought, princes, both. They dueled in the sand—boys cheered on by the men they'd one day lead. The younger brother had the upper hand. But the older brother's magic awakened and he lashed out. An accident, a grave transgression.

The King punished not the older, but the younger, instead.

#

The King sat, unmoved, as his younger son pleaded his case. The boy did not like his lot in life, at just twelve years old, he thought he knew how the world worked. He

wouldn't rebel and he wanted neither throne nor crown, so why not let him do what he wanted?

#

The Second Son sat by his mother's deathbed. He recalled the Holy Man's words and hoped. He hoped that if he prayed hard enough, Zekker might save his mother from whatever illness took her. But as the queen grew sicker, the Second Son's prayers changed too: Take her pain away, oh Zekker.

Chapter 1

Lex stumbled and fell to her hands and knees on the uneven ground, cursing the blindfold for what must have been the tenth time since Lucien's goons had pulled it over her head. She couldn't be certain of the time that had passed—that's the thing about blindfolds, they didn't just make walking through the muddy streets of the Fringe difficult, they also ensured that she had a very poor perception of time. But, if the slowly growing ache in her feet gave no clue, her nose did. Twice now, she'd noticed the fish and mildew smell of the shipyard mix and fade into the sour rubbish and rot odor of the warehouse district. These pups—Lex's favorite name to call the Brotherhood's ruffians, or ruffs—had led her and her uncle in circles for the better part of an hour.

Lex smiled to herself as she confirmed their location by the gritty feel of muddy gravel on her hands. They had barely left the docks she and her uncle, Kedrick, had met the ruffs on.

After one of those pups lifted her none too gently to her feet, she tried in vain to wipe the grit from her hands, only succeeding in dislodging a particularly sharp bit of gravel from her palm. She hadn't noticed that it had embedded itself in her hand at first,

but she definitely felt the sting when she wiped it away. "Thank the spirits they didn't bind my hands, at least." She winced as she realized she'd said it aloud and then hurried to divert their attention from the real reason she'd *tripped*. "Look at my hand." She stuck her hand out in the direction she guessed one of the pups stood. "This would have been my face if I hadn't had my hands to stop the fall."

"Women," scoffed one of the thugs said. "Always worried about their pretty faces."

"I think you should of taken a bit more care with yours, you ugly shite," said the second of the three pups. She'd remember his butchery of language anywhere. Was it really so difficult to pronounce his vowels properly? People like him gave Fringers a bad rep. Or at least, a worse one.

"You well?" Kedrick's voice sounded from a few feet to her right.

She grunted in the affirmative. The sooner they met with Lucien—a prospect that didn't exactly excite—the sooner she could get this damned sack off her head. She could deal with the sightlessness, though, as long as Lucien's goons didn't try anything. People saw her slight frame, her gender, and they judged her as weak, marked her for an easy target.

The city scent changed again as the putrid warehouse district mixed with the single most recognizable odor in the Fringe: The Chute—or more accurate, the slop pile fed by it. Every few days, the Highlanders dumped their waste down a chute cut through the hill that emptied out just south of the warehouse district which bordered the docks and shipyards built along the curve of the Renn River. Lex couldn't fault Lucien's meeting place—the smell would keep most people away.

Yet the fact that he had chosen such a recognizable portion of the city made the last hour of walking in circles rather pointless, save to annoy her. Equally frustrating, she'd bruised her knees and possibly bloodied her hand in her gambit. That would make climbing painful over the next couple of days.

As they approached the chute, her thoughts wandered, as they always did, to the merits of breathing through her mouth versus her nose—whether or not tasting the air was better than smelling it. When they finally came to a stop, someone knocked on what Lex guessed was a door and, a few heartbeats later, a lock clicked and poorly oiled hinges screeched.

One of the pups said, "Stairs down," before shoving her forward. Blind, she tensed for a fall as her foot met no resistance where she thought it would. But two hands on her shoulders stabilized her enough that she made it down the stairs upright, rather than toppling down ass over elbows. That would have been a rollicking good way of introducing herself to the most powerful crime lord in the city: *Hullo Lucien Darkmont, sir, my name is Lex. I'm our best climber. Oh and just ignore the bones protruding from my arms, they'll mend in no time.*

Lex reached the bottom and someone removed the sack from her head. She grimaced as she inhaled the dank cellar air and blinked to adjust to the torchlight. Mildewed sacks of something sat piled off to the left corner, two insubstantial—and half rotted—wooden beams masquerading as pillars pretended to support the ceiling above them, and a slim man with ashy blond hair stood dead center. She assessed him in a glance. The pompous shite wore a black and crimson doublet, dark breeches tucked into knee-high riding boots polished to the point that they actually gleamed with reflected

firelight, and a pretentious little half cape draped over his left shoulder. The only thing more screamingly noble than a half cloak was a surname not associated with a person's craft. Lucien /Darkmont/ had both.

She glanced over her shoulder and took in the room's other occupants as Kedrick emerged from the stairway, escorted by two ruffs wearing the crimson armbands that marked them members of the Darkmont Brotherhood. Two more of Lucien's pups stood on either side of the stairs, equally crimson sashed. Assuming their third escort watched the door at street level, the ruffs outnumbered her and Ked five to two. Lex flexed her wrist and felt the reassuring press of the one knife she'd managed to hide from the pups. It wouldn't make much difference, but it might give them a chance if this meeting turned.

Spirits damn her but she hated these kinds of negotiations, hated supposedly stronger people taking advantage of her.

She tried to swallow her unease away. She'd pushed Ked to accept this meeting after all. Bigger jobs, she reminded herself—careful not to speak her thoughts aloud. Bigger jobs so that one day she wouldn't *have* to take jobs. They'd made a decent living off smaller contracts, things Darkmont's organization would consider too small-time to take on. And what better way to score big than to get courted by Lucien—rutting—Darkmont himself?

Yet, what motivation could Darkmont have in offering them a chance to join his organization? True, they'd made a bit of a name for themselves with the Greenmont job, so they might become competition some day. But so far, their earnings were like a raindrop to Lucien's river.

A ruff guided Kedrick to Lex's left and removed his blindfold, leaving him blinking as he adjusted to the firelight, as well.

The blond man walked forward two steps, standing even with the torch on the left wall so that its light illuminated only half of his face, casting the other half in shadow—an intentional effect, no doubt. "Kedrick, good of you to join us tonight." Lucien's voice dripped with self-importance. "Had a nice midnight stroll through the city, did you?"

When her uncle said nothing, Lucien spread his arms wide. "And who have we here? My, what a lovely creature you have brought, Ked—Can I call you Ked? What's her name?" After the pup's inability to pronounce his vowels earlier, Lucien's precise diction made Lex's skin crawl. She'd dealt with thugs all her life, but Lucien? He made her feel young again, scared, hiding from the men her mam brought home.

Kedrick veritably growled, "Leave her out of this. Don't touch her."

"But Ked, are you not the one who brought her into this in the first place? No need to be so," he reached out a hand and tucked a lock of her shoulder length brown hair behind her right ear, "touchy." Lex clenched her teeth and only barely restrained the urge to slap his hand as he brushed his fingers down her cheek. "I mean her no ill, of course. I gave you my word that you and your," he looked Lex slowly up and down, "partner, would come to no harm at this little meeting of ours." Lucien's greasy gaze, as much as the lingering sensation of his touch on her skin left her feeling like she'd taken a dip in a stagnant pond, and everywhere his eyes had touched remained covered in the filmy scum floating on its surface.

She clenched her fists at her side, feeling warm blood mingling with gravel grit, and fought off the urge to scrub the filth—both real and imagined—from her skin.

She wanted to correct Darkmont, to tell him she and Ked weren't married. She wasn't one of those other Fringe girls who married a man twice her age for protection. Seventeen or not, she didn't need it. But she wouldn't give away any information for free.

"If you have something to say, say it to me, not to Ked."

"Oh my, so the cat has claws." Lucien looked down at Lex's hands, still clenched at her sides, where a faint line of blood trickled between her fingers. He clucked his tongue and said, "And what is your name?"

"Lex."

"Hmmm, such a decidedly masculine name for one so fair. Short for Alexandra no doubt?"

She had long ago stopped going by her given name. No one on the streets took a slight girl named Alexandra seriously.

When Lex refused to answer him, Lucien's seemingly ever-present smile faltered if only for a moment. He turned back to Kedrick and said, "So Ked, we have business to discuss, I believe. Have you given thought to my offer?"

"I talked it over with the crew," Kedrick replied. "We ain't willing to give ourselves to you to bugger us like some poor dame on her wedding night who just wants a little protection. We ain't that desperate."

Lex bit the inside of her cheek, willing herself not to smile at Kedrick's accent. He'd said he actually wanted Lucien to underestimate him, so he'd planned to speak with a thick, uncultured mash of Common. But surely that was a bit much.

"That is quite sad news," Lucien said at last. "I had so been hoping to procure certain," he waved a hand in a small circle, "talents your motley bunch boasts."

"What talents?" Ked asked.

Lucien walked away a few paces. "You must know I've had my eye on your crew for quite some time. For a group so small as yours to pull off the jobs you have?" He turned back to face them, arms outstretched. "I must say, that Greenmont job you pulled off last month? Visionary. How *did* you do it?" He waved one airy hand. "We could have pulled it off, to be sure. But I would have had at least double crew."

The job in question had proven a challenge, but why bring it up? Was it just that few had ever attempted a job on such a powerful lord as Walden Greenmont? His family essentially ran the entire southeastern portion of the Renmarr, himself sitting on the king's inner council.

They'd been hired to plant evidence of a secret alliance between Lord Walden and the recently widowed Lady Calley of Eastveil. The hardest part was breaking into Greenmont's personal safe to use his seal on the falsified documents. In truth, they'd only managed it because one of their crew members happened to be a rather well known locksmith—

"You're after Bozarth," Lex gasped. The realization struck her like a fist to her gut. Boz's reputation gave him unique access to houses in the wealthier districts of the lower city, and even some of the noble manor houses in the Highland. One of the best locksmiths around, and one with a questionable moral code—or at least a casual disregard for property laws who felt that if he could steal something, he should—to boot, would be a boon to any criminal organization.

Kedrick glanced at Lex. She read a flash of anger in that brief eye contact. Ay, she'd screwed up this time. Why couldn't she keep her internal thoughts from passing her lips?

This meeting could take a turn for the worse at any moment, now that Lucien's motivations had come out. She expected a shift in the man's demeanor, a reckless headlong charge at their now fortified position that would leave them no choice but to fight back. Except in this scenario, they, not Lucien, had the disadvantage. Outnumbered, and basically unarmed, they'd be hard-pressed to escape with their lives if the meeting devolved into violence.

"Alas, I have been found out." Lucien opened his hands, palms up to them. "Yes, the Locksmith is one of the talents I seek." He slid his oily gaze once more up and down Lex's body, tightly bound as she was in dark fighting leathers over the rough gray cotton tunic that concealed her knife. "Among others."

Lucien turned back to Kedrick and said, "So Ked, where does this leave us? I am at a disadvantage in that you know what I want, but you have yet to tell me what you want."

"We want your resources and connections. We have our eyes on a couple marks that might could prove troublesome to move. Need your fences."

"Reasonable. What kind of 'marks' are you targeting?"

Lex scoffed. "Why would we tell you that? If these negotiations go bad, we can't have ya swiping our score." She immediately regretted having spoken, thus drawing Lucien's attention back to her.

"Yes, Lex. Quite shrewd indeed." He cocked an eyebrow at her and went on, "You can't blame a businessman such as myself for trying. As I said, I'm at a disadvantage now." But he certainly did not look disadvantaged as he began pacing lazily back and forth across the room.

"In any case, what do I get in exchange for allowing you access to my web of resources?"

Lex felt that calling it a *web* seemed apt. For what was Lucien if not a spider spinning his web to ensnare the unwitting fly. Yet, she worried that they were indeed the fly, already entangled, infected by Lucien's paralytic venom, waiting to die.

"Access to my resources." Kedrick replied evenly, apparently unmolested by thoughts similar to those that ran through Lex's mind. Unmolested, but not unaware, she hoped. "You can contract my crew, or individual members of it, for half the rate we'd usually charge."

"Ahhh, well played Ked. You and the kitten are quite the refreshing change from my usual business dealings. You leverage what I want so well. Despite your rough manners—or lack thereof, I suppose—you have proven shrewd. And what, may I ask would this 'half' the rate come to?"

"If you contract the whole crew, twenty percent's our cut. Or five percent for each person without the whole crew. Dirty jobs cost more. Extra five percent total."

Lucien stopped pacing directly in front of Kedrick and asked, "And what defines a dirty job, Ked?"

Her uncle shrugged. "Killings, kidnappings, and the like." He paused and then added, "Basically if the punishment involves losing limbs or dangling from a noose, it'll cost extra."

"Pragmatic. Higher risk, higher reward. Deal." Lucien reached his hand out, offering it to Kedrick.

Her uncle stared at it for a moment, his eyes a little wide, like he couldn't believe it had been so easy, then clasped wrists with the crime lord to seal the deal. Lucien turned to Lex, gently grasped right hand, still clenched in a fist at her side, and brought it to his lips. He planted a long kiss across her knuckles where the blood from her palm had seeped between the gaps in her fingers. He met her eyes with his as he drew back from his kiss, but did not release her hand. Lex felt very much a scared cat—wanting to arch her back and hiss—as Lucien licked her blood from his lips without breaking eye contact.

What had they just gotten themselves into?

#

Darkness clung to the corners and close-packed streets of the Fringe. The faint light from the waning crescent moon and dim starlight did little to illuminate the ramshackle buildings of the lower city. Lex's boots squelched in what most Fringers called *mud* to avoid thinking about what else it might include. Just one of many things she envied the nicer portions of the city.

Walking through the Fringe at night, however, brought more risk than stepping in one such puddle. Yet, as Lex made her way home from Kedrick's house, she had to remind herself to stay alert despite the events of their meeting with Lucien running through her mind. She scanned the mouth of each alley she approached. She kept her

hand ready to pull her one knife—the only one she'd brought to the rendezvous with Lucien—from its spot in her sleeve. Eyes occupied with searching for threats, she stepped directly into a particularly deep puddle, sinking to mid-shin in rancid water.

She pulled her foot out and shook, sending clumps of substances she tried not to identify splashing back into the "water." She cursed herself for not taking Ked up on his offer to walk her home. He always offered to escort her, but walking the extra few blocks seemed trivial enough that she seldom took him up on the offer. *One of these days, Lex, you'll realize that relying on others isn't weakness*, he'd said once. Maybe she should have taken him up on the offer tonight. With an extra set of eyes to watch for trouble, she might have seen that spirits damned puddle.

She'd stepped in them before, and would likely do so again, yet somehow, that thought brought her little comfort as she resumed her walk, not relishing the idea of having to clean the muck from her leathers again.

With only four blocks to go before she reached her flat, she began to relax, focusing more on the ground than alleys. She pivoted to step around one of the longer puddles when movement caught her eye and she stopped to peer into the darkness. She stood, pulse racing, at a crossroads of sorts—two alleys opening at roughly the same place on opposite sides of the street. A sound in the darkness behind her made her glance over her shoulder, but in the low light, she couldn't make out what had caused it. Lex swung her attention back to the alleyway ahead of her in time to see two men step from the darkness. One had a cudgel, while the other's fists glinted with iron knuckles.

"Give us your coin, girl, and we won't even hit ya too hard," said the one on the right, his voice raspy like he had something sharp permanently in his throat.

Too late, she remembered the sound behind her. Arms gripped her around the waist, pinning hers to her sides. She struggled for the knife in her sleeve, but couldn't quite get her fingers to it. She thrashed and felt his hot breath on her neck as he adjusted his grip. She stomped down on the man's instep and threw her head back into the bridge of his nose. He grunted and let go. She turned and drew her knife, tracing it across his throat before turning to face the remaining two men.

She ducked as the first man swung the cudgel and rolled clear of the second man's kick. As he brought his foot down just inches from her left hand, she drew the knife across the back of his knee. He dropped to the ground as he screamed in pain.

The first man recovered from the momentum of his missed blow and swung again at Lex, who was still on hands and knees in the mud. She only had time to clench her left arm to her side to protect her ribs. The impact of the baton slamming into her arm sent a shock of agony radiating all the way up her shoulder and neck.

She grunted and staggered to her feet as the man raised the baton over his head to deliver a two handed blow. Off balance with no time to dodge, she lurched forward, jamming the knife into the man's eye. He crumpled to the ground screaming all the while.

The second man, still on the ground, grabbed her by the legs and yanked. She dropped the knife and collapsed face first in the mud. Lex rolled over onto her back just as the man thrust his weight on top of her. He found her neck with his left hand. He pressed her down into the mud, keeping his face just out of reach. She scrambled to find anything she could hit or punch or claw at to get the man off of her.

He drew a knife from his belt with his right hand and said, "Wasn't supposed to mark your face." He pressed the blade of his knife to her cheek, its cold blade like fire against her skin. "But accidents happen."

Cold fear flooded her belly. She'd faced knives before, been cut and even stabbed on occasion—knife fights rarely ended with both parties unscathed. Yet, pinned on her back in the mud of an alley, this man targeting her specifically? Bile rose in her throat, but she swallowed it down, pushing the fear away with it.

She spat up at his face and he pulled the knife away to wipe the spittle from his eyes. She punched him in the crook of the left elbow collapsing him fully on top of her. She bucked her hips and pushed up on his shoulders with all her strength and rolled out from under him.

She found her knife in the mud and turned back to face him as he dove at her. She threw her knife hand up, driving it into his chest as he crashed into her. Hot pain shot through her left bicep at the impact, but she held the knife in place as his weight brought them both back down.

They lay there together in the mud, strangely intimate, his head on her chest like a babe at his mother's breast. He groaned in pain, not quite still, not quite moving as he died.

When, at last, his breathing had stopped, she tried to push his oppressive weight from her body, but her left arm screamed in protest. She looked down to see his knife had sliced deep on the outside of her left bicep, just below the shoulder. She took several deep breaths to focus on anything but the pain and then tried once more.

Using only one arm, it took several minutes of struggling to climb out from beneath him. When she did, she pushed away, sliding through the mud until her back hit the solid wall of the alleyway. She sat there for some time trying to catch her breath and calm her thunderous heart as tears fell unbidden and sobs wracked her body.

She cried in frustration for her stupidity, carelessness, all of which she equated with the weakness she tried so hard to distance herself from. She cried for their deaths, even knowing that killing them meant she survived another day.

She had killed before, of course. Few people in her area of the lower city made it past fourteen without taking at least one life, usually in self-defense, occasionally in malice. She had claimed her first at twelve. She'd come home to see a man beating her mother and she'd sobbed as she'd stabbed him with Mam's kitchen knife until he couldn't hurt her mother anymore.

Lex had killed before, then and several times in the intervening years. She hated killing, but in the Fringe, sometimes people had to do things they hated if they wanted to survive. Her duties in her uncle's crew sometimes required killings, and she always performed on the job. But that was a passionless sort of murder, one she could detach herself from. One she could, not forget, exactly—she would likely never forget the faces of those whose lives she'd taken—but one she could live with and move past, most of the time.

But tonight, as with her first? Though necessary for survival, they were anything but passionless. She thought about the third and final life she'd taken that night, the desperate struggle in the mud, the knee jerk reaction to bring the knife up as he'd leapt for her. The way he'd drawn his last breath laying so close, almost embracing her as he died.

Bile rose in her throat once more, but she didn't force it back down this time. She turned and retched into the mud beside her, crying all the more for that weakness, too.

Some time after the sobs ceased and her tears ran out, she pushed to her feet, sliding up the rough stone wall of the alley. Her head swam from blood loss and she instinctively pulled her left arm close to her body, groaning as fresh pain, sharp and hot from the gash on her shoulder, dull and stiff from the cudgel. She didn't know which hurt worse, but she knew she needed to wrap the gash, at least.

She staggered the remaining few blocks and turned down a familiar alley, rummaged through her trousers for her key and turned it in the lock, pushing into her flat, her home. She stumbled into the kitchen and lit a small lamp to work by. She tore off her tunic and dumped the last dregs of water from her washing basin on the gash, sucking air between her teeth as the chill water stung her open wound. Lex dug through a box and withdrew some bandages. She lacked the energy to properly clean the cut—that would be a problem for the morning—but wrapped her arm as tight as she could before leaving a trail of muddied and bloodied clothes from table to bed.

#

Lex opened her eyes to find sunlight streaming in from the narrow slit in the wall that passed for a window. A key turned in the lock and her door swung open, revealing an aged and slightly hunch backed woman with a kindly, if wrinkled face underneath beneath a full head of gray-white hair.

"Grans," Lex greeted sleepily. "What are you doing here so early?"

"Early, child? Nay, tis nigh on midday. But what happened here?" Her grandmother eyed the trail of clothes and bent to lift Lex's tunic, now caked in dried blood and dirt. She dropped it and brought her hand to her lips. "Are you well, Lexi?"

Like a hammer striking stone, the memories of last night flooded back, and with them, so too returned the tears.

"Oh Sweetling, let me see you. What has happened? No, no don't stand." She examined the once-clean but now burnt-red bandage on Lex's left arm. "Sit and stay here. I will be right back with Eva and we will get you cleaned up straight away. Don't you move, now." Lex nodded and closed her eyes again.

When she reopened them some time later, Kedrick's wife—Eva—stood profile to Lex talking in hushed tones with her husband. Eva, only about eight years older than Lex, had dark blond hair that resembled damp straw. She must have been cooking when Grans fetched her because she still wore a dirty apron over the threadbare fabric of her dress. She stood before a kettle that she'd apparently been using to heat the water for the now steaming tub that sat in what passed for Lex's kitchen.

Grans approached the bed where Lex still sat, wrapped in sheets. "There now, Sweetling, my darling granddaughter. All will be well again." She pulled Lex's head gently to her, careful not to disturb the injured arm. Lex leaned into her grandmother's belly as the tears returned. Why could she not stop crying? How had her tears not run out yet? The thought struck her as so odd that she began chuckling, quiet at first, wracked with intermittent sobs, but it grew into a healthy laughter, and all the while, Grans held her.

Kedrick approached, sweat-damp dark hair starting to stick to his face, despite the chill early spring day, having set two more buckets of water near the kettle. "What happened, Lex?" He asked, but before she could even attempt an explanation, his wife shooed him out of the room.

"Thank you, love. Now go home while we get her cleaned up. We'll take good care of her." He opened his mouth as if to protest but Eva cut him off. "Tis improper for you to be here when she's in this state of undress. Uncle or not, you gotta leave. Out, you. We'll be along when she's ready." Eva's accent, though not as thick as Kedrick's, always took on a rolling lilt when dealing with her stubborn husband.

Her uncle turned and glanced quickly at Lex and nodded once in farewell, then did as his wife had bidden.

"Come now, Lexi," her Grans said, "the water ought to be about right now. Let's get you cleaned up." Grans offered a hand to Lex, who slowly took it and stood from bed, dropping her sheet to the floor. "Spirits alive, child, if you aren't a mess."

Lex looked down at her bare form and saw that the gore and soaked through her tunic and mud had seeped in, down her chest, almost to her navel. Blood had dried in irregular patterns all up and down her arms looking brownish-red spider webs crisscrossing her forearms. She still cradled her injured left arm against her breast, unwilling to straighten it.

"How much of this is your blood, Lexi?" Gran asked, eyeing the bandage and ugly dark bruise that spread across her upper arm.

Lex shrugged—even that motion reigniting the pain in her arm—and let her grandmother guide her to the tub. She climbed in and sat awkwardly, lowering herself,

using only her right hand. Eva had found the rags and a small bowl Lex used for bathing and passed the dish to Grans. Together, they cleaned her back and shoulders, neck and chest, their movements practiced—but not ungentle—as they dumped water from the small bowl and wiped away the filth.

They worked in relative silence until they reached for her injured left arm. "We have to move your arm now." Eva said and grasped Lex by the wrist. Slowly, ever so slowly, she helped Lex to straighten it. Soaking in the warm tub water had done little to loosen the stiff muscles of her arm. The simple act of straightening it loosed a new wave of agony through her, feeling as if the muscles had fused together in her sleep, and now they tore, rending bicep and forearm in two. She gasped and cried out as the muscles stretched and pulled at the gash, as well.

But the pain shocked her brain out of its fog. She told the story of her walk home and the assault that followed. By the time she finished her tale, Lex shivered not just from the now cold water, but from the retelling itself. The two women sat in silence, Eva's mouth agape and Grans stared wide-eyed at her granddaughter. So Lex stood and took the rag from Eva to wipe away what little grime on her legs that hadn't yielded to the warmth of the water. She stepped dripping from the tub into a towel that Grans held out for her. Lex dried off and dressed, donning smallclothes and a large, loose fitting tunic that hung nearly to her knees.

Finally, Eva broke the silence. She spoke, her voice soft like speaking to a scared animal. "You're so brave. So strong, Lex. I wouldn't have survived that at all, and with only a bruise and a gash to mark your skin?" She shook her head.

Brave? Strong? She had panicked when the man pressed his knife to her cheek. She could barely think straight for the sheer helplessness she had felt. No, not brave. How could Eva claim she'd been brave?

And strong? She had wept for what felt like hours in the mud. She had wept through her retelling of the story, and as Grans had held her on the bed. Not strong either.

"Look at me, Sweetling." Her Grans took hold of Lex's still tear streaked face and turned her head to lock their eyes. "You survived. You won. You will endure. Survive and endure, that is all any of us can do." The words that her Grans had taught to her so many years ago after her mother's death.

Survive and endure.

Words that she had taken to heart at the time, words she tried to live by. To be strong, she had to survive and endure.

"And you did that so well, sweet girl. It is well to cry. Good even, at times. When you have nothing to cry and scream about, you lose your ability to fight, to survive and endure."

Lex nodded, knowing that if she spoke, her voice would betray her and the sobs would return.

Despite Grans' words, she hated crying. Hated showing weakness. But maybe her Grans had a point. Perhaps strength meant more than never showing vulnerability. Maybe Ked had a point. Perhaps asking for help wasn't a weakness. Or if it was perhaps having strength was the courage to survive the pain and endure the weakness.

"Let's go get ya a bite to eat, mkay? I'd just about got it all done before Grans came in earlier. Cmon, up ya go."

Chapter 2

A book slammed shut, startling Jairen from his reverie. He looked around to gather his bearings, heart racing. He sat on the cushioned window seat of his tower room overlooking the training yard far below. Blue carpet lined the floor and leather couches sat around an empty hearth off to one side. Off to the other, a sturdy wooden table with four chairs of matching elm sitting around it. Jairen's uncle, Luca, occupied one chair, a stack of books to his left, a stack of scrolls to his right. Their gazes met and, despite sitting at a slightly higher elevation than his uncle, Jairen felt very much the hare beneath Luca's hawkish gaze.

"Sorry, uncle," Jairen said, rubbing one eye, "I seem to have dozed off."

"I would say so, yes." Luca sighed and reopened the leather bound tome.

Jairen opened his mouth to say something when a knock sounded at the door and a familiar voice called from without. "Your Highness, I've brought your tea service."

"Come in," he called back.

The door cracked open and a thin waif of a girl in the drab brown dress and gray apron of the castle servants shuffled in sideways, bracing a silver tray and tea service on

her hip. Jairen stood from his seat and took the tray as Sorcha struggled to close the door behind her.

"My prince, you mustn't—"

"Oh I mustn't, mustn't I? And by what right do you forbid me?" He smiled and winked to show that he wasn't angry, but the girl had her eyes downcast, dark locks obscuring her face.

"My sincerest apologies my prince. I meant no offense." She bowed low and held the posture.

Jairen set the tray on the tables and turned back to the girl. He put a hand on her shoulder and said, "Sorcha, we go through this same routine far too often. You should know by now that I said that in jest."

"Y-yes, Your Highness. My apologies, Your Highness," she said, eyes still on the floor, despite having risen from her bow.

He used his thumb and forefinger to lift her chin and meet his gaze. "Your pretty eyes are wasted if you look down all the time."

She blushed and tried to turn away, but he smiled and said, "Chin up. Now, about that tea?"

Sorcha set about preparing the tea service. When she'd finished mixing the spoonful of honey into his cup, and the two sugar cubes with milk into Luca's, she bowed and left, having pointedly not looked in Jairen's direction the entire time. He feared he really had gone too far that time.

"You shouldn't tease her so," Luca said from behind the rim of his teacup.

Jairen had to admit Luca was probably right. "She does have pretty eyes, though."

"She fancies you, you know."

Jairen waved a hand to dismiss the subject. "You're right, of course. It's just, well—she is one of the few people who doesn't treat me like I'm a person—" like I'm not a Second Son—"—so sometimes I forget that she's a servant and I can't help but tease her a bit." He shrugged. "It's all in good fun, or at least, I mean no harm by it. I think she knows that, at the end of the day."

"You have some seriously misguided world views, nephew, if you truly think that way. And love is anything but reasonable."

"Too true, Uncle. Just take Cici for example."

Luca set his teacup on the desk before him and sighed. "That's not love, and you know it."

"Lust, then?"

"Entrapment, more like."

"Why, just the other day, I would swear Cici was coming on to me." Jairen took a sip of his tea—Sorcha had done an excellent job preparing it, as usual. The earthy taste of black tea mixed so well with a touch of honey. Honestly, how could anyone take their tea with sugar?—and continued, "She practically untied my robe when I ran into her as I was leaving the baths."

"Didn't your father tell you to avoid using the baths during high traffic times? I think he'd be wroth with you if you fell prey to Ms. Calley—or any of the noble girls seeking to improve their station, for that matter."

"You know how he is, uncle. He gets angry if I sneeze wrong." He waved his left hand. "And what an asinine request that was, anyhow. Zekker's truth, uncle," he pointed

his teacup at Luca, "wouldn't I be less likely to have similar near illicit encounters if the baths were crowded? Cici's not half so brazen as to do something like that with witnesses around."

Luca sighed as he finished his first cup of tea. He poured himself a second and changed the subject. "We're not getting very far in your lessons, are we?"

"Why rush them, Uncle?" Jairen sat in the chair directly across from the older man. "Given my father's health, I'll likely be older than you before Malkai sits on the Alabaster Throne. Let me learn at my leisure. It will be a long time yet before I must—how do you always put it?" He affected a rather poor imitation of his uncle's voice, "assume my duty to throne and kingdom." He kicked his legs up on the table, nearly knocking the tea service over in the process. "Besides, I already understand all that nonsense anyway." He gestured to the book sitting directly before his uncle titled, *Grain: The Rise and Fall of Kingdoms*. "You know I've already read it once."

"The ability to recall word for word something you've previously read does not mean you understand why something is the way it is," Luca said in the voice that he seemed to reserve exclusively for Jairen's particular brand of laziness.

Jairen recognized a challenge when he saw one. He took his feet off the table and leaned forward to begin his summary explanation of the grain market. "The grain merchants have only a finite amount of grain, whereas the seething mass of hoi polloi out there," to which he gestured out his window at the lower portion of the city, "in the Fringe—and beyond really—reproduce faster than the grain merchants can increase their yields. Thus, the price of grain rises." He smiled, sipped from his teacup, and awaited his uncle's praise.

The look Luca aimed at Jairen could have withered a tree. Heat bloomed in Jairen's cheeks as he studied his half empty teacup.

"You never cease to amaze me," Luca said, and Jairen knew without looking from his tea that his uncle shook his head. "Your blatant overconfidence in nearly everything you do is really quite astounding. Nothing you said was wrong, mind you. Yet your attitude certainly was. Your blithe disregard for the hoi polloi—as you put it—is unsettling at best." He stood and gathered his things to leave. "They," he gestured out the same window Jairen had, moments ago, "are for whom you will help your brother govern one day. I know you don't want to be an adviser. But you'll make a damn good one someday—if you ever shed that mask of indifference. Hell, you'd even have made a good king, I'd wager, had you been born first. But not with that attitude."

Jairen picked at his fingernails. He'd just disappointed perhaps the only man outside of Malkai that actually put in any effort on his behalf. He opened his mouth to apologize, but words, now that he truly needed them, failed him.

Luca stopped by the door and turned back to say, "Jairen, I know this time of year is difficult for you. And I'm sorry if this sounds callous, but it has been four years. You need to let it go. She's gone, Jairen. Forgive yourself and move on."

Jairen shot from his chair, spilling the remnants of the tea service as his legs hit the table. "How can you say that?" He balled his fists and his vision blurred. "You don't understand, uncle," he took a shaky breath as the first of his tears fell.

"I understand that she loved you, and that seeing you like this would have hurt her more than the disease that took her ever could." The door closed, leaving Jairen alone. Both Malkai and Luca had said it wasn't his fault, that they didn't blame him for his

mother's death. *It was an illness. You couldn't have stopped it.* But he'd seen her in such pain and been weak. He couldn't bear watching her waste away. So he'd prayed, at first for her recovery, later for Zekker to stop her pain. Zekker had listened to the latter, and Queen Madeline had drawn her last choking breaths as Jairen held her hands, eyes closed in prayer, tears leaking out the sides.

If only he'd prayed harder for her recovery. If only he'd been stronger during the transference ritual, maybe she'd still be alive.

He wept until his tears ran out, only marking the passage of time by way of the setting sun's progress through the sky and Sorcha's knock on the door to tell him the banquet would be starting within the hour.

He sighed, as much as he didn't want to attend, as much as he wanted to hide away and ignore the stupid tradition, he owed his mother this much. He'd go to dinner and hold inane conversation with the frivolous nobles that had gathered to pay homage to his mother, dead now these four years.

He splashed water on his face from a basin by the window and donned a sapphire doublet emblazoned with the crowned falcon in flight and unsheathed sword of his house. He left his tower and made his way to the great hall, exchanging only minimal pleasantries with various lords and ladies.

Most addressed him with outward deference for, Second Son or not, he was still a prince, still a member of the royal family. No, their slights came in the form of not bowing low enough, or failing to address him by a title—or, when they did, pausing too long before adding the title as if using it only as an afterthought. Subtle needles in conversation, barely enough to draw blood. Yet, by the time he'd reached the grand

double doors to the banquet hall, he felt tired, bloodless—due in no small part from his mood going into the night.

He'd just reached the crier who would announce his entry when a flash of blond hair and green lace caught his eye—and his arm.

Claudia Calley, only daughter of the recently widowed Lady Eloise Calley, had long blond hair, blue eyes, and enticing lips. Today, she wore an elegant emerald-green dress that, though it hugged her curves nicely, rose all the way to her collarbones, thus—surprisingly—protecting her modesty.

"Cici," he said, by way of greeting.

"Good evening, my lord."

In spite of his mood, he smiled at the throaty way she drawled out *my lord*, marking the term as more flirt than slight as he'd expect from other nobles.

The double doors opened and the crier announced, "The Lady Claudia Calley, escorted by Second Prince, Jairen Miraxes."

Bollocks. He hadn't meant to be announced with Cici, though, judging by the sly smile on her lips as she looked up at him, she'd certainly meant it that way. Not only had the crier—quite predictably—emphasized that he was the second, not first, prince, but he'd also likely face his father's ire for the simple act of being announced as escorting Cici.

Jairen gritted his teeth at the inevitable confrontation that would arise from this. Rumors regarding Jairen's love life already ran rampant throughout the castle, and King Dalen had warned him on countless occasions not to do anything to fuel them—or worse,

to actualize them. Cici was the latest—and most tenacious—in a long line of mid-tier ladies to seek his favor.

Jairen escorted Cici down the stairs to the banquet hall, a court smile devoid of any real joy affixed on his lips as he fought the urge to hurry Cici along.

An usher stepped forward to greet the pair and directed Cici to her assigned seat for the evening's meal. Jairen brushed his lips across her knuckles, as was expected, and continued to his seat at the high table. The room, itself, held four long tables draped in cream colored cloth and adorned with all manner of breads and cheeses. Guests milled about in polite conversation over glasses of wine that white-clad servants delivered on silver trays. The high table, set on a raised dais of sorts and crossed the head of the room, running perpendicular to the other four tables. It hosted seats for King Dalen's inner council, as well as Luca, Malkai, Jairen, and an empty seat to the King's right, in honor of Jairen's mother.

The sight of her empty chair hit Jairen like a punch to the gut, simultaneously making him gasp for breath and force down a sudden wave of nausea. What a morbid tradition. Holding a funeral banquet in memory of her death had been one thing. But to hold a subsequent one each year on the day of her passing—this to mark the fourth year since Jairen's prayers had killed her—seemed more his punishment for her death than celebration of her life.

The dinner passed in an endless blur. He remembered none of the specifics save that he wished more than anything that it would end. Some nobles, including his father, gave speeches and drank toasts. Jairen had downed his first glass of wine but the servants had conveniently forgotten to refill his cup. So he sat in deplorable sobriety, not even

tasting what little food he ate until the dessert course came and went, marking it as acceptable to retire for the evening.

He stood, made his goodbyes to father, uncle, and brother, and returned to his room. He kicked out of his boots and pulled off his doublet, removed his belt but climbed into his monstrous canopied bed without removing his breeches. He just hadn't the energy.

He'd barely slept over the past few days, and having had his few moments of slumber interrupted by *that* dream, he offered a silent prayer that he would find restful sleep.

Jairen was sure he'd only barely closed his eyes when the dream took him, a memory as real at seventeen as when he'd lived it at age thirteen.

The underbelly of the palace smelled dreary like wet stone and dead grass. Jairen hated this portion of the castle—with its unadorned gray stone walls, floors, and ceilings. These identical corridors with their weird smell and weirder sounds made Jairen's palms slick with sweat. He walked hand in hand with his queen mother, following a few steps behind his elder brother and king father. The hair on Jairen's neck stood on end not just due to the four sets of footsteps echoing off the stone sounding very much the sepulchral stampede.

How did the others look so calm? Jairen wasn't even three full years younger than his brother, but he had to admit, Malkai always walked with a regal determination—shoulders set, perfect posture, long strides—that Jairen could never match.

Especially today.

He'd known this day would come, of course. His parents had warned him about it when he'd first developed the ability to channel Zekker's Will almost a year prior. Basic lessons had seen him nurture the power, and, despite knowing that he wouldn't keep the magic for himself, he'd applied himself to its study, enjoying every moment.

He'd almost convinced himself that this day would never come. Yet come, it had, and far too soon. It wasn't fair that he should have his magic taken away just so that Malkai could grow stronger. But he was a Second Son, and the law said that no Second Son could wield the Will, be they low-tier noble or prince.

"Father, will," he swallowed and wiped his free hand on his trousers, "will it hurt?" He hadn't forgotten about the ceremony, not exactly. But he'd done his best not to think about it in the intervening months. Yet, now that they were minutes from the ritual, fear like sour milk, roiled in his gut.

King Dalen stopped walking, but didn't turn to face Jairen as he answered. "I do not know, son." *Son?* His father reserved that word for Malkai, alone. Dalen rubbed the back on his neck, where his hairline should have started. When he continued, his words came slow. "I have never undergone this ceremony, leastwise not the part that you will experience. Ask your uncle when we arrive."

Malkai glanced over his shoulder and met Jairen's gaze. The crown prince's eyes had the look of a dog who'd been caught destroying a down pillow—culpable. That look even more than his father's hesitation gave Jairen pause.

He looked at his mother, now only barely taller than he, and furrowed his brow. His mother always had a way of knowing Jairen's heart, and could usually assuage his

fears. She squeezed his hand once and gave a wan smile that didn't reach her eyes, then continued after his father and brother, ever dragging Jairen along in their wake.

They turned a corner and approached the most unnerving portion of the already strange underkeep—the Undercroft. Though not exactly a crypt, a—supposedly—unoccupied blue alabaster sarcophagus sat beyond a bronze door carved with the six pointed Star of Zekker. The sarcophagus itself was said to encompass all of Zekker's Will, and was therefore the most sacred place in the entire Renmarran Empire. It also happened to be the only safe place to remove the Will from another person without killing them.

Jairen stopped short, his sweat-slick hand slipping from his mother's grip. He did not want to do this. Why did he have to do this? He knew why, of course, on the abstract level that one knows of historical events, facts learned on rote from dusty tomes and decaying scrolls. Yet, to know was not to understand.

He had no plans of plunging the empire into civil war, no desire to rule, nor to oppose his brother's right to do so. "So why should I have my magic ripped out and given to Malkai?" He spoke the thought aloud. His mother placed a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. He half turned and looked into her almost inhumanly green eyes that always reminded him of the northern pine forests in her homeland of Timberlan Province. But for once, they didn't comfort him in the slightest. Purple bags poorly concealed by cosmetics showed that she'd slept very little last night.

Yet, she smiled, this one almost reaching her eyes, and said, "Ripped is perhaps a mite dramatic, dear. Siphoned would be more appropriate."

She reached out her hand and once Jairen took it, she bent and whispered into his ear. "Besides, losing Zekker's gift may well offer," she paused and seemed to reconsider her words, "other avenues in your life as you mature."

Jairen wanted to ask what she meant, why she'd emphasized *other*, why she'd whispered like it was their secret, alone. But the moment was lost as Jairen's uncle, Luca, and the High Zekkite emerged from the Undercroft. Luca shared only one trait in common with the king—the gray-blue eyes of house Miraxes. With a graying beard, a hairline retreating against time's inevitable advance, and a wrinkled face, few who didn't know the man would likely ever guess that he was two years the king's junior. He wore sapphire blue robes and his silver sash of office that marked him as the king's Master of State. The High Zekkite, on the other hand, looked positively ancient with a shaved head—as was tradition among the clergy and certain nobles—as shriveled with age as a grape left too long in the sun. He wore the pristine white robes and golden sash worn by the Zekkite Order.

"Uncle," Jairen spoke up, still several feet away, "Will it hurt?"

"Hurt, my boy? No." He smiled in the way only his uncle could, reassuring, relaxing. "It does not so much hurt, as it merely exhausts. Zekker's Will burns in your veins, giving your body energy, whether you use the magic there or not. So when your piece of His power is transferred to your brother, you will become tired. So very tired. But no more than that, I'm sure."

Jairen nodded once, and before he could change his mind, stepped into the chamber. Malkai, Dalen, and the High Zekkite followed suit, Luca and his mother stayed without as the bronze door swung shut.

The silvery-white and blue sarcophagus dominated the hexagonal interior of the Undercroft, sporting no other decorations, save for the six pillars braced against the rather low ceiling. The High Zekkite directed Malkai and Jairen to stand to either side of the sarcophagus on slightly raised pedestals facing one another.

"Grasp one another's hands," the ancient man said. "Good, now stand still while His Majesty and I perform the ceremony.

Jairen stood, his heart beating an entirely too-fast rhythm in his chest, clammy hands interlocked with Malkai's. Both boys' eyes went wide as Dalen and the priest began chanting in some strange language Jairen had never heard before. At first, he merely felt tired, as his uncle had said—arms feeling heavier and heavier, knees growing weak, eyelids drooping. Then, a terrible rending sensation ripped through his body. He screamed as he felt his very soul separate, tear, splinter from his being. His vision went black at the edges and—

The latch to his sleeping chambers clicked, and he sat bolt upright. The darkness in his bedroom brightened from pitch black to dark gray and he could just make out a figure slipping into his room before the door closed and the blackness returned once more.

Heart thumping in his chest, he called out, "Who's there?"

"Not so loud," a familiar female voice sounded from the darkness. "My lord."

Her throaty voice gave his heart a new reason to race. "Cici, what are you—"

"I noticed my lord left dinner early," she said. "And you looked positively pallid, so I thought I'd come to check on you."

"Are you a physicker now, visiting in the night to tend to the infirm?" he said, doing his best to keep his voice just on the annoyed side of neutral.

The sound of a match striking was her only reply as Cici lit the lamp on the table by his door. She turned to him then, wearing a thin—almost translucent—nightgown, that left very little to the imagination despite the backlit lamp casting her mostly in shadow. He hadn't realized he'd slid out of bed but now he fought the urge to close the few feet of distance that separated the two. He knew he should send her from his chambers chastised and chaste, but he was so tired from the trying day, from the dream.

Did he have the willpower to deny her?

She took a tentative step forward and twisted a lock of golden hair in one hand, body haloed by the orangey light from the lantern.

He couldn't fix his mother's death, or the fact that he'd been born a Second Son. Nor could he change his lot in life. But he could make this small choice. Could choose to spit in his father's face and do what he wanted for once.

He took a step forward and breathed, "Cici," as his lips found hers in the darkness.

Chapter 3

Lex broke from cover in an alleyway opening up before the Highland Wall and ran, light on her feet, for the crate that marked her point of attack. She propelled herself off the crate, traveled two steps up the wall and threw her momentum sideways to lever her body onto a beam that jutted from an abutting shanty. Lex crouched in the darkness, panting more from the thrill of the night than from the thirty-yard sprint from alley to wall. She stared into the dark between the buildings she'd just abandoned trying to spot her uncle and the locksmith, but they'd chosen that particular alley for a reason.

The sound of retreating footsteps still nearly ten feet overhead signaled her time to move. She stood and scrambled up to the ledge just below the crenulated edge of the wall and waited for the footsteps to recede again before swinging up between two merlons. Lex rose to her feet behind the source of the footsteps and thanked the spirits when she took in the one guard on duty.

He was not large by any means—rather slight, actually—though, not large still meant significantly larger than her. But he didn't seem to have much muscle under his armor, likely a young nobleman serving a stint in the Empire's military, or an underfed

Fringer who took a job with the city guards to feed his family. The man wore only leather armor, carried a standard issue sword at his belt, wore a blue tabard trimmed in white.

The worn conical helm and no chainmail underneath marked him as a Fringer.

She approached on her toes, moving fast, but careful not to make a sound and alert him to her presence. She drew a short length of rope from her belt, looped an end around each hand, and kicked him in the back of his plant leg, right behind the knee joint. He yelped in surprise, but before he could call for help, she looped her crossed arms over his head and pulled, wrapping the rope tight around his neck, cutting off blood flow to his head. She fell backward onto her butt and then back, pulling the guard down on top of her. He struggled to pull loose, but the rope gave her the leverage she needed to keep him down.

On his back, panicking as the rope squeezed tighter, he bucked his hips and gurgled for air. Lex wrapped her legs around his waist, pinning his hips down as she arched her back to pull the rope tighter and his neck further back. The man's movements slowed, losing their violent fury, until finally he went still. She held the rope in place for another few seconds to ensure he was truly unconscious, then unwound the chord, pushed the man—no, the boy, she could see now—off of her, and climbed to her feet.

She loosed a shrill bird call and waited in slick palmed anticipation until Kedrick returned the call. A moment later, a coil of rope flew out of the darkness at the base of the wall and she flinched away, entirely forgetting to catch it. She could just barely hear the choice words her uncle grumbled as he threw the rope a second time. Lex caught and tied it to a merlon then stepped back to wait.

Ked cleared the wall first and barely gave her a once-over before he set about binding and gagging the unconscious guard. "I'll stash him somewhere below."

She only dimly registered his words as she heaved to drag Boz up and onto the wall. Of the three of them, Boz was clearly the worst climber. Actually, the man failed to excel at anything vaguely requiring athleticism, be it fighting, climbing, or running.

Boz had only just flopped down on the wall, arms outstretched, panting like he had just run a mile with rabid dogs nipping at his heels, when Ked reappeared, having apparently stashed the unconscious guard somewhere. "Get up Boz, time to move."

Lex offered a hand to help him up. The red-head's baby face was marked by a prodigious number of freckles and only the barest hint of a beard. He seemed much younger than his twenty-six years, and not just due to his appearance. He always had a sort of innocent mischief in his eyes, not unlike an eight-year-old boy hiding around a corner, waiting to jump out and scare his sister.

She and the locksmith followed Ked down the stairs and into the Highland beyond. This portion of the city, rather than organized into districts like the lower city, was divided into nearly concentric almost-half circles, or rungs, leading—in order of importance—up to the imperial palace at the hill's summit, with the lowest of noble families at the base of the hill. One central boulevard led from primary gate to apex, with lesser streets like tributaries feeding from smaller gates into the main avenue. Kedrick led the way up one of these tributaries, many times ducking behind this shrub or that statue to hide from the clink of approaching guard patrols.

"Next rung up, yeah?" Ked whispered after yet another patrol passed them by.

"Ay," Boz agreed. "Third rung, he said"

"Third rung, second house east," Lex confirmed. The third of the predictably pious six total rungs—counting the palace as a rung of its own—was almost exactly halfway up the hill. "Low cover ahead. Follow close."

Lex took the lead and crept forward, row of privacy hedges to her left, low brick retaining wall to her right, and approached the intersection where the second rung met third. She didn't risk crossing into the next rung along the main thoroughfare, but rather opted to climb up the short—about six feet—ledge separating the second from third rung.

Once over the border, she crouched and surveyed the rung before her as first Ked, then Boz clambered up behind her. To her right, the central avenue ran long and cobbled. The most prominent houses of each rung lined the central avenue, with the slightly lesser houses moving off along the remainder of the shelves. She counted two paths left, marking the way to her target house, and ran east down the narrow street stretching crosswise at the northern edge of the third rung.

The wrongness of the job struck her, not for the first time. Lucien had insisted that it *must* be done that night, and that only Ked's crew could mobilize fast enough to do it. Never one to miss an opportunity, Ked had squeezed every ounce of silver out of the man that he could, of course. And she always welcomed a big payout, but still, something gnawed at the back of her mind.

Their target, a small manor house likely belonging to some noble family who rarely visited the city, looked deserted. The sheer lack of guards spread uneasy tingles across the back of her neck like so many tiny needles. Despite the Highlands's low crime rate, even the meanest of manor houses usually kept a few guards on patrol. Lex figured

that keeping guards on retainer was a statement of power, or some such posturing like that.

She shook her head as much to clear it as to dislodge whatever foul thing gnawed on her neck and surveyed the house. Lucien had described it as being built in the coastal style prevalent in the Lorchican province to the southwest—a description that had then meant very little to Lex, and now meant very little *other* than that Lorchican houses weren't meant to be climbed. Sheer sides reaching nearly fifteen feet, and tall, narrow windows offered little in the way of handholds. The quoins on the corners only went halfway to the second floor roof, but their target was supposedly on the third floor that jutted out almost like a guard tower from the right corner of the house. Spirits, it was just her luck that their target was probably the only bloody house in the city she couldn't scale without her equipment.

"No good, Ked. I can't climb it without my gear. Reckon the backside's the same."

Kedrick cursed under his breath, then narrowed his eyes and asked, "Greenmont?" his tone hopeful.

She took a moment to consider the maneuver they had performed during the Greenmont job two months ago. "No, that won't work either." She cracked her neck left and right, as if the pops that followed steeled her nerve to say, "No guards. I don't like it."

Ked only grunted, apparently unwilling to be drawn into that argument again. Spirits damn the man's pride. Once he took a job, he always saw it through. That fact had earned them the reputation of being reliable, but had also given them no small amount of trouble.

"Well if there ain't no guards outside, I can get us through the front door. A mite risky, I suppose, but have we got any other options?" Boz's far northern accent always came through heavily when he was nervous.

Kedrick nodded and looked to Lex, "Lead the way then."

Like all noble manor houses, it had a short iron fence separating it from the street. Boz made quick work of the lock, and they hurried in, shutting the gate behind them so that a random guard patrol wouldn't have cause to check the grounds. Half running, half crouching, they made their way to the hickory double doors. Boz picked two locks and pushed the doors open.

The manor's interior bespoke none of the austere outer facade. Despite the house's relatively small size, lavish decorations abounded. Even in near darkness, Lex could tell it was perhaps the most heavily decorated noble house she had ever entered. She reckoned she'd been inside more than some of the lower nobility, owing to her last three years running with Ked.

Her uncle led the way farther into the manner, past a pedestal with a water-filled stone basin, over a latticework carpet that looked almost gold despite the low light, and down a short corridor lined with crimson curtains made of heavy looking damask. The room they passed into at the end of the short hallway looked every bit a shrine, complete with an altar adorned with the six-pointed star of their faith, and gaudy golden candelabras.

Who put a spirits damned shrine ten feet from the front door? Damn pious Highlanders. Lex reckoned she could spit in any direction in any noble manor and hit something devoted to their man-god on two out of three attempts. She refused to

acknowledge Zekker as anything more than a man, and certainly not as a deity. Sure, the magic that those noble shites called Zekker's Will was real enough, but she'd heard stories from her Gran's people about magic equally potent as Zekker's version.

"Lex, move." Kedrick's low whisper—and his hand between her shoulder blades—moved her along.

They passed through no fewer than three different sitting rooms on the first floor before they'd found the stairs leading to the second level. Lex's memory of the basic floor-plan Lucien had provided did little good as she lost her sense of direction among the numerous twists and turns in this house. But eventually, Ked brought them to a stop before a pair of heavy wooden doors. He tried them, then stepped aside for Boz to do what he did best.

He chuckled and said, "This be one of my locks." The last pin clicked into place a moment later and Boz pushed the doors open revealing a square chamber, about fifteen paces wide from wall to wall. Bookshelves lined almost every inch of wall space. Spirits alive, who had time to read that many tomes? A plush rug covered a lacquered wood floor and the scent of dust and parchment hung in the air. A spiral staircase leading to the third floor rose from the center of the rug.

They closed and locked the doors behind them before climbing the dizzying staircase. Kedrick had to hunch as he climbed to avoid hitting his head on the low stairs above. A large desk and upholstered leather armchair dominated this upper room. Each of the four walls had two square windows, between each of which hung a painting or tapestry of some sort, except for the wall directly behind the desk and chair. Instead, a

small wooden table with a crystal decanter of some amber liquid and a silver tray rested between the two windows.

"Lex, you and Boz search the room for the papers. Check the desk first."

Kedrick's left hand fiddled with the hilt of his sword in a gesture Lex recognized all too well. Despite his unwillingness to admit something felt wrong about this job, he seemed to be feeling it too. "I'll watch the doors below."

They rummaged through the desk drawers, sifting through paperwork. Their progress was slow as the dark forced them to hold each paper up to what little moonlight filtered through the room's windows.

"Found anything yet?" Kedrick's voice sounded from down the stairs.

"Reckon we'd tell you if we had," Lex shot back. She loved her uncle dearly, but Spirits alive, that man could ask the most stupid of questions sometimes.

"Well hurry." Lex heard the tell-tale metal on leather sound of Kedrick drawing his sword. "I think we may have company."

Lex worked faster, flicked through pages and pages of parchment looking for anything remotely similar to the deed of purchase Lucien had sent them after. A crash sounded at the door and Kedrick grunted from somewhere down below. Lex's heart hammered in her ribcage and blood pulsed at her temples. She gritted her teeth and tried to focus. The unease she'd felt made sense now, at least. They'd been set up. But had Ked's crew simply gotten caught in a trap meant for Lucien's? Or had Lucien set them up from the beginning?

"Don't think it's here, Ked," Bozarth said, his voice sounding calm as stream water, but one look at him told a different story. His eyes were wide, his chest heaved,

and hands shook in what Lex could only assume was fear—Boz wasn't the type to anticipate conflict with anything other than fear on his mind.

"We don't have time for this." Lex said. Then louder, "Uncle, let's go, it's not here." She grabbed all the papers she could get her hands on and stuffed them into her knapsack.

Kedrick had just cleared the spiral staircase when the doors crashed open. "I'll hold them on the stairs. Lex, find us a way out." He turned and took up a guard stance at the top of the stairs.

Lex turned and took the silver tray from underneath the decanter and used it to smash out one of the windows. She knocked away the remaining glass and crawled through. She sat on a narrow ledge with nothing to anchor her rope on. She would be able to climb down without it. And her uncle would manage. But Boz never would.

She climbed up, instead—up to the roof where she found a spire. The sound of Kedrick's battle reached her even outside. A clash of swords and a grunt of pain as someone's guard faltered. She tied their rope around the spire and let it drop. It only reached about two-thirds of the way down, but that would have to do.

She shimmied back down to the window, peered in and gasped. Kedrick had felled two of their assailants, but more queued behind the fallen. But the line of men wasn't what caught her attention. The men all wore the red sash worn by Lucien's Brotherhood. They had been set up. Those papers she had grabbed were likely worthless.

That lying, two-faced, shite eater had set them up and they had walked right into it. Spirits above! They'd made it rutting easy for him, hadn't they?

Lex climbed all the way through the window. "Boz light a candle." She crossed to the decanter and unstopped it, "Just do it, Boz." She tore a strip off her cloak and soaked it in the amber liquor, then jammed it down into the decanter. "Boz I need that candle."

He handed it to her, wick alight. "Good, now out the window." She touched the flame to the tip of the soaked cloak peeking from the decanter's mouth. The fire took. "Ked, duck." He did, and she threw.

It shattered against the front man's sword spraying liquor and shards of glass all over the men on the stairs. It didn't quite have the effect she'd imagined, but the panic that followed bought them the time they needed.

"Out the window, Ked." She turned to see her uncle sling himself through the window feet first, grabbing the rope on his way out. Bozarth still stood next to the window looking at the rope. "Damn it Boz, out."

"I can't."

"I don't give a rat's ass. You are going."

He didn't move. "You first."

"Spirits, fine, we don't have time for this." At the stairs, the red-sashed pups had nearly patted out the flames on the men at the head of the line.

She dived through the window, tucking her feet in as she cleared the window and grabbed onto the rope. Her injured shoulder screamed in protest as her momentum swung the rope out and slammed her back into the house's side.

But she held on. She loosened her grip so that she could slide down the cord, letting her gloves' natural resistance slow her descent until she felt the knot in the rope

that she had tied to mark the end of the coil. She spun herself around so that she faced away from the house and kicked off with her feet, letting go of the rope and launching out into open space. She fell about ten feet to the ground, rolled on impact, and sprung to her feet just beside her uncle.

"Come on, Boz," Kedrick said under his breath.

Lex looked up to the window she had just vaulted through mere seconds ago. Boz sat on the window ledge gripping the rope tightly as his legs dangled below him. He squeezed his eyes shut and scooted toward the edge of the ledge, but just before he fell, a pair of hands ripped him through the window and back into the tower.

Lex shouted his name, but it was too late.

"Lex, he's gone. We have to go." Armored footsteps sounded up the street. "Lex," her uncle said again, more urgently this time. "We have to go. Guards coming."

He tugged at her arm and she followed him through the gate, running for the wall and home. Leaving Bozarth behind.

Chapter 4

The sun had barely begun cresting the eastern mountains when Malkai crawled from bed and made it down to the yard. The crisp morning air prickled his skin as he stripped off his tunic and folded it neatly on a nearby bench. He used to hate the mornings, always preferring to sleep until the servants came to rouse him from slumber. Yet, over the last few months, he had found that mornings offered numerous opportunities that other times of day did not. For instance, he usually had the training yard to himself for an hour or more before the guards filed in en masse. He relished this time alone with his sword, sweat, and no distractions. Working his body so hard that his head cleared, concentrating on naught but the arc of his sword through the air and the placement of his feet as he worked slowly through his sword forms.

Over the course of the last year or so, Malkai had attended his father's council meetings with increasing regularity. At first, he'd been ecstatic at his frequent inclusion. Yet, yesterday's meeting had brought news that hung heavily, not just on his soul, but on the rest of the councilors' as well. All signs pointed to Au'Dovier reigniting war for the

first time in almost fifty years. Renmarr couldn't afford a war—not even one with such a small kingdom. The coffers couldn't handle it.

Malkai shook his head and began his sword forms, moving through each movement at half speed, focusing on each inhale and exhale of breath, the placement of his feet in the sand as he pivoted and stepped in time with each slash and thrust. He honed his attention in on the slow line his sword cut through the air and the growing ache in his muscles, letting each fresh sensation distract him from the trials the day would bring.

"Your form is improving," a familiar voice said from behind Malkai. "But you lack endurance. Sluggish and sloppy at the end."

Malkai couldn't help but smile when he saw Rico, captain of the guard, standing at the edge of the yard, about ten paces away. His ringmail shirt poked out the half sleeves and under the hem of the sapphire livery of House Miraxes. A yellow sash denoting his station looped diagonally from right shoulder to left hip where it tied just behind the longsword that hung on his belt. His caramel skin and dark eyes beneath closely cut hair made the man appear mysterious and aloof.

"I was doing it slow on purpose," Malkai said, sheathing his sword.

"That only explains one of my two critiques, Your Highness."

"I'm better at full speed." Malkai's protest sounded petulant, even to his own ears.

"Care to put that theory to the test, my prince?"

Malkai never could back down from a clear challenge. Maybe this would be the day that he scored a blow on his friend. He unsheathed his sword and drew a hand across

his blade, more out of showy habit than any real need for the hand motion as he settled a gossamer thin blunting edge around his sword.

Rico cocked an eyebrow. "I thought you, of all people, wouldn't need the gesture to focus the Will like that."

Despite Rico's teasing tone, Malkai felt his cheeks heat. "I don't." He focused on Rico's now unsheathed blade, still fifteen feet away, and added the same blunting edge to the Captain's sword. "See for yourself." Malkai smiled to hide his wince at the effort it had taken to channel the Will for such a precise working at that distance.

"Ahh now that, my prince, is far more impressive than flourishing your hand."

"We've had the same training." Malkai shrugged. "The untrained courtiers, though?"

Rico cracked a grin. "You only seek the admiration of half the untrained courtiers." Rico spun his sword in a quick circle before taking his fighting stance.

"Is it so wrong to want my future subjects to admire me?" he said by way of avoiding the emphasis his friend placed on half.

Malkai took a step, sword at the ready with one hand just below the cross guard and the other just barely above the pommel. These were not the flimsy swords worn by courtiers more for fashion than function. Nor were they cumbersome two-handers. They were the longsword favored by the royal guardsmen, balanced well for both one and two handed use, with hilts just long enough for either.

"I do believe the court respects you enough that, barring any major blunders, your rule will prove far from troublesome, my prince."

"You can call me by my name when it's just the two of us, you know."

"Of course, my prince." Malkai heard the smile in Rico's voice even as his friend—somehow—affected a perfectly elegant bow while holding his sword at the ready.

Malkai stepped forward for the first of likely many thrashings to come that day.

Malkai swung low. Rico checked the cut and returned a slice across Malkai's abdomen that the prince only just managed to avoid. Off balance, Malkai reeled as Rico pressed the attack, aiming high, aiming low, aiming at Malkai's chest. The captain's sword seemed everywhere at once, forcing Malkai farther and farther backwards as his movements proved too sluggish to counter every successive strike.

Malkai parried one overhand swing, absorbing the impact in his knees, crouching a bit, and then pushing back. He launched forward trying to slam his shoulder into the captain's sternum, but Rico stepped aside and, not finding any resistance where he expected, Malkai toppled forward into the sand, only twisting at the last second so that he skidded on his back rather than his face. He tried to bring his blade to bear, but found the point of his friend's sword aimed at the hollow of his throat.

"I'll admit, you almost had me at the last," Rico said, offering his hand to the prone prince. "You're just a touch too slow for me."

Malkai sighed again as Rico helped him to his feet. "Everyone is too slow to touch you."

Rico laughed, deep and melodious. "I would hesitate to make such a claim. More apt is that nobody I've faced *so far* is fast enough."

"Again?"

They clashed another several times that morning, each bout ending differently, though with the same result. Not for the first time, Malkai admired his friend's skill with the blade. Truly, the captain had no equal.

"You're improving," Rico said as he helped Malkai to his feet following the latest in his long series of defeats

Malkai looked down at his arms, now covered nearly as completely in welts as dust covered his tunic. "It's immoral to lie to your prince, you know."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Your Highness." Rico sheathed his blade and swept into a deep bow even as Malkai's sword rose from the ground several feet away and hovered waist high before the prince.

Malkai cocked an eyebrow and returned the floating sword to its sheath. "Now who is showing off, Captain?"

"Me? I would never," Rico said, still bowed low—no doubt to hide his smile more than to show undue respect.

"Did you not just say you would never lie to me?"

Rico straightened and turned away from Malkai. "I assure you, I haven't the slightest idea what you might mean. Perhaps my prince took one knock too many to his royal head and ought to seek the baths before his lessons?"

Malkai smiled and shook his head at his retreating friend and resolved himself to take the captain's advice. A bath sounded quite nice, indeed.

He descended to the first underground level of the palace and wound his way through the hallways to the baths.

He sent a bathhouse attendant to have a servant bring fresh clothing from his rooms and then undressed behind the changing screen on the men's side of the baths. The bathing chamber consisted of six separate pools: separate lukewarm washing pools for men and women, similarly separate pools for rinsing, followed by two shared pools—one hot and one cold.

Malkai passed through the first two pools quickly, attendants helping him scrub clean in each, and dressed in the loose-fitting bathing shorts at the changing station before the cold pool. He grimaced as he thought about the icy plunge before him, took a deep breath, and leapt, tucking his knees to his chest, and crashed into the deep, cold water below. He kept his eyes closed tight and let himself drift to the surface. His lungs only gave the barest protest before he emerged from the water to the sound of slow clapping.

"Bravo, Your Highness." Tucked away in the corner of the pool, green eyes beheld him from beneath a mess of floating red hair. "Quite the entrance you made." Lady Varlys—High Commander of the army, and his father's chief military councilor—stood near the edge of the pool, head just barely clearing the water, arms raised high overhead as she continued her slow clapping.

"Varlys," Malkai nodded in acknowledgment as he made his way to her, half swimming, half walking to close the distance. "Apologies. I didn't notice you."

"Do you always jump in like that?"

Malkai scratched at the back of his shaved head and smiled. "Only when I think I'm alone."

"Don't like the cold water?"

"Less the water than the initial shock."

"Almost as good as tea in the morning, wakes you right up," Varlys agreed, smiling. "Although, judging by the bruises on your arms, I'd say you've already woken quite well."

"Ah, yes. Rico made me reconsider the merits of waking early."

"Perhaps avoid emulating your brother, though?" She cocked an eyebrow. "I hear his morning habits prove quite different from yours. I," she said, bringing her hand to her chest, "much prefer the peace of the palace before the cocks start strutting and the hens start clucking."

Malkai chuckled. "I couldn't agree more, Lady Varlys. There is a certain contemplative serenity inherent in a sleeping castle. And a morning bath does do wonders for the rest of the day's timbre."

"Well, I'll leave you to your morning contemplation, then, my prince. Enjoy your bath." She winked and climbed from the pool, leaving him to shiver in the chill water alone.

He waited until he heard the sound of the doors to the baths close before climbing from the cold pool and wading into the warm. He winced as the hot water set his cold skin to tingling. He could never decide if he enjoyed the sensation of moving from cold to hot, but as the initial discomfort subsided and his skin acclimated to the new temperature, he sighed and sunk to his chin.

He marveled that the pools' water always seemed the same temperature, no matter the season. The product of some grand working of the Will from a time long past, no doubt. He had the vague recollection of having read about it in his youth, but he'd never

had a mind for details like that. Jairen would know who had done it and when it had been completed.

Shame that his brother's keen mind would never serve the kingdom beyond the role of an adviser. Still, Uncle Luca's calming influence balanced father's quick temper. Perhaps Jairen's intellect would one day cover Malkai's own inadequacies. But no. That wouldn't do. He'd promised himself that his first act as king—many years distant, Zekker willing—would see him repeal the Second Son's Limitation decree. He could never return his brother's share of the Will that Malkai had received on Jairen's thirteenth birthday, not without dying during the extraction, that is. He could, however, give Jairen the post he truly sought—not adviser, but general.

Malkai relaxed in the water, letting the gentle current in the pool pull him off his feet so that he floated on his back, drifting like his thoughts. Jairen's life had turned sour all at once, hadn't it? Stripped of the Will and therefore lacking real value, even the servants had begun to treat him differently. And with their mother's death coming just a few months later, it was a wonder Jairen hadn't broken completely. How could Malkai begrudge Jairen wanting to exert some modicum of control on his life? Malkai had resolved to never compound his brother's daily mistreatment, and to one day give Jairen the freedom to pick his own path in life.

Malkai heard a distant splash and voices rose from one of the first pools. He sighed, knowing that if the castle was waking, he'd best be about his morning. Breakfast first, though.

With his brother fresh on his mind, he decided to break his fast in Jairen's room that morning. He dressed and headed to the kitchens to inform the cooks of the deviation from his normal morning routine.

He took the long way through the palace's many corridors to avoid any ambitious and early-rising courtiers. The day would prove trying enough even without having to deal with one of the obsequious young men or a fawning young woman. As much as he liked the attention of the courtiers at formal occasions like balls or feasts, he found them tiresome during everyday life. Especially if he had not yet had his morning tea. He mumbled a short prayer of thanks to Zekker for turning Cici's attentions to Jairen as of late. After rebuffing her gently on several occasions, Malkai supposed she had given up on her ideas of winning the crown prince's hand and moved on to lesser targets. Lesser in title, he chided himself, not lesser in truth.

Malkai turned down a short hallway lined with rich, multicolored tapestries of great feast days and entered the door at the end of the hall.

Scullery maids scrubbed pots and chopped vegetables, cooks shouted orders to their underlings, and the aromas of onion, garlic, sizzling bacon and eggs, and various sauces wafted from somewhere in the bustling room. Though chaotic to behold, the kitchen always seemed to run smoothly under the watchful eye—for truly, he had but one eye—of Master Chef Rolan.

Such was the chaos that all Malkai could do was stand and wonder at the scene.

"M'lord prince!" One maid—Sasha? Sarah?—dropped to a knee, a large cauldron in her arms. Not exactly all at once the staff came to a standstill and Rolan approached, bowing almost low enough to mark the difference in their stations.

"Please carry on." Malkai gestured with his arms outspread, indicating that they should rise. Then he turned to Rolan, "Perhaps you could spare a servant to bring my meal to my brother's room this morning? I find that I have not enjoyed Jairen's company often enough as of late."

"This earl—" he cleared his throat, "I mean of course, my prince. It will be done. His standard meal?"

"Yes I believe so. Though," Malkai paused briefly, narrowing his eyes, "perhaps an extra pot of tea for my brother. As you said, it is very early for him."

"I will see to it, right away. But, My Prince, might I inquire," the chef shuffled his feet, "does Prince Jairen—well, is he expecting you?"

"Oh not at all," Malkai responded, grinning wide.

"Ahh, hence the extra tea. A peace offering, no? I'll have Sorcha bring the meal straight away. Your typical fare is all but complete and Prince Jairen's, well, that's easy."

#

Malkai took his leave of the kitchens with Sorcha in tow as he led the way through the castle and up to Jairen's apartments in the old tower. Why Jairen had opted to stay in the drafty quarters of this tower following the construction of the new royal wing, Malkai would never understand, though he suspected the distance and isolation from their father had something to do with it.

He glanced over his shoulder at Sorcha whose furrowed brow showed the concentration and effort to balance two pots of tea and two meal platters on a silver tray. Most servants made such tasks look effortless, but perhaps the extra tea or the spiral staircase of the tower proved too difficult.

"Sorcha was it? I can carry that, if you'd like."

Her face, which had already turned a light pink with exertion, blushed further as she stammered, "My-my thanks, m'prince, but that'd be improper."

"Then let me at least lighten the load a bit." He smiled and waved his hand—unnecessarily, of course—and one of the tea pots lifted from the tray and floated into his hands.

Sorcha gasped and tripped launching the tray into the air as she tumbled backwards. Instinct kicked in and Malkai reached out with the Will, holding the contents of the tray suspended in air, and erecting a solid field of power behind Sorcha to halt her fall. She collided hard with the field and gasped again. Malkai winced. That had probably hurt. He shifted the wall of power that caught her, gently returning her to her feet, as the toll of the magic began taking effect. Sweat beaded on his brow, and though he did not yet shake from the strain of holding so many threads of the Will in place, he knew would not last.

"Quickly now Sorcha," Malkai said through gritted teeth. "I know not how much longer I can hold this. Grab the tray, I will release it to you."

She did as he bade and grasped it with both hands, nodding. He released his control over the tray and immediately felt one of the knives jabbing into his consciousness recede. "Hold tightly, now," he warned.

Sweat streaked his face as he slowly guided the various airborne elements of his breakfast back to the tray, taking extra care with his poached egg—it wouldn't do to pop it prematurely.

He winced. The knives in his head vanished, leaving only an echo of pain like the memory of a migraine—or the promise of one to come. Sweat now soaked his fresh tunic so thoroughly that he supposed he had wasted time on the bath after sparring in the yard. Still, despite his exhaustion, he couldn't help but smile, and not just at Sorcha's expression, her mouth hanging agape and eyes wide. He had just, on instinct, managed to control multiple items for nearly twice as long as he normally could in training, and did so with the utmost precision. He hadn't clumsily slung the items back to the tray and just hoped they stuck. He had painstakingly reset the tray item by item, and, while Rolan wouldn't approve of the presentation, he'd managed to save every last scrap of food from disastrous end.

Malkai gripped the pots of tea. "Well, I think I'll carry these the rest of the way, Sorcha." He kept his voice light, despite his fatigue. Always putting on a show, always acting the part of the powerful prince, even for the servants. Perhaps especially for the servants. His father once told him that to lead, one's followers must always believe in the strength of the leader. So even though Malkai wanted nothing more than to sit and recover, to regain his breath and his composure, he hid that weakness behind his usual calm bravado, feigning the confidence and ease he embodied while in the presence of those beneath him.

"Y-yes, my prince." Sorcha agreed.

They climbed another quarter turn around the tower stairs in silence before Malkai spoke again. "Sorcha," he said, using her name often—a trick he had picked up from Rico, always using his subordinates' names to engender trust and make them feel

important. "Are you my brother's usual chambermaid? You seem to know where to go, despite this portion of the palace being so remote." He looked back to her, inquiring.

"Y-yes, my prince," she replied again, blush spreading across her cheeks. "I have that privilege."

"Ha, privilege? You mean that you are forced to climb this tower every morning just to face his anger upon rousing him from sleep." Malkai pitied the poor girl. Even their father avoided Jairen before he had downed at least one cup of tea. Though ungifted and not exactly a physically imposing figure, Jairen could be downright scary in the mornings.

"No, my prince." Sorcha responded more forcefully than he had expected. He glanced at her again to find her blush had spread, turning her face bright pink, almost red. "It is not like that. Prince Jairen can be," she cleared her throat, "grumpy in the mornings, true. But he really is a gentle sort, if you wake him right."

"Is that so? Well then, perhaps you could demonstrate the proper manner of waking my bear of a brother." Malkai opened the door to Jairen's apartments and gestured his arm in a sweeping motion indicating that Sorcha should take the lead.

She acquiesced and entered the rooms, as Malkai placed the tray quietly on the large table next to the window seat that Jairen loved so much. She retrieved the pots from Malkai, fetched two white ceramic mugs from the station opposite the table, and poured tea into one, adding a spoonful of honey, leaving the utensil in the mug, just as his brother preferred. She walked to the door and pushed it open, speaking quietly she said, "My prince, I have your morning t—" The last word seemed to catch in her throat, and Malkai saw why. A nightgown lay at the foot of Jairen's bed, the blankets of which resembled a

hastily constructed bird nest, that only barely covered the entwined limbs of his brother and... Cici.

The mug slipped from Sorcha's hand and shattered on the floor. Jairen propped himself up and Cici bolted upright. Remembering her nudity too late, she shrieked, scrambling to clutch the blanket to her chest.

"Well, Sorcha," Malkai said slowly. "It seems that we might need an extra breakfast setup. Cici, how do you take your tea?"

Chapter 5

If the crash of shattering ceramics and the sudden motion of Cici bolting upright next to him hadn't jolted Jairen awake, her nearly inhuman shriek certainly did. Jairen pushed himself into an almost-sitting position, leaning against an elbow, as he surveyed the scene. Sorcha stood at the door, tears welling in her eyes as she looked between the shattered remains of the tea cup at her feet and Cici's belated attempt to cover her nudity. His brother stood just behind Sorcha, a bemused grin painted on his face. Zekker damn it all to oblivion. Not good. This would not end well.

"Well, Sorcha," Malkai spoke slowly, his muscular form blocking half the large doorway. "It seems we might need an extra breakfast setup. Cici, how do you take your tea?"

Sorcha turned and pushed past Malkai, fleeing the room. What had gotten into her? The shattered mug? Or—Oh Zekker, no—Cici's presence? Damn it all, Luca was right.

"Perhaps you could give us a moment, brother?" Jairen suggested, as he swung out of bed, also still naked, doing his best to mimic Malkai's usual uncaring bravado

despite the uncomfortable situation. "'Tis improper for a Lady of the Court to be seen in such a state of undress."

"Improper?" Malkai raised an eyebrow and veritably snorted as he looked to the ceiling and muttered, "He speaks of impropriety. My brother..." Then looking back at Jairen, "Very well, my prince, as you command." He made a mock bow and closed the door as he retreated.

All at once, Cici burst to life, throwing the covers back and vaulting from bed in a frantic search for something, her smallclothes, most likely. Had she even worn smallclothes? Jairen couldn't recall. The night had been a bit of a blur, in truth. Perhaps he should have made greater protest and expelled her from his room entirely. Not that he hadn't enjoyed himself—Zekker knows he did. He only regretted that there would be consequences. He knew not what form they would take, but they would certainly come.

"Jair, hello?" Cici's voice finally drew his attention to her in full. She stood fully clothed now, or at least as clothed as possible when wearing only a nightgown—and a short one at that. Had she really walked all the way from her chambers on the other side of the keep wearing only that? The gown barely reached the middle of her thighs.

"Jair, I," she hesitated, "what should we do? My mother, your father," her eyes went wide in panic, "He's the king, Jair. The King." She veritably yelled this last, as if Jairen was unaware of his father's crown.

Jairen bit back several curses, each of which surpassed the last in both profanity and blasphemy. "What can we do?" He asked, perhaps more bitterly than he would have liked. Cici drew back as if he'd struck her. "You're right, he is the king. Any punishment will most likely fall more heavily on me than you. I doubt anything will happen to you."

"Don't be daft, Jair. He could send me home. Where will that leave me? Alone, and at my mother's mercy. She already threatened to arrange a marriage if I didn't secure a match on my own before the new year."

Jairen flung his arms wide. "Is that what last night was? You tried to secure me?" He had known, of course, that Cici sought a husband and that he made a tempting target. But sometime last night, he had forgotten and surrendered to the moment. He enjoyed her company to be sure, but he didn't love her. So why then, did voicing her motives cut so deeply? "Am I no more than a tool to thwart your mother's matchmaking?"

Tears welled in her eyes. "Jair, no. It wasn't like that. Well," she walked toward him, "it was at first. But last night," She took his face in her hands, "that was real, Jair." Her eyes swam with contrition, her kiss screamed of desperation.

A knock sounded at the door and Malkai's voice echoed from the other side. "What's taking you two so long? Taking a morning tumble, too? Well make it quick, the tea will get cold."

#

After an awkward meal, Cici said her goodbyes and left the brothers alone.

Jairen held up a hand. "I know what you're going to say, Mal."

"Oh, and pray tell, what was I going to say?" He quirked half a grin.

"That it was reckless and foolhardy to take Cici into my bed. That there will be consequences, and that I should have been smarter."

"Well yes, that may all be—"

"But I assure you, Malkai, no one is harder on me than I, myself, am, right now—" other than Father "—I remember thinking in the moment that I should send her away, but Mal, the feast, the dreams I've been having," Jairen walked to the window, picking at his fingernails. "I could have said no, but I lacked the will—" Jairen chuckled, a wry grin turning his lips, "no pun intended, willpower, perhaps I should say."

"She came to you, then?" Malkai asked.

"I think she regretted it, too—funny how decisions made in the dark of night seldom look so bright by the light of day." Jairen rubbed the back of his neck—he had to stop picking his nail—and turned from the window. "Father won't send her away, will he?"

"I'd be more worried about what he'll do to you. But no, I doubt it. She just wanted to secure a match without her mother's intervention." He poured himself another cup of tea. "You, on the other hand, how many times has he warned you?"

"I know, Mal, I know." So what if he got trapped into a marriage—at least it would be his decisions that made him fall for such a ruse. "What business has Father in telling me whom I can and can't marry? Uncle Luca married for love, and he's a Second Son. So why can't I? It's all about bloodlines with Father, but he doesn't give your love life the same scrutiny, does he?"

Malkai cleared his throat, "I think the issue really comes down to whether or not your wife's ties to Zekker are strong enough to produce heirs with adequate Wills."

"And whose fault is it that I'm a siph?"

"Jair, you know I didn—"

"I felt something tear when they ripped it out. I feel it every time I have that dream. What went wrong?"

Jairen didn't expect an answer. No one understood what happened—or at least, no one told him if they did.

"I'm so sorry, Jair. If I could go back—"

"You'd what? Tell father that you don't want a piece of your thirteen-year-old brother's soul, that your magic would be strong enough without it?" Jairen slumped back into a chair and pressed his palms to his eyes. It was just so hard not to be bitter with the memory so fresh. "Listen, I don't blame you, Mal. Not anymore. It wasn't your doing. It was Father's. But he's still punishing me for something he did."

"Well, when he calls for you, just, refrain from yelling back this time, eh?" He patted his brother on the shoulder but Jairen didn't look up. Malkai's footsteps receded and the door to Jairen's room slid open. "All will be well, Jair." Jairen waited until his door clicked closed to look up. "Don't yell back," Jairen thought aloud. "Easier said than done, brother." He shook his head and reached for the tea only to find the pot had gone cold.

Malkai had a point. Last time Jairen had ended up on the wrong side of his father's ire Jairen bore bruises for weeks.

But this time would be different. He would keep his temper in check. This time, he knew that he had made a mistake.

Or, better yet, perhaps if he stayed in his rooms all day, Father's other duties would distract him. Besides, better not to fuel the inevitable rumors. Jairen busied himself reading through bits of the tomes his uncle had left on the table the previous day: *Treatise*

on Renmarran Regional Exports, Disciples: an index of Zekker's first students, and Second Son Rebellion: a complete history of the civil war that nearly toppled our kingdom.

He'd tried to read the same line half a dozen times through drooping eyelids when a knock at the door startled him fully awake.

"Aye, who is it?"

"Sorcha, Your Highness," she said, her voice muffled by the door.

"Enter and speak, what is it?" Zekker damn her, she'd likely told the whole castle by now.

She opened the door and slid in, closing it behind her. She turned to face Jairen but kept her eyes downcast, mumbling something unintelligible.

"What was that? Speak up, damn you."

She met his gaze for only a second before looking back down at her twisting hands. She spoke all in a rush. "My prince, King Dalen demands your presence in the throne room."

Just bloody great. He'd stayed in his rooms for no reason. "This would have nothing to do with a certain piece of gossip you no doubt had a hand in spreading, I suppose?"

"My prince, I—"

"You what? Apologize for sticking your nose where it doesn't belong? For wagging your tongue and spreadi—" he trailed off, seeing the girl shrinking back before his words, tears welling in her eyes.

Zekker damn him. She may have told someone what she'd seen, but the situation wasn't her fault. He'd made the choice, made the mistake not to send Cici away. Sorcha didn't deserve his ire. He remembered the look on her face, the pain in her eyes, just before she'd fled. How must she have felt, seeing Cici and him together like that?

"Sorcha," he knew he shouldn't, that princes didn't apologize to the help, but—"you're one of the few people who treats me like a person, rather than a Second Son, but I've treated you terribly in return. I'm sorry for snapping at you just now, and—" He rubbed at the back of his neck chagrined. Too late to take it back now. He might as well do it right. "—I'm sorry for all the teasing. I hope you know I meant no harm by it, but I realize how insensitive I've been."

He refrained from wiping the tears from her cheeks, gave his best reassuring smile, and then marched from his rooms with his head held high as he went to meet his father's judgement.

#

Jairen approached the double doors to the throne room, his heels scuffing against the stone floor. His heart hammered in his chest and he panted for breath. Despite telling himself that this time would be different, that he would admit his mistakes and make no excuses, he couldn't convince himself that he'd come out unscathed.

Please Zekker, let there be guards.

Dalen had never used the Will to discipline Jairen with witnesses present—the scripture forbade using the Will in such a way.

Yet, as Jairen pushed through the doors, his heart skipped a beat and what little resolve he'd built up crumbled away, hundreds of years of weathering carried out in an instant.

Neither guard, nor noble, nor servant occupied the grand room. Once he crossed the threshold, he'd be fully at his father's mercy. He squeezed his eyes shut, took two deep breaths, then stepped through and pulled the doors closed behind him.

His boot heels barely made a sound as he trod down the plush sapphire carpet running the length of the room. Dalen had the braziers behind the dais lit so that Jairen could scarcely make out his father's silhouette on the semi-translucent, backlit Alabaster Throne. Despite his anxiety, Jairen had to admit that his father's flare for the dramatic fell second to none.

He took slow, deliberate steps meant to calm his breathing, counting the pillars he passed to distract himself from what was to come.

At last, he passed the final set of pillars and reached the end of the carpet, some three meters from the stairs to the dais where his father still sat. He knew from experience that while people on the dais stood obscured by shadow, they could still clearly make out the faces of those who stood before them.

"Why is it you defy me at every turn?"

Hello to you, too, Father. "Apologies, Your Majesty. What are we discussing?"
Jairen cursed himself. He could have phrased that better.

"Your bravado serves no purpose. Care to explain why rumors about a tryst with Miss Calley have flown through the palace today? Did I not warn you against such actions?"

"Aye, Father, you did. I made a mistake."

"Yes, well let us hope your mistake stops at rumors. We wouldn't want any misfortune to befall Miss Calley because of your mistake."

"You can't be serious," Jairen said before he could stop himself. "Cici has nothing to do with this."

"I do not understand how your uncle tutors you every day. Does your stupidity know no end? She has everything to do with this, boy. I will wait an appropriate amount of time to ensure nothing comes of your nocturnal escapades and then find some excuse to send her away. You are to have no more contact with her save for exchanging niceties at formal occasions. Do you understand me?"

"No, Father. You can't send her away," after he had reassured her that the punishment would fall on him, he couldn't let his father send her away. That would crush her. "It was my doing."

"I can, and I will." He stood, his silhouette cresting just over the throne behind him. "I am the king and I will do anything I damn well please to preserve our kingdom's prosperity."

"And how does sending Cici away preserve anything?"

"We can't rely on the Miraxes bloodline. You're a siph, now, boy."

"Aye and whose fault is that? Haven't you interfered enough in my life? You should have no say in who I do and don't ta—"

Jairen's world turned sideways, as the Will ripped him from his feet. He rolled to a stop ten feet down the sapphire carpet.

"I will decide how much is enough. You're weak. Too weak for the transference ritual."

I was thirteen. Jairen pushed to his knees and looked up at his father, now standing at the base of the dais.

"Too weak to turn Calley away. Too weak to even stand, apparently. Get up."

Jairen rose to his feet, but the Will jerked him sideways, slamming him into one of the stone pillows. Jairen's shoulder popped as bone ground against bone. He cried out and his right forearm and hand went numb.

Jairen levered himself up with his left hand and walked toward his father. How could he still blame Jairen for whatever had happened in the ritual? What had changed that day? "Why do you hate me so?"

"Hate implies I feel something toward you at all. No, Jairen, I don't blame you for the ritual going wrong. If anything, it revealed your mother's lies for what they were."

"Then why?" *Why treat me like this?* Jairen stopped just feet from his father.

"Zekker's Will burns brighter than ought else, but without it, you're blasphemy made flesh." Dalen punched Jairen in the gut. Jairen fell to his knees gasping. "Proof of my failure and Renmarr's ruin," the king finished.

Jairen staggered to his feet, left arm clutching at his gut as he forced down the urge to puke. How could one ritual gone wrong bring the kingdom to ruin?

"You're just like your mother, right down to her tainted blood flowing in your veins."

Dalen could beat Jairen all he wanted—Zekker knew it had happened before. He could live with the king's ire. But over his dead body would he just sit there while his father talked about his mother like that.

"Zekker take you." Jairen lunged forward and tackled his father, his left arm wrapped around the king's midriff, knocking them to the ground. A wet crunching sound echoed around the chamber. His heart lurched to his mouth and his stomach felt leaden. Dalen's head twisted at an awkward angle against the stairs, eyes stuck open in shock. Blood already dripped down the lower steps from the growing pool above.

"No," Jairen said aloud. "No, no, no, no, no. Not possible." His father, the king, the Zekker-be-damned king, could not be dead. Jairen's world spun, his eyes swam with tears. He fell forward, catching himself on his hands. His right shoulder screamed in protest and Dalen's lifeblood seeped between Jairen's fingers, the puddle growing ever larger.

He grabbed the king's lapel and shook as the first tears fell. "Father." He shook harder, ignoring his shoulder's complaints. "Zekker damn you, wake up."

He couldn't have. He couldn't have killed his father, too. Both his mother and father dead through his doing—one by prayer, one by his own hands. He shook his head. What should he do? Malkai couldn't, wouldn't forgive him for this.

There would be no talking his way out. There had been no witnesses, no guards to corroborate his story. He had no way to prove that it had been an accident. Should he even try?

He'd kill his own father, he'd killed the bloody king!

Jairen looked at his hands. Crimson stained every inch. He had to clean them off, had to wipe it away. He ran his hands down his breeches, down his chest, but the creases remained red.

Even if Malkai believed Jairen's story, the court would demand retribution for their king's death.

He had to run, had to escape on his own. He would hurry to his rooms, pack a knapsack, stop by the stables for a horse, and flee—where? No, *where* didn't matter. Not yet. He had to live long enough for where to matter. He had to go.

Jairen stumbled, half running to the double doors. Mind reeling, he pushed through and saw his brother leaning against the wall some fifteen paces away.

"Jair, how did it—Is that blood?" He took a step forward. "Why are you covered in blood?"

Chapter 6

Lex and Kedrick led the way through the winding streets around the docks, weaving their way ever closer to the warehouse district. Rollo and Dorran—the crew's other two members—followed just far enough behind so that a casual observer might not consider them a group.

As they walked, Lex scanned the rooftops of wooden shanty houses and stilted houses of the less destitute, all of which had long ago lost the war with Fringe mud, their color succumbing to the all-consuming brown of the lower city. So too, had the people.

Lucien proved his wealth with every sash and armband worn by his goons. The ability to supply a stream of color to combat the drab tide in the city was visible testament to his success. Color did not come cheap. In fact, the only real color Lex could afford was black. Black held its own against brown—nothing ever beat brown, but black put up the best fight. Lex couldn't imagine the effort it took to keep those sashes clean.

Lex's eyes roamed the crowd as she walked, looking out for members of the Darkmont Brotherhood. Yet, as Lex cut down the last alleyway before their destination,

she'd still not seen a single splash of that tell-tale crimson. Either Lucien didn't expect retaliation for the setup, or he'd ordered his goons to hide in plain sight.

"That the one?" Dorran asked from just over her right shoulder.

She stood just inside the alley's mouth, more out of habit than any desire to remain unseen. The noonday sun overhead meant few shadows could conceal her.

Ahead rose one of the newer warehouses in this portion of the city. Made of mostly-intact wood, the large A-frame had a metal roof and three sliding doors large enough for two wagons to pass abreast.

"Ay." She turned to Kedrick. "Give me ten minutes before you go in."

Lex hurried out of the alley and crossed the street, leaving Kedrick and the others to their parts. While she climbed, Rollo and Dorran would don crimson sashes and escort Kedrick into the hideout under the guise of arresting him. Lex only had a few minutes to scale the building and start searching Lucien's office in the structure's loft.

She darted down the alley between two warehouses and looked up at the nearly sheer wall. Its mottled, muddy, and once-blue side stretched fully forty feet up. She plotted her course up to a window set on the left side of the alley. Her first handhold was about ten feet up, but beyond that, the rest of it looked easy. Managing her momentum would be key to this climb.

A hanging light fixture jutted from the neighboring warehouse, about eight feet overhead. She took a running start and leapt onto the hanging lamp, swinging herself up to balance on the thin metal rod. She edged forward and launched herself at a window ledge on Lucien's warehouse, grunting as she hit the wall. Her stomach lurched as she felt her grip sliding, but she scrambled for purchase with her feet and managed to lift herself

fully onto the ledge. She slung herself from the window to a set of pipes protruding from the wall and scarcely paused to consider as she leapt sideways to the fire escape ladder that led to the roof.

She thrilled at the warm tingle in her stomach and spine as she flew from one perch to the next, enjoying the freedom and weightlessness, the exhilaration of falling and flying.

Then her fingers wrapped around the lower rung and she heaved up, against the sideways momentum that threatened to tear her hands free.

But she held.

She didn't have time to waste, though, and made the rest of the climb up the ladder in a handful of breaths. She shuffled on hands and feet to the window that led to Lucien's *official* office. The pig likely had another on one of the underground floors where his real—less legal—business happened. This office on the top floor of his main warehouse was probably just a front.

Lex figured that was both good and bad. On one hand, it would be fairly easy to break into, unguarded and unused. But on the other, it would likely hold nothing of value, at least not for the crew's purposes.

The window—only barely big enough for Lex to squeeze through—had a standard window lock on it. Lex wasn't as good with locks as Boz but she had picked her fair share when a climb had been too much for him to manage. It yielded to her picks after a few seconds and she pulled it open. She poked her head in to make sure the room was clear, then slid through feet first.

The room was decorated with all the necessities of an office—two chairs and a low table, a mahogany desk and desk chair, a couple of bookcases filled with what Lex could only assume were ledgers, a file drawer and a coat rack—and had been kept relatively neat. The desk held one stack of folders with a paperweight on top, a quill and inkwell, a candle, and what looked to be a wax seal.

Lucien either never used this office, or the man's cleanliness bordered on compulsion: the stack of papers had been set one finger width left and up from the bottom left corner of the desk and the paper weight sat in the exact center of the top folder, the letter opener and quill lay halfway up and perfectly parallel to the right edge of the desk with the inkwell two finger-widths left of the quill.

Lex estimated that she had about five minutes until she needed to make her way down to the lower levels of the facility, so she started snooping. She rifled through the folders on the desk, but none of the contents struck her as important: they were mostly employee files on warehouse and dock workers.

Spirits, running a legal business looked boring. She moved over to the bookshelves full of ledgers. It was more of the same. Meaningless bookkeeping, for the most part, but for one more worn looking tome. Though identical to the others in style, this one's spine had significantly more creases.

"Oh, what's this?" she asked herself and opened the book. It was either older than the others, or more heavily used.

Up until this point, the ledgers had all been organized chronologically, each shelf relating to a different type of good or shipment style—land or water routes—but this one,

stuck between two books logging spice shipments downriver, noted lumber shipments over land.

She flipped through the pages, trying to commit some of the numbers to memory, but she had never been good with that sort of thing. Kedrick could have, but not Lex. Instead, she chose a page in the middle of the ledger and tore it, taking her time to ensure that she got the whole page. She would show it to her uncle after they broke Boz out. As she went to place the book back into its spot, she heard raised voices from the warehouse floor below.

"Time's up." She tucked the bit of folded paper into a pocket cut into her leathers and slid the ledger back to its out-of-place spot on the shelf, then headed for the door to the lower warehouse floor.

She emerged from the office and looked out to the ground floor in time to see Dorran and Rollo shove Kedrick through a concealed door between two sets of scaffolding full of product. They followed behind one of Lucien's men, with the other trailing behind Dorran and Rollo.

"This is where the plan gets messy," she muttered to herself.

That misplaced ledger had burnt a lot of time, and she had to hurry to catch up with the men. Atop the scaffolding, she weaved between barrels, crates, and chests, piles of this good or that, on her way to the doors Kedrick and the others had taken. She hoped they didn't have a door guard on the other side.

A large pile of crates blocked most of the door, barely leaving enough space for a man to pass through. How had Rollo gotten through so easily?

Lex swung herself to the ground, landing in a crouch before the door. It was unlocked, so she pushed it open just wide enough that she could slip in.

Torches set in wall sconces provided the hallway with dim light. Lex crept forward following the torches through the nondescript hall that angled gently downward as it curved to the left.

After maybe thirty seconds of cautious progress, she found the first signs of life that took the form of something other than torches: doorways. One door about halfway down the hall looked open, and the sounds of snoring drifted toward her. Here, the wall sconces had been placed between each doorway so that they illuminated almost all of the corridor. The musty smell of human sweat was only partially masked by the scent of burning pitch, which meant that there had to be some sort of ventilation system in this underground lair.

She made her way up to the open doorway and peered inside. Three sets of bunked beds lined the far wall with a small space between each for their occupants to climb in and out. Thugs, each in a different state of undress, filled four of the beds. Three chests lined both the left and right walls. This wasn't just a between-jobs resting area. This was a barracks of sorts.

She stepped past the open door and continued on. The hallway ended in a bit of a crossroad with a tunnel branching off both right and left. The stone floor offered little clue as to which side was used more frequently. How was she supposed to know which one to take?

She chose at random and turned left, following it through a series of winding turns and not-quite corners, the walls unblemished by doorways or tapestries. As she

rounded what felt like the fiftieth curve in the corridor, she saw a door at the end of the tunnel. She hurried to it and tried the handle.

Locked. Of course. Spirits, why could this not be easy? She withdrew her picks and after several tries—too many tries, if she was honest with herself—the last tumbler clicked into place and the handle turned. Lex poked her head inside and realized with a start that this was the same exact room she and Kedrick had met Lucien in two nights before. But this was not what she had been searching for.

Wrong way. She cursed and turned back to the door, only to see that she wasn't alone. Someone had followed her through the maze of a tunnel. The man had an eye-patch over one eye and a shock of curly, dirty blond hair that fell across his face. He wasn't big, exactly. Not like Rollo, at least. But definitely muscular. His face was twisted into a sneer.

"Thought that was you, girly," he said. "Hard to tell cuz it was so dark, y'know?"

Chapter 7

Jairen stood rooted in spot, his plans of escape shattered. Why had he not taken the side door and wended his way through the servants' corridors?

What should he say now? What should he do?

"Why are you covered in blood, Jair?" Malkai asked again, taking a step forward. "Jair, are you hurt? Did father?" Malkai visibly swallowed. "Do I need to summon the physicker?"

Malkai's gaze was soft as a down pillow, concern written all over his face, from blue-green eyes to the way the corners of his mouth always seemed to smile. When Malkai looked at someone, spoke to someone, servant or noble alike, he gave his whole attention to them and what they had to say. Jairen couldn't bear to hold that caring gaze any longer. He dropped his eyes.

"Mal—it was an accident. I didn't mean to. I," but he trailed off. The words sounded hollow even to his own ears.

"What did you not mean to do, Jair?" Malkai had closed the gap between them to just three or four paces.

"Father is-"

"Was it bad this time? What did he do to you?"

How did Jairen deserve such compassion from his brother? He felt sick. Felt as if he had been punched in the gut all over again.

"Dead." Jairen finished. "Father is dead. But Mal, you have to believe me." Jairen slumped to his knees. He heard his voice emanating as if from someplace else. "It was an accident. I just," he choked back a sob, "I pushed him. And the stairs. And the blood. Oh Mal, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to."

"You jest, surely. Brother, I am not amused. Tell me true: why are you bl-?"

Malkai's words cut short and Jairen looked up to see why his brother had stopped. Malkai stared over Jairen's head and into the room behind.

When Jairen had fallen to his knees, he must have opened Malkai's line of sight into the throne room. And though the dais sat over one hundred paces away, though that was perhaps too far to make out the exact features of the king's corpse on the steps to the throne, the crimson puddle and the dead body were undeniable.

Jairen felt his world lurch as Malkai yanked his brother to his feet, lacking the fine-tuned finesse of Will that his father had displayed. "You did. You actually killed Father. How? Why, Jair?"

Jairen, suspended in the air, scarcely had time to flinch before Malkai's fist smashed him in the nose. Hot pain flared, consuming all he knew, spots of white light blooming in his vision. Blood gushed from Jairen's nose in a hot stream, mixing with his tears.

Malkai threw his brother with the Will, sending Jairen skidding across the polished stone floor and halfway onto the carpet.

He deserved this, didn't he?

Patricide and regicide, both in a single moment.

No point in fighting back. He didn't want to fight back. What if he killed Malkai, too?

But what if Malkai killed him, instead?

The guilt would eat his brother up, just as it already ate at Jairen.

That thought, not his own self-preservation, gave Jairen the strength to first kneel, then stand and face his brother. Malkai's face streamed with tears, his hands trembled with what could only be rage.

When their eyes met, Malkai paused, his steps faltered, and Jairen made his move. He swung a fist at his older brother's face, making solid connection with Malkai's nose.

Jairen shoved his brother aside and ran. No time to get his belongings, he angled for the main doors from the keep. His footsteps echoed as he flew through the castle halls. He turned down the second to last corridor before freedom and saw Cici. Her eyes opened wide and her mouth fell ajar when she noticed him. She brought her hands to her mouth as he streaked by.

He neither slowed nor stopped as he ran by, offering no more explanation than, "I'm sorry," as he passed her and turned the last corner.

Jairen burst through the already open double doors to the castle yard and wove his way through the stream of messengers, nobles, and attendants that flocked about the yard.

Twenty paces separated Jairen from the portcullis and gatehouse when his brother's voice rang out across the yard, magically carrying over the din of voices outside. "Close the gate."

The soldiers, well drilled as they were, hesitated at the sight of their princes streaking toward them, both with blood streaming from their noses. That brief hesitation gave Jairen the extra few steps that he needed. He hurled himself to the ground and rolled free just as the portcullis slammed shut behind him. Yet Jairen ran another hundred yards before his burning lungs forced him to slow his pace.

Only then did Jairen realize he had no idea where to go. He thought about hiding out in one of the manor houses kept by nobles there in the upper city. Every great house in the empire kept a manse in the Highland, though few families actually used them regularly—holidays, and major events like coronations and funerals mainly.

He forced himself onward, dismissing the idea of squatting in one of the manses. His brother would search there first.

That left him with one option: the Fringe. Jairen had only visited the lower city once before. He'd gone with his mother to the opening ceremony of one of the soup kitchens she had established for the poor peasants. He, Malkai, and his mother, accompanied by twenty of the castle's elite guards, had taken a carriage through the muddy, stinking streets to an A-Frame building only marginally less dilapidated than the other structures in the area.

They had emerged from their carriage to scattered cheers from a crowd of unwashed urchins and unshaven men, and unkempt women. Why had so many peasants gathered for a soup kitchen? Verily, Jairen enjoyed the soup course served with the

evening meal, but why establish a kitchen devoted to soup? His mother had said a few words about hardship and suffering. Then they had climbed back into their carriage and left. Ten years old at the time, Jairen had thought the whole affair unpleasant.

Now, however, he knew, at least in theory, that the unwashed masses lived in dire poverty, that the soup kitchens had fed many thousands that had no other recourse. For the first time, Jairen thought he understood the desperation of those people. For he, too, had no recourse. He would hide in the Fringe and go to a soup kitchen for his meals. Perhaps he would rent a room in an inn for the night like travelers did in stories. He had a small coin pouch on his belt, at least. Thank Zekker he'd followed the latest trend in court fashion and fastened the coin purse to his belt that morning.

Jairen slowed his run to a walk and caught his breath. He could see the large, fortified wall that separated the Fringe from the Highland and did not want to startle the guards managing the checkpoint by approaching at a run.

The stone gatehouse stood wide enough for ten horsemen to ride abreast yet the brief tunnel, fortified by two latticed-iron portcullises, narrowed to half that width, creating a choke-point that helped make the Highland almost impregnable. Two guards in chainmail and blue gambesons with the royal crest emblazoned on the chest stood at their posts on either side of the gatehouse. They leaned against the stone wall behind them, resting the hafts of their halberds at their feet.

Upon Jairen's approach, the younger of the two guards—perhaps Jairen's age and still babyfaced—straightened and stepped forward, halberd now gripped in two hands.

"Halt please, m'lord." The young guard's voice marked him as even younger than Jairen originally believed—perhaps fifteen? "M'lord, if I might inquire with Your

Lordship on your business in the Fringe, and without an honor guard too, if I may add, I do believe this is quite unsafe, m'lord. Mayhaps I could fetch a retainer for-

Jairen held up a hand to interject, "My business is my own," he said. His voice held only a hint of the tremble he felt in his hands. He rubbed his sweaty palms on his trousers and marshaled more control on his voice. "I demand passage, require no retainer, and will suffer no arguments to the contrary." He wished swords had still been in fashion in court. He thought his statement would carry significantly more weight had he worn even the ceremonial rapier that had been the height of summer style some three months ago.

Despite Jairen's youth and disheveled—bloody appearance—he wore noble clothing, royal insignia, and the practiced air of a prince.

Both guards resumed their slouching, leaning back against the wall. But the younger spoke again before Jairen had fully passed. "As milord wishes. Yet," he paused a heartbeat and shifted his weight from his left to his right foot, "if I may be so bold, sir, why are you covered in blood?"

"Corben, silence." The older guard's harsh tone matched the man's appearance, all lean sinew and grit with a sharp jawline and a hawkish nose. "Please my lord, forgive my boy's question. He means well."

"There is nothing to forgive. It was a fair question." Yet Jairen walked through the gatehouse without answering the boy's question.

Jairen walked deeper and deeper into the Fringe, stepping around or over the largest stretches of mud and muck when he could. Even so, he had scarcely covered five

blocks on the winding, narrow streets before he'd managed to step into a deep puddle, splashing mud and awful all over his trousers..

He walked by the mouth of an alley and something in the mud caught his eye. Was that a corpse? He watched the passersby, folk of all ages walking through the alleyway and around the corpse, casually, callously disregarding it, simply avoiding it like Jairen had dodged puddles.

Jairen wondered if people would have avoided it at all, but for its smell. It stunk like something between the sickly sweet decaying meat and the odor of pickled vegetables. He grew nauseous as its stink mixed with the old sewage scent of the Fringe. As he approached, a weird, arhythmic motion on the body's chest and neck drew Jairen's eye.

Swatting at a cloud of flies, Jairen realized the squirming wasn't that of skin, but of maggots writhing in masses on the man's neck, in and around the stab wound in the man's chest. Bile rose in his throat.

He had seen death before. Had held his mother's hand as she drew her final breath. He had killed his father less than an hour ago. Yet this stranger, dead in the street, being devoured by maggots and rats alike, somehow that struck him harder than either other death he'd seen.

He pictured his father's lifeless form lying on the stairs to the dais, blood pooled behind his head, dripping down the steps, being devoured like the corpse in the muck. When bile surged again, he couldn't hold it back. He retched all over the body in front of him, adding his own vomit to the feast for flies and rats.

Jairen turned and half ran, half stumbled from the alley, heedless of the mud and muck, with no destination in mind. He had to get away from that alley, from that body, from death, from memories and guilt.

He ran for several blocks before finally stopping to catch his breath. He hunched over and braced his hands on his knees, panting, gasping for air due as much to the exertion as to the memories he couldn't outrun. He was covered in filth, his shoulder ached, and his stomach growled.

All at once, Jairen became aware of the people around him, milling about the streets of the Fringe. Even bloodied and covered in mud, he knew he must stand out in his once-fine clothes. The majority of folk around him wore ill-fitting tunics and breeches of drab colors—variegated shades of brown and gray. He supposed that some of the tunics may have been white, once, but life in the Fringe had likely soiled the garments long ago.

Jairen realized that, despite their different levels of economic prosperity, and aside from the relative lack of cleanliness, these folk, the hoi polloi, as he had referred to them to his uncle yesterday—had that only been yesterday?—went about their daily lives as would any courtier with whom Jairen had grown up.

But, no, while they might not be seething masses, as he had intimated, they were yet nigh on uncivilized. Just leaving that corpse in the muck and mud of the alleyway to be eaten by the lowest life forms around? Surely that, alone, defined savagery.

And now he was part of it, that Fringe life.

Jairen had to come up with a plan, had to do something, had to move forward. But what? Should he flee the city? He could go to Timberlan, his mother's familial lands in the north. No, too obvious a choice. Malkai would surely think to search there.

And search, he would. Jairen had no doubt that even now, guards scoured the city for him. Whether they knew that he had fled to the Fringe or not remained to be seen, but as sure as the sun sets west, they would figure it out eventually. Which meant he had to vacate the city.

Of that much, he was sure.

Yet... had Jairen been in Malkai's position, he would likely order the city gates closed, and river traffic ceased while guards swarmed around the city.

An undertaking of that size would likely take days to organize, though, and many more to complete. The royal guard simply lacked the manpower to conduct such a search on short notice without abandoning their other duties. No, word would be sent to either request volunteers or, more likely, to a nearby garrison or noble house to send troops to augment the city guards. Such an inundation of soldiers into the city would cause chaos, and possibly even panic.

Jairen needed somewhere to stay, somewhere to lie low for a few days. He wondered how much a safehouse would cost. For that matter, where would he purchase a safehouse at all? He didn't figure he could walk up to someone on the street and make the inquiry. Even if he could, would such a house actually be safe? He doubted that very much. He would stick to the original plan—could he call it a plan?—and rent a room at an inn.

He picked a direction and started walking, following the flow of the crowd, dodging around puddles where he could, hopping where he couldn't, and wading when neither was an option. He came across a group of men who stood around a flaming barrel of some sort with a roasting spit above it. Almost as soon as he noticed the rabbit—he thought it was a rabbit at least—on the spit, his stomach growled again. He had retched up the remains of his afternoon meal when he came across the body in the alley.

He set the desire to find an inn aside for the time being. He had plenty of money in his pouch, perhaps he could simply purchase the rabbit from the men.

He observed the men for a moment, unsure. Three of them in total: one pale and bald and burly with a thick brown beard growing down his cheeks, a bushy mustache covering his upper lip, but no whiskers to speak of on his chin; one was nothing but freckles and sinew with a shock of red-orange hair nearly the color of a carrot, and a scar reaching from hairline to chin on the left side of his face; and the other was a short, dark-skinned man, probably of Itheran descent, yet bearing none of the tell-tale piercings or tattoos prevalent among the people of Ithera.

Though the group as a whole looked rough, they joked with one another and laughed often enough. Jairen supposed that his hesitation merely came from the anxiety of approaching strangers without the etiquette of court procedure to guide him through the interaction.

Jairen had never been shy, exactly, but to call him awkward wouldn't be far from the truth. He hid it well beneath the mask that all courtiers wore; a mask augmented by the confidence and power—however diminished as the Second Son—of princehood. Yet,

without those roles of court to slip into, in an unfamiliar situation, and with his life crashing to pieces around him—

But he was oh so hungry.

He dismissed the rough appearance of the group as the standard for men in the Fringe. He swallowed his anxiety and approached.

"Pardon, my good sirs." Jairen affected his best manners, bowing lower than he had ever bowed before—except perhaps to his father—to show deference to these men. "Could I, perchance, purchase that rabbit? I am truly famished."

The Itheran spoke first, "That may be the first time I ever been called sir." His accent drew out the vowel sounds in a weird lilt, but still recognizable as some facsimile of the accent dominant in Ithera.

"That's probably 'cause he was talking to me and Carrots here." The bald man's voice, like his laugh suggested, sounded deep like gravel. He nodded toward the freckled man—Carrots, presumably—who had not looked up from the roasting spit.

"Ay shove off ya damn hairy twat," the Itheran shot back.

Still not looking up from the fire, Carrots spoke: "You can't have it. It's ours."

Jairen's heart fell. He thought for sure these men would gladly accept his coin for a rabbit. He didn't know what a fair price was, but he was willing to overpay if it meant a warm meal. "Then perhaps I could purchase a portion of—"

"Don't ya mind ole Carrots—"

Seeing a glimmer of hope, he cut the bald man off mid sentence: "So you'll sell it to me? How much?"

The Itheran's eyes narrowed and he took a step forward. "How much you got?"

"Plenty, I'm sure. What is the running price?" He pulled the tie on his coin purse so that he could rummage inside for the proper amount. The bag shifted and some of the golden Zeks—the highest denomination of Renmarran currency—clinked together. Though the sound hadn't been all that loud, Carrots's eyes shot to Jairen. He looked hungry. His eyes opened wide and the man gave Jairen a once-over, apparently untroubled by his bloody, muddy, retched-on garments.

Jairen's gaze fixed on Carrots for a moment, then shifted to the bald man who had advanced a couple of steps toward Jairen—though not close enough to touch him. Yet, for the first time since fleeing into the Fringe, Jairen felt a hint of fear creep into his belly. He tensed, but none of the men came any closer.

"Come on now, don't you shy away now. You want some of our rabbit ain't you?" Carrots turned fully to face Jairen now, all but ignoring the rabbit on the spit behind him.

Jairen thought about running, right then and there, but the rabbit—the rabbit smelled so good. "Aye, some food would be welcome after the day I have had."

"Oh for shame," the bald man affected a mockingly poor imitation of Jairen's own speech, "the poor Highland laddie had a bad day."

The Iteran joined in on the fun at Jairen's expense. "Did the lordling lose a game of Conquest? Or maybe he slept through his midday meal?"

Jairen would have preferred that the barbs hadn't stuck, that he would have grown thick skin from his lifetime of ridicule in the courts, and that he'd have kept a level head. But he didn't. "Zekker take you all, I just want to eat some damnedable rabbit." Who did these peasants think they were to goad him like that. Second Son or not, he was their better in every way.

Yet, as he moved his attention from the bald man to the Iteran, Carrot took a step toward Jairen, drawing the prince's attention momentarily away from the other two men.

The world tilted and spun as Jairen's head was knocked hard to the right. He staggered one, two steps away, following the motion of his head as it did its best to escape his shoulders. He fell to his hands and knees and braced himself on the ground, willing the world to stop spinning. His injured shoulder still throbbed from his father's beating, his jaw ached and felt unhinged. Some small part of his mind told him he couldn't stay there, that he was in danger. Yet, that voice was far too quiet to be heard over the ringing in his ears.

His world lurched again as a boot connected, lancing pain through his ribs. The impact knocked him onto his side. Darkness closed in on the edges of his vision. He could vaguely make out the feel of hands rolling him onto his back, grasping at his belt and fumbling with something there. He heard muted curses and words drifting through haze like the sight of a torch in the distance all but obscured by fog. "Move," said one of the voices. "I'll cut it off."

A sharp tongue of flame bit into his right hip and was gone. The voices disappeared and Jairen succumbed to unconsciousness.

Chapter 8

Malkai knelt, a prince—a boy—in mourning, next to his father's cooling corpse, head jutting against the marble stair at an unnatural angle, not dissimilar to the way one would use a pillow. Had it not been for the not-quite-warm blood soaking through the fabric around his knees, or his father's open eyes, he might have convinced himself that the king merely chose an odd location for a nap.

But Dalen wasn't asleep. The king, the leader of the greatest kingdom Renmarr had ever known, was dead. Dead at the hands of a siph prince, at the hands of his own son. How could one so gifted by the divine have found such an inglorious end? No matter one's strength and prestige, Zekker reclaims all. How fast a life can be snuffed out.

A tightness pressed at Malkai's chest like trying to squeeze the air from his lungs until his screams turned to silent, desperate gasps. The pressure built right to bursting but the Will surged in him, feeding on whatever force constricted his breath, masticating, corralling and channeling his sorrow into rage, digesting it into purpose.

Malkai clenched his fists and willed the burning in his eyes to recede. He braced himself then, his left hand sinking into the gore, closing his father's eyes to end Dalen's death stare with the other.

He stood, a king—a man—with a purpose, and strode from the room, issuing commands as he went.

"Captain," he addressed Rico as he stepped into the corridor beyond. "Rally the castle and city guards alike. Find my murderous cur of a brother and bring him before me." He paused mid step to look his friend in the eyes. "Alive, Rico. He will answer for his crimes."

He passed two servants and ordered them to seek out the High Zekkite to prepare his father for burial rites.

"And make the call for council. There is much to be done."

#

Malkai strode into the council chambers, left hand and knees still stained red. He could have bathed, changed, and then called for the meeting. Some of the councilors would no doubt see his appearance as him making a dramatic statement, but in truth, he'd simply forgotten. He had made it to the very doors of the chamber and had reached out to push inside before he even realized his left hand was still bloody. The Zekker-damned lords could bugger off for all he cared.

A heavy dark wood table surrounded by nine chairs of the same wood dominated the council chambers. Various tapestries and paintings added color to an otherwise dreary looking room. Other than the tapestries, and the three slitted windows along the northern wall of chambers that allowed for some degree of natural light, the sapphire crest of the

royal family inlaid in the wood on the king's chair at the head of the table made up the entirety of the chamber's decoration.

Out of habit, Malkai walked to the fourth seat on the King's Right—the closest to the door and farthest from the king—that had once been his. He had been overjoyed on the day of his thirteenth birthday when his father had first brought him to a meeting. The king had worried that Malkai would resent being so far down the table, in the place of least importance, despite that he would one day inherit the throne. They had been the first two inside the chamber that day. He had squatted—not knelt, exactly. King's never knelt—and looked Malkai eye to eye, the scent of cloves on the king's breath merely a foot from Malkai's face.

His father had explained with the gravest solemnity that the King's Right were made up of the sovereign's most trusted, and that his place closest to the door was named the Defender, and was therefore the most important seat to occupy, save for the king's own—and perhaps that of the High Zekkite. The Defender sat closest to the door so that in the event of attack, he was the first line of defense. The king's most stalwart defender. In the early days of the kingdom, the king's younger brother often filled the role. But after the Second Son rebellion, the role had been filled with the king's heir instead. *Because who might a king trust the kingdom's security to, if not the one who represents its future?*

So Malkai had sat tall and proud in the chair twice every week since that first day. And though he hadn't always maintained vigilance, he thought he had done his duty well.

Until today.

Today, his father had died.

Today, the king had died.

Today, Malkai had failed at his duty, his one—and most sacred—charge as King's Defender. His king had been murdered while he had stood patiently just beyond the door.

He couldn't bring his father back. Couldn't right the wrong. But Zekker be damned if he couldn't bring justice to the one responsible.

To his brother.

Chapter 9

"I'm sorry, have we met?" Lex asked, doing her best impression of an airy noblewoman, turning her head up and sniffing slightly. She clasped her hands behind her back. "I do believe you have the wrong person." She didn't honestly expect to fool the man, but she did hope to put him off a little.

"You don't know me, eh?" The man took a step forward. "I suppose the patch is new." He adjusted it and stepped closer still.

"No, I do believe I would recognize someone as," she took a step back, farther into the room. If she was going to fight this man, she would need more room than the hallway would allow. "Handsome as you are."

The man's chuckle lacked anything resembling humor. "Don't reach for that dagger you got in your sleeve." He pulled a dagger of his own. "Seen what you can do with one of those, before, I have. Ain't pretty. Half of me ain't gonna see pretty again, neither."

"What?" Lex blinked. She honestly didn't understand what the man was saying.

"You killed Cud and Jax and then put one of them knives in my eye."

"Oh shit," she thought aloud. "He's one of the alley thugs. I thought—"

"Who're you talking to?" He tightened his grip on his dagger, which he held like a sword before him. He edged his foot up and shifted his weight forward so that it was centered on his right leg. The man had obviously never fought with a knife before. Though she had a hard time believing that the stance he took was particularly well suited for swordplay, either. "Don't matter. You thought wrong though bitch. I'm alive kicking. But you ain't about to be."

Lex never understood why people—men, especially—thought it was a good idea to warn their opponents when they were going to attack. Probably some misguided form of chivalry or some shite like that.

He swung. She dodged back a step and drew her own knives from her belt. Her right hand gripped the knife for slashing, thumb wrapped just below the blade. Her left hand held the other in a reverse grip.

She let him swing again, a wild motion that had him overextending so badly she could have dodged it after drinking a bucket of Dorran's "home brew." This man was no knife fighter. All clumsy, jerky motions intended to eviscerate, like he was hacking with an axe or a cudgel.

In a flash, she saw the alley again, the two men, batons swinging, remembered the crack of one as it slammed into her arm. Then searing pain brought her back to the moment as the man's knife nicked her right bicep. The memory had caught her unaware and she hadn't dodged far enough.

A smile spread across the man's face. "Not so tough now, huh? You're gonna die here."

He lunged for her, knife in the lead. Lex shifted right, left blade flashing up, a stripe of blood blossoming on the man's right forearm. He cursed and swung at her head. She ducked the slash and kicked him in his plant leg. He tumbled to the ground, but regained his feet quickly.

Lex smiled. He had underestimated her, *again*. He had lost an eye when it was three on one. His friends had died when they had the element of surprise. Now, her favorite knives in her hands, in a fair fight? Well no, it wasn't fair, was it? He was big, dumb, and slow.

He hacked down at her and she twisted to the side. The man's momentum carried him forward, knocking him off balance. She pivoted and dropped low, cutting both of her blades across the back of his calf. Two ribbons of blood marked his mud colored britches just above his boot. He cursed and spun, aiming high.

She ducked and stepped into his guard, punching her right-hand knife into his belly. He stumbled back a step, pulling free from the blade, dropped his own knife, looked down at the wound, looked up at Lex. "You bite—"

Lex slashed, cutting her reverse-gripped blade across his neck just as surely as it cut the curse off mid word.

She wiped her knives clean on the man's tunic, sheathed them, and inspected her bicep where the man's knife had cut her. She cursed herself for her lapse in concentration. All three of her assailants from that night now dead, with only an injured shoulder and a nicked bicep to show for the trouble.

"Kedrick," she thought aloud. In the excitement of the fight, she had all but forgotten why she was there in the first place. She rushed back down the twisting hallway and continued down the right-hand fork that she should have taken to begin with.

She hurried past closed doors and even another couple of branching tunnels, letting her instincts guide her, rather than her head. She turned a corner and saw an open door at the end of the long hall. Through it, she could see a small group of people. Two men with red sashes on, one massive, one slight. A third man stood between the two, hands manacled behind his back. Spirits, they cuffed Kedrick?

She stole up the hallway toward the door, hugging the wall as she went. As she grew closer, she heard a voice she had hoped to never hear again. Or at least, not so soon.

"Ahhh but Ked, you see, that, as they say, is the rub, is it not?" She would recognize Lucien's oily voice anywhere. Even with the man obscured from sight, she could scarcely resist the urge to shiver. More than mud, more than blood, more than bile, the thought of his gaze made her want to bathe.

She wanted to move into the room, to cut the man's throat and be done with it. And she might have, had she been able to see the whole of the room. But she had no idea how many ruffs awaited her beyond the press of Rollo, Kedrick, and Dorran. So she stuck to the plan and hurried past the open door, turning a corner to the right, heading in the only other direction Bozarth could be.

Finally, she turned one more corner in the underground maze of a lair and saw a reinforced wooden door with a beam barring it from the outside.

"That has to be it," she thought aloud.

She crept the rest of the way down the corridor and peered through the eye slit. One guard sat in a chair, back against the wall, perhaps five feet into the dank of what could only be Lucien's equivalent of a dungeon. Spirits, the man's pretension went so far as to install a dungeon in his lair?

She lifted the heavy beam and lowered it to the ground. She gasped as her grip on the wood slipped and it fell with a clatter against the door frame.

"Who's there?" The guard's voice sounded muffled, filtering through the gap in the door. "Pearce, that you? Shift change already?"

Lex drew a dagger with her right hand and shoved the door open with her left. She fell on the guard, making a shallow slash from left to right across his stomach, stepped through with her left, kicking out at the man's lead leg.

He checked her foot with his shin and she cursed at the impact. But she drove on, a series of cuts forcing the man back, giving him no room to draw his sword. He caught her wrist when she over extended and twisted the knife from her hand. She sprung back and drew two more knives. The man drew his own dagger and gripped hers with his other hand.

They squared off in the narrow hallway. This man's stance, his balance—poised on the balls of his feet, weight evenly distributed between fore and back foot—marked him as a competent knife fighter, unlike the alley thug.

"Already seen one scrap today, eh?" He gestured with his knife to the gash on Lex's arm.

She launched forward again, knives held in the same fore and reverse grip she had used earlier, just the way Dorran had taught her. *Better for tiny things like you*, he had said.

They exchanged a flurry of cuts, each marking the other multiple times. The key to winning an even knife fight was not in avoiding all cuts, but to avoid only the dangerous ones until you found your opponent's tell—that hitch in breathing or tension in their shoulders—that would precede a cut. That was not the case with this man. Competent though he was, he fought with each knife individually. Each cut with each knife part of their own movement. Left, then right, then left again.

He lunged, right knife in the lead, aiming for her throat. She twisted and brought her left arm up to guard, deflecting the blade wide, letting it bite into the meat of her left shoulder as she moved into his guard. She lashed her right out at the man's left arm, cutting across his bicep and spun, bringing her reverse-gripped left around, stabbing him in the side.

He gasped as she jammed the knife to its hilt under his arm. She wrenched it free as he staggered back. He clutched his injured arm to his side and took another step back. His eyes were wide with horror as Lex closed the distance between them. She slid one of her blades between the man's ribs and into his heart. If she had to kill, she preferred to do so quickly.

She didn't have time to slow, to stop, to think about the guard. She just wiped her knife clean on his jerkin and continued down the hall, peering through the cell doors.

"Boz?" she called, just above a whisper. "you down here?"

"Lex?" the locksmith's voice came from farther down the hall.

She reached his cell and looked in. He stood manacled in the middle of the cell, chains attached to each wall, keeping his hands well away from one another. But apart from a bruised eye and red raw patches of skin around the cuffs, he looked well enough.

"Spirits, Boz. All's well?" She pulled out her lock picks and, self conscious about picking a lock in front of a master of lockpicking, set to work.

He looked between his chained hands. "It look like all's well?" he asked. "The bloody bastards chained me like this after I sprung the first set of cuffs they put me in. Honestly don't know what they expected to happen. Locks are my life, y'know." He cocked his head to the side and a rye smile spread across his face. "Guess I shoulda expected them buggers to catch me, though. It's a bloody maze down here, lass."

The lock clicked and she sighed in relief, swinging the door open and stepping inside. She turned her attention to the lock on the first cuff. This was easier than the door, and it opened after only a few seconds of coaxing.

"Give them over." Boz gestured with his free hand at her lock picks.

She obliged and strode from the cell.

Boz joined her maybe five seconds later, having picked the locks on his left arm and his feet in the time it had taken her to do one.

He grinned at her, one eye swollen under a mess of red hair. He never looked happier than in the seconds following a sprung lock.

She shook her head and they hurried back up the hall.

They had just rounded the first corner when she heard footfalls echoing from the corridor ahead. Kedrick's voice drifted along as well, louder than was probably necessary,

warning her of their approach. "Where're you sons of whores taking me?" His exaggerated accent back.

She whispered a string of invectives. She had taken too long to spring Boz from his cell. The fight with the alley thug had wasted precious time. Now they were escorting Ked to the same dungeon Lex had just left. Even if they could hide, Lucien's men would surely see the pool of blood, if not the dead body of guard. The alarm would be raised. But what if—

"Takes four of you to watch me? My hands are chained together. Sure, one of you's a stick of a thing, but ya got this biggun here, too."

"Rollo and Dorran are with him. Only two guards to deal with then." Lex pushed Boz back around the corner.

She peeked around the corner and saw them now. Two guards ahead of Kedrick, with Rollo and Dorran bringing up the rear. Why hadn't they just offed the guards already?

The first of the guards rounded the corner. She lunged, taking him in the throat, covering his mouth with her off hand to stifle his shout. Kedrick slammed a shoulder into the second guard and Dorran ended the surprised man in short order.

"Get these irons off me," Kedrick said by way of thanks.

Bozarth had scarcely touched the locks when the shackles dropped with a clang.

Ked rubbed his wrists. "Let's go"

They came to the three way intersection. The left path leading out the way they came, the straight path leading to the room they had met Lucien in two nights back. Lex

crept forward and peered into what she assumed was Lucien's real office, but it was empty and the candles were unlit. What she would give to search that room.

"Clear," she said, beckoning the crew forward.

As they turned left to leave the way they'd come, men filed out of the barracks doors that lined the hall. Probably thirty of Lucien's pups, all in all. Way too many for the four—Boz didn't count—of them to handle.

"We got the intruders," Dorran said. "They're right here." Lex felt hands on her shoulders. "We'll just take them on up to Lucien's office in th' warehouse. Don't mind us."

Despite the sudden sinking feeling in her stomach and the nearly audible beat of her heart, despite the obvious danger, despite the thirty or so murderous whoresons in front of her—all of whom were armed—Lex laughed. She couldn't help it. It just bubbled out of her.

"Oh bravo, indeed." Lucien's voice rang out from somewhere toward the back of the crowd. Short as she was, Lex couldn't see over even the first row of men. "You infiltrated my hideout quite well, little kitten. Did you kill my guard by the cells? I knew you had claws." Lucien finally stepped through the front line of his men. He wore a crimson weskit atop a black tunic and dark gray trousers, looking every inch the noble that he styled himself. "I truly don't want to kill you all, though, I certainly have no compunction against it. Give up and I'll let you live. We will, of course, have to restructure our arrangement from three nights back. But surely that's fair, in exchange for your lives. What say you? Join me and live or defy me and die."

"A question, first?" Lex asked, motioning behind her back to Dorran that they should backtrack and take the other tunnel. She sensed, more than felt, Dorran relaying that signal to Rollo who grunted.

"Lex, dear, that *was* a question, was it not? But yes, go on." He waved his hand in a small circle. "What would you like to ask?"

"Do you talk so much because you like to hear your own voice, or do you think people actually want to hear your monologues?"

To his credit, Lucien's face didn't betray even a hint of consternation, or any other emotion, for that matter. His only reaction was a brief nod and an almost lazy gesture toward Kedrick. "Rollo, if you will," he said.

Spirits, no!

Lex opened her mouth to warn her uncle, but it was too late. Kedrick gasped in pain as Rollo jammed a knife into his side and withdrew it. Rollo was about to stab again, but Lex was faster. Her knife shot from her hand and buried itself in Rollo's right bicep. The giant of a man cried out and the knife fell from his hand, clattering to the floor.

"Down the tunnel," Lex shouted, pushing a wide-eyed Dorran back the way they came. Bozarth followed, and Kedrick came next, clutching his side, but moving well besides. They hurried through the corridor she had traversed maybe ten minutes previously, the sound of pursuit spurring them along. They reached the end of the hallway and flew through the door. Lex turned just as the lead pursuer rounded the corner. She slammed the door shut and locked it before following the group past the dead alley thug, up the narrow stairs, and into the muddy alleyway beyond.

They had made it almost two blocks before Lex heard men burst through the door they had just escaped through. They wouldn't be able to outrun the men for long. Not with Kedrick bleeding all over the place.

"Where do we go?" Dorran asked, looking to Kedrick.

"To my flat." Lex answered instead. "Lucien knows of Boz's workshop and Kedrick's house. They will be headed to both places. Dorran, hurry to Ked's and get Eva and Grans, bring them to my flat. They won't be safe at home. Boz, go with him. I'll help my uncle."

Dorran just looked at her. Blinked. Then nodded and took off, Boz following close behind.

"How's your wound?" she asked, turning to her uncle.

He grunted. "I've been better, Lex." His voice was strained, pain mirrored in his eyes.

"We need to dress it. Can you get to my flat?"

"Aye, Lex. I'm not done yet." He straightened himself, and took a step forward, leaving a crimson streak along the wall he had leaned against. "Let's go."

They made their way slowly through the city, talking very little. Their route was anything but straight, taking alleys and relatively unpopulated side streets wherever possible. They only had to dodge two groups of crimson-sashed ruffs on their trek home. Giving Kedrick's house a wide berth, they passed through a rough area of town and saw a group of men kicking some poor, blood covered wretch as he cowered in the mud. And finally, Lex supporting Ked's bulk on her slight frame, they made it to Lex's flat.

Eva cried out in alarm when they staggered in, and Dorran replaced Lex in supporting her uncle, lowering him onto a pallet they had prepared. They gave Kedrick a deep draft of liquor and he passed out soon after.

Eva and Grans tended to Kedrick's wound as best they could, but neither was a physicker. After cleaning it and stitching it closed, all they could do was change his bandages and pray.

Dorran slipped out sometime after sunset, saying that he couldn't just sit there, but gave no indication of when—or if—he would return.

Boz stayed, though.

Shortly after midnight, with Grans nodding off on the cot, Bozarth long since asleep in the corner, only Lex and Eva standing vigil, Kedrick—her uncle, the man she loved as a father—drew his last breath.

Eva keened, a heartrending sobbed wracking her chest as she clutched her husband's still-warm body.

Lex clenched her fists and squeezed her eyes shut, willing the tears away, failing even in that.

Chapter 10

Jairen regained consciousness in the darkness of a new moon. Only the light from what must have been tavern gave any semblance of visibility. That was fine with Jairen. He just wanted to go back to sleep. His head pounded, and he couldn't open his right eye very far. He was definitely still tired, then. He would sleep for a couple of hours longer and then Sorcha would bring him his morning tea and everything would be as it ought. But Zekker be damned, it was cold in his chambers. The fire must have gone out. Where were his blankets, though? He reached one arm out and felt around him, his hand slipping into some slimy cold substance. Was that mud? Why was there mud in his be-

Oh.

Oh Zekker damn it, no.

The events of the day rushed back to him. Those ruffians beating him and stealing his coin, his flight from the castle, his father's lifeless eyes staring in accusation from beyond the Vaile. And Cici. Cici who he had veritably flown past with no explanation as he fled the castle. And Malkai, his best friend and only ally in the castle, had tried to kill him as Jairen left the throne room.

What had his father said? *You're just like your mother, right down to her tainted blood?* What did that mean—her tainted blood?

Maybe he did have tainted blood. Maybe all the shite that had happened since he prayed to stop his mother's suffering was Zekker's way of collecting reparations.

But no. He couldn't just dutifully make payments, could he? No, he had fought back. He had killed his father, injured his brother, and fled, rather than facing whatever punishment Zekker deemed appropriate.

So Jairen sat up in the mud and gasped in pain. He gritted his teeth and pushed to his feet, hands outstretched.

But where would he go? Where could he go?

That tavern, perhaps. But with what money? Bide...

There was a Zekker-damned tavern not a hundred yards from where he had gotten robbed. He could have strolled right past the ruffians and been perfectly warm in a Fringe tavern, instead of battered, bruised, and caked in Fringe street mud.

He heard the chink of chainmail from somewhere up one of the alleys.

Guards were exactly what he needed. He would inform them that some ruffians had stolen his coin and beat him. The guards would find the men and return his coin in short order. With his pouch back in his possession, he'd purchase a stay at the inn and get a good night's sleep before formulating a plan. A night or two in the Fringe wouldn't be so bad. Though he had to admit it had started poorly enough.

"Guards." He waved, but the motion made him nauseous. "Your assistance please."

The clink of their mailed armor sped up as three men in City Watch livery rounded a corner at a trot, hands uniformly reaching toward their swords.

As Jairen waved at their approach, he saw one of them stumble in the mud and curse. A second guard slowed to steady the stumbling man, but the lead guard hurried on.

"What might be the problem?" the guard asked when he drew near. His voice sounded vaguely familiar. But Jairen's head swam, and besides, so many of the lesser nobility served stints in the watch to fulfill—or more accurately, to avoid fulfilling—their yearly military service obligations. He had likely met this lordling at some fête a time or two.

Jairen noted the insignia of rank marking the man as a *hectus*—a noble in command of the five other troops that made up a *hecton*—and felt heartened. Who but a fellow noble, lowly as the man may be, would truly understand his plight? Robbed by ruffians and beaten near senseless. Aye, this man would help.

"Hectus, I wish to report a crime," Jairen said with all the formality he could muster.

One of the other guards who had just arrived chuckled. "This whole damned city be a crime, boy."

Jairen bristled, but, for once, held his tongue in check. "Good sirs, I know not how long since the crime occurred, as I have been unconscious for several hours, but earlier this day, I was beaten and robbed by three ruffians. They made off with my full coin pouch. I demand that my pouch be returned and the ruffians meet with the king's justice." He winced as he remembered that he had killed the very king he had just invoked.

"Hear that, Hect?" The third guard slapped the officer on the shoulder. "He demands the king's justice. Don't he know? The king died today. Murdered by some foul craft the youngest prince worked. The brat's probably working with them Doviers, the way I heard it."

"King Dalen's murder was a tragedy," the hectus said. "But King Malkai's—though he has not been crowned—justice must still be administered. If you'll come with me, citizen, we will escort you to the upper city, where you will likely be more comfortable." He gestured at Jairen's finery, tattered though it was, its quality still showed, even in the low light.

Jairen froze. The upper city? He couldn't go to the Highlands. Even if they just brought him to one of the guard houses, someone would likely recognize him, swollen face or no.

"Nay. I refuse to leave the area until the lowlifes are found." He hoped his indignant refusal was convincing.

The hectus changed tact. "May I inquire as to my good sir's name? Perhaps we could return you to your family estate while we search."

"I said I will stay here." Jairen squared his shoulders and straightened his back, stretching to his full height so that he stood slightly taller than the officer.

"Ay, the Hect asked a question." The second guard said. "What's your name?"

"Citizen, it appears you took a beating. We merely want to verify your wellbeing. Do you know who you are? What is your family name?"

Zekker damn it all. He had to risk it, had to give a name. The hectus was probably from a lower or mid-tier family, so Jairen couldn't pick just any lord. *Think*

Jairen. What noble houses have young lords in the city for the season? And which of those could he impersonate well enough to fool the hectus? "I'm Baxton of house Korwin."

The guards on either side of the hectus gasped, while the officer, himself, merely laughed.

"Is that so?" the hectus's voice held an edge.

Jairen took a step back and the two grunts put their hands on their sword hilts.

"Interesting. The light may be low, *Lord Korwin*, but I can see well enough to know that you are most certainly not my younger brother. I am Bruceter of House Korwin."

Oh Zekker's damnedable shite-streaked underthings. No wonder the man's voice sounded familiar. The Korwin's—vassals to his mother's family—used to summer with him and Malkai as children, though Jairen hadn't spoken with either Korwin brother in years.

He ran.

"Seize him." The ring of drawn steel and the chink of three mailed men giving chase punctuated Bruceter's command.

He wove through alleys trying to shake off his pursuers, and though the armor slowed their progress, Jairen's injuries hampered his own. He ran past a familiar alley, a dead body still in the mud, and turned down another, some three blocks on.

The walls of the alley narrowed the farther down it he went, until finally, the damned alley dead ended. The few doors set into the alley walls were locked, but light peaked from a crack beneath one.

He knocked, "Let me in." He hated pleading. But with the guards approaching, he had little choice. A pressure rose in his chest, and a tingling sensation spread through his arms not unlike the dead limb feeling after sleeping on one's arms, he had little choice.

Baxton's voice cut through the last vestiges of Jairen's hope from the mouth of the alley. "I think he went down here. Is this one not a dead end?"

"Aye, Hect. We got 'em now."

"Please," Jairen hissed, slamming a fist into the wooden door. "Please let me in."

No answer.

Zekker damn it all. This was just a wooden door. Maybe he could bust in. He wouldn't be able to hide a broken door, but maybe he could find a way out the other side.

He backed up five paces until he had pressed himself against the opposite wall. He took a deep breath, trying to ignore the growing feel of pins and needles in his arms and legs. He lurched forward, uninjured shoulder in the lead, closed his eyes, gritted his teeth at the moment of contact.

Only, there was no jarring impact of unyielding door, nor a splintering crash as he burst through. Rather, the pins and needles sensation had spread to his whole body, he felt almost weightless. He opened his eyes and saw only white.

What the—He gasped, panic rising in his incorporeal chest, then the white faded along with the tingling in his limbs. By the time vision returned in full, the sensation was but the ghost of a memory.

He stood in a dimly lit, stale little flat that smelled of musk and coppery blood. A pale girl about his own age with dark brown hair and the widest, greenest eyes he had ever seen stared at him, mouth agape. She knelt with a slightly older haystack-haired

woman with tears streaking her face. In front of them, lay the corpse of a middle-aged man with dark hair similar to the girl's. A wizened old woman with a shock of curly white hair slept on a cot in the corner.

The haystack woman shrieked. The green-eyed girl had risen to her feet and, almost in the same motion, had hurled a knife aimed directly at his head.

Jairen only barely had time to process all of this before his world tilted sideways and darkness closed in on the space the white had fled from a mere heartbeat before.

Chapter 11

Tears seeped from Lex's eyes, unbidden, unwelcome. Eva still clung to her now dead husband, silent now, but sobs still wracking her body. Slowly, ever so slowly, like reaching out to a frightened animal, Lex put a hand on the new widow's shoulder.

"Eva," she murmured. "Eva" she said again.

"He can't be gone, Lex." She let go of Kedrick's body and looked at Lex through tear filled eyes. "He can't be."

Lex drew her into an embrace. She didn't usually like physical contact with other people, but Eva was family. She and Grans were all the family she had left. So she clung to Eva, as much for herself as for the grieving widow, though she would never admit that to anyone.

They held each other, taking solace in one another's embrace, Eva's tears tickling Lex's neck as they fell. Lex couldn't say how long they stayed like that, but they had only just separated when the lock on her flat's door rattled.

"Let me in," a male voice pleaded from the other side, desperation ringing in his tone.

Lex drew a knife and caught Eva's eye, gesturing that the woman should stay quiet.

A few seconds passed before the man outside knocked hard on the door. "Please," he said. "Please let me in."

What was happening? Or more importantly, *why* was all this happening? Were the spirits playing some cruel joke on her? Her mind flashed through the day's events. The man from the alley, Boz'z rescue, Rollo's betrayal, and Kedrick's—spirits why?—Kedrick's death. Her whole life had flipped today, and now this?

Worry and fear for Kedrick's life had disappeared, like air vacating dead lungs. What was left in its place? Revenge on Rollo and Lucien, perhaps. But beyond that? Nothing, she would have thought.

But there, a tendril of curiosity like fire licked at Lex. Who sounded so desperate outside? What did he seek shelter from?

She stared intently at the door, knife in hand, though still on her knees next to Eva. In her periphery, she could see Bozarth had woken and was on his feet, his own dagger in hand.

She was about to re-sheath the knife, when mist—fog? Some sort of white vapor—seeped through every crack and crevice in the door, between boards, between door and frame, everywhere but through the lock hole. The fog pooled just beyond the door and sort of gathered, taking on a shape similar to that of a person, vaguely male, though not very broad of shoulder.

Then, all at once, the mist-man's features sharpened, defined, and he was mist no more. He was just a boy, perhaps her own age, though it was hard to tell given the

swelling on his face. His spotless—though torn—nobleman's clothes dripped, sodden with water, all over the floor. A cut in the fabric on his right hip revealed a pink patch of skin.

Eva shrieked and Lex sprung to her feet, throwing the knife in her hand almost in the same motion. The throw was more reflex than anything. Kedrick had always said that she was one of those rare people who fought in the face of fear. She regretted the throw almost immediately. The boy was an intruder, sure. But he looked just as frightened as she felt, and was clearly in worse shape than she, if the bruised face was any indication. Yet, she could no more halt the dagger's flight than she could breathe life back into her uncle.

The boy fell sideways, dodging the knife aimed at his head in the process. A feat that impressed—and relieved—her until he crumpled to the ground, unmoving. He had fainted, not dodged.

"Well bugger me with that six pointed star of Zekker. What just happened?" Bozarth said. "Do you know this bloke?"

"Wake Grans," she told Eva. "Boz, give over your belt. We need to tie him up."

#

In the end, they resorted to cutting strips from Lex's bed sheet to wrap the intruder several times. He'd have to break free of knots at his ankles, knees, hips, and chest to escape.

They shoved the unconscious boy in the corner, out of the way while they discussed what to do with him. The actions gave her purpose, something to do, to think about, other than her uncle.

"We ought to leave the city," Boz said, finally.

"Oh ay, and where would we go?" Lex asked. It made some sense, she supposed. Rollo would have told Lucien about their two safehouses. And who knew when Dorran would be back.

"Home," Grans said. "We go north to my family."

Lex knew so little about her grandmother's people, beyond that they lived in small villages—closer to tribes—in the northern provinces. Grans had relayed a few stories told around fire pits from her youth. They all revolved around long dead warriors and heroes from her tribe, and spoke about the spirits that her people had worshipped in the times before Zekker and the Renmarran Empire. But nothing concrete, nothing more than mythology.

"And what about the boy?" Eva gestured to the corner as the boy stirred in his bonds.

His eyes fluttered open and he groaned. His eyes widened.

"Where am I?" He demanded. "Who are you? Why am I tied up?"

"Who are we?" Lex scoffed. "Who are *you*? Spirits alive, what are you?" Lex stalked closer to the boy. "You broke into my house. You walked through a locked door like it weren't there. How'd you do that? And why were you running from the Watch?"

"Bide." He opened his hands palm up. "I did what?"

"One moment you're knocking on the door, the next, you just," she shrugged, "appeared out of some mist or something." Lex stabbed a hand toward the door. "Explain that."

"I'm sorry, I did what?"

"Lex," Grans said. "Maybe he doesn't understand it either. Look at his face. The lad has seen better days, I'd guess." She turned to the still-struggling boy. "What is your name, child."

He stopped struggling against his bonds and looked up, sulky defiance in his eyes. But he dropped his stare when he met Grans's gaze and murmured, "Jairen."

"Ain't ya a lordling master Jairen," Boz asked, emphasizing the term of respect used for business owners or craftsmen, not for nobles. "Lordlings always give their family name like it makes them better than us common folk," the locksmith continued.

"My surname is none of your concern, cretin."

Boz opened his mouth to respond, but Grans's raised hand cut him off. In a city where people considered eighteen-year-olds middle aged, Grans's white hair and wrinkled skin commanded as much respect as a king's crown.

"Jairen, my boy, ignore that surly locksmith." Grans kept her voice soft, soothing, like the lordling was some sort of injured animal. "You're only tied up because of the way you broke in here. We mean you no harm."

"Guards came by after you'd fainted." Lex shrugged. "We could have given you to them."

"Should have, more like," Boz mumbled.

The boy stiffened at the mention of the guards.

"Did they do that to your face, Jairen?" Grans brushed her fingers over the swollen skin.

"No, they were—I asked to buy a rabbit from three men. They did this, took my money."

"Oh, child," Grans said, "You definitely aren't from the Fringe, are you?" She patted his leg. "Well if you don't want to tell us your last name, my boy, we won't make you. But until we know more about you—about why you were running from the watch, we can't untie you."

"Who is that?" the boy—Jairen—jerked his chin at Kedrick's corpse. "Did you kill him? Are you going to kill me like you did him?"

"Lex drew a knife from her belt. "You do not get to ask about him." She didn't shout, didn't threaten beyond the drawn knife, but judging by the boy's flared nostrils, he must have caught the edge in her voice and made no reply.

"He was my son, Kedrick." Grans gestured to Eva. "This is his widow, Eva, and this," she pointed at Lex, "is my granddaughter, Lex. Bozarth is the ill-mannered man in the corner." She turned back to Kedrick, her eyes glistening with unshed tears as she took in her son's lifeless shell. "I'm afraid you caught us on a bad day. Kedrick was stabbed yesterday. He—" she dabbed at her eyes, "he died minutes before you burst in."

Jairen ducked his head in what might have been an awkward attempt at a bow. "My condolences then. I apologize for my comments." He raised his gaze and darted his eyes between Lex and Grans. "Might I inquire how the good sir was stabbed?"

"With a knife," Lex said. "Did the beating this boy took leave him addled?"

Grans aimed a glare at Lex.

Jairen grunted and said, "This boy, who is likely older than you, *girl*, is perfectly unaddled, I assure you."

Lex balled her hands into fists and drew breath to retort. She hated being called *girl*, like it was some curse, like being a girl made her less. She was just as good as any man.

"You deserved that, Sweetling," Grans said, forestalling Lex's reply.

Heat bloomed in Lex's cheeks. She murmured an apology and crossed the room to sit with Eva.

"She thinks aloud sometimes," Grans says. "Never realizes she says anything at all until it gets her in trouble."

"'Tis a problem," Boz agreed. "Gotten the crew into a number of right fine scraps, it 'as."

"Spirits take you, Boz."

"Alexandra. Watch your language," Grans said.

"Alexandra? The girl with a temper sharp as that knife on her belt is named Alexandra?" Jairen laughed. "Why, that is rich. Rich indeed."

"Careful. I may show you exactly how sharp my knife is."

That cut the lordling's laughter short. Where did he get off laughing at her like that? He should be thankful. She could have killed him at any point while he lay unconscious that night.

"Don't mind her, my boy. Lexi is tetchy about that sort of thing. Claims that people won't respect her on the streets if she went by her full name, or something like that. I don't really understand it, myself. But then again, I don't understand much of her life. They're a gang, you see."

"A crew, Grans." Lex said, hating how sulky her voice sounded even as she continued sulking. "Gangs are for unskilled thugs."

"Ahh yes. They're a crew. My dear Kedrick, spirits keep him, was their leader."

"One of our own stabbed him in the back." Boz said.

"When I find Rollo—"

"You'll do nothing of the sort." Grans turned and looked at her. "We don't have time for that. We are leaving the city."

"Grans, Rollo—"

"Can wait. We cannot."

"With the death of the king yesterday, guards will likely shut down the city soon."

"Why would they shut down the Fringe? Prince Jaire-" she stopped. All eyes turned to Jairen. "Jairen. As in the Jairen? *Prince* Jairen?"

Grans breathed a sigh. "Oh spirits, preserve us."

Chapter 12

Oh Zekker, no. Why?

He had lied to the guards about his name—unsuccessfully, mind—so why hadn't he lied about it to these people? Maybe the green-eyed quick-tempered *Alexandra* had been right. Maybe his wits were addled. The last day and a night had blurred past like an out of control carriage. Only, he sat in the driver seat and the horses wouldn't obey a single command, so that he was just a mere passenger hurtling along to certain disaster.

"The prince?" the haystack woman—Eva—spoke up for the first time.

"Aint there a r'ward on 'is head?" The redheaded prig said.

"You've been inside all day, Boz, how would you know?" Grans asked. Not waiting for an answer, she turned her attention toward Jairen, still tied up in the corner.

"You truly are the prince, then?" She asked. "Yes, yes you are. I can see it in" she tilted her head, "your eyes. That *does* make sense of much, actually."

"Makes sense of what?" Alexandra—he couldn't conceive of thinking of her by any other name, now—and Jairen said in unison. She glared at him, but said nothing else. Jairen smirked.

"Oh, nothing." Grans smiled. "Just his fine clothes, the fact that he was running from the watch, that sort of thing."

"We run from the watch, and fine clothes aren't that hard to come by," Lex countered.

"No Sweetling. Your disguises are good," she gestured at Jairen's own tattered finery, "but his are castle made."

"Reward or no, we still oughta do something with him." Bozarth walked a few steps closer.

"We have to get out of the city. We don't have time to do anything with him. Spirits, he is the reason we have to get out of the city. He rutting well killed the king." Alexandra said. Then turned to face him. "You did kill the king, aye?"

The way she asked gave Jairen pause. She sounded more curious than accusatory.

"Aye, he killed his own father," Bozarth said. "He's a cold hearted bastard, he is."

"I didn't," Jairen started to say.

"If you didn't kill him, why're you running from the Watch?" Lex asked

"I," he swallowed. "I didn't mean to." He told the story, then. Words poured out in time with his tears as he relayed the events of the last two days, starting with his mother's feast.

Bozarth whistled when Jairen had finished. And Jairen looked up at the man through his tears. The redhead's expression, indeed, his whole demeanor, had changed. No longer did his glare look capable of crumbling stone. His shoulders had relaxed, and his general twitchiness had even calmed a bit.

"Damn," Eva said.

Gran's looked at him with pity so strong in her kind eyes he had to look away.

Alexandra walked toward him, knelt and looked at him, their faces a mere foot apart, her deepest-green eyes unreadable, staring into his own. Jairen's breath hitched in his chest as she drew a knife from her sleeve. He closed his eyes, expecting her to take revenge for the kingdom's fallen leader, but opened them again when his bonds slackened and fell free.

He smiled in surprise, but the emptiness of his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten since the previous morning's tea—an event that seemed so much farther removed than merely a day. "Now that you've heard my story and know who I am, I don't suppose I can trouble you for a bite to eat." He cracked a grin, hoping it seemed genuine, and perhaps even a touch abashed at having to beg for food.

Alexandra, who had already stood and walked to Eva, turned and glared at him. "You expect us—lowly peasants as we are—to feed you—a rutting prince?"

"Come now, Lex," the old woman—Grans—said. "It matters little which side of the Highland Wall he was born on, hunger is hunger, my dear."

"I haven't got much food here, though," the girl protested.

Still trying for his most charming smile, he said, "Anything will do, really."

Lex drew a knife and hurled it into the corner opposite Jairen, skewering a rat that, seconds before, had been poking around a rucksack. "There's your breakfast."

"That's a rat." He laughed, surely that was a jest. Surely.

"Well spotted," Lex said. "I'm surprised your fancy palace has enough that you'd recognize one."

He blinked. "Bide, do you actually expect me to eat a rat?"

"You did say anything will do," Bozarth said.

"Haven't you got any, I don't know, pheasant? Rabbit? Venison?"

Bozarth laughed from his belly and Lex shook her head. Even Eva hid a smile behind her hand.

Heat bloomed in his cheeks. How dare they mock him. "Rat is not food. And besides, it's raw."

"I can help you cook it, child," Grans said. "But I'm sorry to say, that's the best we can provide right now." She stood and walked to scoop up the rat from the corner. Removed the knife and brought its furry corpse to the small counter for prep. "Come, child. I'll show you."

Jairen shuddered, and would have refused—hunger seemed preferable to rat—until his stomach rumbled as if in protest of the thought. He rose and went to watch the old lady's work.

"We have to get out of the city." Lex put a hand on Eva's shoulder and said, "I'm gonna check the city gates and see about finding passage from the city. We'll bring Ked to pyre rites once we get out. We go North to Gran's people."

"What about Dorran?" Bozarth asked.

"If he gets back by the time we leave, he can come too. I have enough coin saved to get us all out." She turned back to Eva and Grans. "Do you have everything you want to bring from home?"

"Aye," Eva said, gesturing to the bags in the corner. "We packed the essentials when Dorran fetched us."

"Then I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Bide a moment, please?" Jairen stood, rubbing his arms where the bindings had been tightest. "What about me?"

Lex blinked. "I cut you loose. You're free to go. Do whatever you wish."

"You're leaving the city?" he asked.

"You are actually addled, aren't you? Yes. We're leaving as soon as possible. It isn't safe for us to stay, and we don't have long to leave, thanks to you."

Jairen paused only for a moment, his decision already made. "Might I come with you, then."

END ACT 1

Chapter 13

The great double doors of the throne room swung open on freshly oiled hinges and orchestra song drowned the creak of flexing wood as Malkai strode the length of the room. Malkai wore a rich sapphire doublet, the crowned falcon and unsheathed sword of the royal house emblazoned on his chest. The high and low nobility alike stood rank after rank, organized by station, as their prince knelt before the High Zekkite.

"Let this crown mark you first among equals under the eyes of Zekker." The gray-bearded holy man placed the six pointed ceremonial crown on Malkai's brow. "Let this scepter signify superiority of Blood and Will among those chosen of Zekker." He pressed the sapphire and gold scepter to Malkai's left hand, guiding the arm across his chest. "Let this sword strike fear in the hearts of the kingdom's enemies." He placed a gold-bladed—more gaudy and ornate than the traditional bronze—short sword in Malkai's right hand, and similarly crossed that arm to rest the sword hilt above his heart.

The Zekkite stepped back, purple and silver robes billowing about him, and raised his arms to the sky. "Malkai Miraxes, son of Dalen, blood heir of Zekker, you knelt a prince, you now rise a king."

Malkai stood, arms still crossed, scepter and sword in hand, and turned to greet the court. Like a wave rippling in reverse, the assemblage dropped to their knees row after row. "Hail King Malkai. Hail son of Dalen. Hail heir of Zekker," they chanted as one, their voices reverberating around the marble room, raising goose flesh on Malkai's arms and neck.

King Malkai raised his arms for silence and waited for the last echo to fade. "My friends, my fellows," he began. "It is with utmost solemnity that I take this crown. Already, its weight humbles me. Too soon did my father die, too soon do I hold scepter and sword. Indeed, merely two days have passed since mine own brother slew our king. Whether through calculation or misfortune, we yet know not. But rest assured, Families of Renmarr, his misdeeds shall not go unpunished. Even now, our soldiers aid the city watch in searching the city door by door. With the gates locked down, we will flush the rat from his hole and he will stand judgment for his crimes beneath Zekker's eye. These troubling times will indeed prove taxing, but with your help, my friends, we will stand strong. I will strive to honor my father's rule and continue the tradition of my line as we move into this new age. Rise, now, my friends. Rise as I have risen, rise and stand with me as I stand before you. Stand and strive for a prosperous tomorrow."

Malkai strode from the dais, walked down the carpet dividing the congregated nobles, and left through the same doors through which he had entered just minutes before. Though, cheers of "Hail King Malkai," and "Hail the Blood Heir," had replaced the orchestra song that accompanied his arrival.

There was work to be done.

He'd called for a council meeting to take place just after the coronation. Chief among his concerns was his father's burial. He had wanted to delay the coronation until after his father had had his rites, but his uncle had insisted that Renmarr needed a king more than a funeral. And *the dead can wait*, he'd said.

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"What do you mean, *he disappeared?*" Count Greenmont—the middle aged lord of the Greenmont county north-east of the capital—had high cheekbones, a distinguished jawline with a close cut salt-and-pepper beard, and a sharp nose that matched his temper. "How does a damned boy escape you and your men down a dead-end alley?"

Hectus Korwin had reported a miscreant Fringer posing as a nobleman two nights ago to the captain of his watch garrison. The watch captain had brushed it aside until the order to lock down and search the city came through the next day. Now, Hectus Korwin stood before the council having just relayed his story, describing a bruised and tattered youth of about Jairen's build. It had been too dark for Korwin to clearly identify the man, and indeed, it had been years since Baxton had summered with Malkai and his Jairen. But despite the low light, the young officer said he recognized the voice *like an echo from a memory that grew in depth as it rebounded through the caverns* of his mind.

Apparently Baxton still thought himself more poet than soldier. A fact which likely explained his posting on the night patrol of the Watch—a duty usually reserved for the newest of recruits, not officers.

Malkai had to admit a certain deal of admiration for the boy, though. He had scarcely blinked through the count's lengthy tirade. Poet or not, his tenure with the guard

had tempered a once sottish boy into an almost-man. And to hold his tongue, despite his family's proud reputation? Though the Baxton family had fallen on hard times, they could trace their blood almost as far back as Malkai's own.

Finally, Malkai took pity on his childhood companion and raised his hand, cutting the count off mid-expletive. "The point I believe Count Greenmont is trying to make," he nodded at the count, "is that we find it difficult to believe anyone—leastwise my brother—could have escaped you and your men down a dead-end alley. Are you sure he went down that alley?" He sighed. "Zekker preserve us, but how certain are you it was my brother at all?"

"Your high—" Baxton cleared his throat. "Your Majesty, I cannot be sure. But I feel it was him just as truly as I felt the good count's spittle on my face a few moments ago."

Not totally disciplined, then. Malkai struggled not to smile as the count opened his mouth to protest, but Baxton didn't give him the chance. "I am more uncertain that he went down that alley, however, my king. Jairen always was a spry one, even as a child. He had a lead on us, bogged down by armor as we were. And it was dark to be sure. But both my men swore they saw him turn down that one."

"Then, pray, how did he escape you?" Malkai's uncle spoke up for the first time from his place just to the king's right.

"As I say, one minute we heard him banging on a door, the next minute, nothing. We reached the end of the alley, and he was nowhere in sight."

"And tell us again what you found in the flat you think he tried to enter," Luca prompted.

"We knocked on the door, and a wizened old woman answered. The smell of death wafted out with her. There was a dead man, even lying down, I could tell he stood well taller than the man we had been chasing. I asked what had happened, and a girl with dark hair said that her uncle had been stabbed in a mugging earlier that day. We didn't go inside, as the grief on the blond woman's face was clear as day. Must have been his wife. Can't fake that sorrow, my king.

"We asked if they had seen a boy run through, and the dark haired girl said that she would have noticed if some boy had broken down her door. So we left. I followed protocol at the end of our patrol and filed the report with the garrison captain, and you know the rest."

He shifted on his feet, slumping his shoulders ever so slightly, obviously glad to be finished recounting the story again.

"And when you returned yestereve with the captain and a full hecton, you found nothing?"

"Not nothing, exactly. There was a bed frame and some dishes, in a cupboard. But no other signs that the flat was still occupied. The wardrobe was cleaned out though. Looked like they left in a hurry."

"And long before the order to close the city down, I'd wager," Malkai said.

"Aye, my king. We returned to the flat perhaps an hour after we received the lock down order. I expect they were gone by midday."

"Very well, Hectus Korwin. You are dismissed. Captain," he said to Rico, who now occupied the Defender seat at the council table, "please arrange a visit to that flat. I

would see it with mine own eyes." Then he turned to his uncle. "Now, Uncle, I understand there are reports that I need to catch up on?"

The focus of the council meeting shifted then, to Au'Dovier, and the various troop movements their scouts reported. Ill tidings, indeed. In the last two days since his father's death, Au'Dovier had ramped up its militarization, amassing a large force at castles near the border. They had not yet put boots on Renmarran soil, but the increased numbers at key fortresses spoke of aggression to come. Their timing was perfect. Though his transition had gone uncontested, there would still be a window of flux before the kingdom truly calmed.

Had Au'Dovier known ahead of time that his father would die? Surely the rumors about Jairen working with them had been nothing more than wild speculation. No, their forces would have likely already crossed the border had they known ahead of time. There was no way word could have reached that far yet. It took a week of hard travel to reach his mother's home province in the north, and Au'Dovier, according to the maps—he had never visited the realm, himself, of course—was at least double the distance.

No, it had to be coincidence.

Unless they had a traitor in the castle.

Chapter 14

Jairen's left foot squelched with every step, as much from the mud underfoot as the muck inside his boot. He wore rough-spun clothes that had made his whole body itch—but now only half. The wagon to his left rattled as it hit another rut, splashing yet more rancid water from what passed for a road in the Fringe. He sighed, not even mustering the indignation to curse.

Was that the fifth time? Sixth? Not that it mattered. He honestly didn't know if he preferred the wet or the itching more. The latter felt like bugs crawling all over his skin. Actually, thinking about it, that possibility didn't seem far-fetched. Yet, the former inflicted a different misery. The wet clothes caught and intensified the cool spring wind, dropping that half of his body several degrees, at least. Oh, and the smell. He had known that the brown tinge to the spraying liquid didn't only represent muddy streets. Yet, he'd ignored that truth, right up until the moment he brushed something that was decidedly not mud off his left arm. And if that hadn't given it away, the scent of freshly stirred feces now clung to him just as surely as the left half of his clothes.

Maybe he should turn back. Surely a little light execution wouldn't be as bad as tromping through the city, posing as a guard, while Alexandra and the old lady drove the wagon through every possible puddle. He sighed and immediately regretted the deep breath as he tasted the cloying odor. No. If he turned back now, he'd just be executed in these awful clothes and then he'd have put up with all of it for no reason. Better to see it through.

Beside him, the wagon slowed to a halt as they joined the line to leave the city. Off to the east, the sun cast its morning light on the wrong side of Jairen's person, doing little to dry his wet clothing. Jairen heard voices ahead and the distant snap of reins as the line moved forward. Only three carts between him and safety. He rested his left hand on the pommel of Kedrick's sword that now hung at his waist. Alexandra had protested when Grans offered it to him, but she had relented in the end. What good was a guard without a sword? He and Boz walked on either side of the wagon, trying to look imposing.

The wagon moved forward again. Two to go. Only two wagons before he left the capital behind, and his stifling life at court with it. What would he do once he got free? Even if Malkai didn't think to check his mother's lands, he had no guarantee that they would take him in. Sure, Timberlan province had been his only real refuge in the days immediately following his mother's death. While the whole of the capital's nobility had scorned him—newly siphoned of Zekker's Will and officially named Second Son—the people of Timberlan, noble and servant alike, had treated him with kindness even though he felt he didn't deserve it.

No, he wouldn't go to Timberlan. If they took him in and Malkai found out, they'd be tried for treason, or at the very least, abetting a fugitive. And if they didn't help him?

That would hurt even worse than them dying because they'd helped him. He didn't want to know what they'd choose. Better to leave them out of it entirely.

One wagon left. He'd go with Grans and Alexandra and the rest, at least until he figured out what to do. He'd try to learn more about whatever magic they'd seen him use. He'd go to Grans's people. Had she even mentioned who her people were? Where they lived? Who was this old woman, anyway? *I can see it in your eyes. Yes that does make sense of much*, she'd said. What did his eyes have to do with his lineage? And what did they make sense of? He shot a look at the wagon—a simple, wooden affair with no color beyond the muddied wood sides and a couple of black and gray splashes from the four packs sitting around Kedrick's covered corpse. Grans sat beside Lex in the driver's seat, a thin blanket wrapped about her shoulders. What did she know?

Finally, Lex urged their cart forward. The guards on duty, one man and one woman, dressed in ill-kept City Watch uniforms—chainmail shirts atop padded gambesons—glanced at their wagon, taking in the group.

"Odd party you got here." The male guard's raspy voice sounded like he'd smoked a dozen rat-weed pipes per day for the last twenty years.

"What business?" The female guard's crisp voice sounded almost sonorous next to that of her partner's.

"Aye," Lex said. "We be bringing my uncle to burial rites outside the city."

"How'd he die?" the woman stepped forward and peered into the wagon at Kedrick's corpse, Eva's hands resting on her husband's dead chest.

"Mugging." Lex didn't even hesitate as she lied.

"Who're they?" the male guard asked, gesturing to the rest of the group.

"Friends," Grans said at the same time Jairen said, "Guards."

This made the man perk up. "Which is't, then?"

Jairen cursed himself for speaking. Why could he never keep his Zekker damned tongue still?

Lex shot Jairen a look that could have flayed him alive. "They're friends. Asked them to help us bury my uncle. Ain't exactly safe for a couple of girls and an old lady."

"Aye, suppose that be true enough." The man met Jairen's gaze and Jairen felt his pulse quicken. Does the guard know? "Women be a right handful sometimes, eh?"

"What's that supposed to mean, Bart?" The female guard turned to fully face her partner, hands on her hips.

Bart took a couple of steps back and raised his hands. "Didn't mean nothing by it, Sal. Swear."

"Think that be our queue, Lex," Boz said from his place on the other side of the wagon.

Lex slapped the reins and the horses plodded forward.

"Oi, we didn't say you could go," Bart called.

"Oh shove off and let them bury their kin in peace, you fool," Sal—the female guard—said.

Lex drove the cart on until about an hour before dusk. She finally pulled off the road near a thick copse abutting a stream. Despite the long day of walking, they didn't make camp immediately. Instead, they set about constructing a small funeral pyre, chopping wood from the surrounding area, only breaking once to eat some strips of salted meat and dry bread.

They finished the pyre somewhere around midnight, by Jairen's estimation. He and Boz carried Kedrick's body to plinth and Lex brought a piece of burning wood from their campfire to ignite the blaze. The flames grew, eating through the kindling, making slow progress as they licked up the larger pieces.

Fire crackled and smoke billowed into the night sky. Eva cried silent tears between Alexandra and Grans, while Bozarth looked on, eyes tired and drawn. Jairen glanced sideways at Alexandra, the amber firelight flickering in her reflective green eyes, Her jaw set and hands clenched into fists trembling at her side. But she shed no tears.

Jairen stared into Kedrick's funeral pyre, thinking not of the man he hadn't known, but of the one he had. The one he had killed with his rash words and thoughtless actions. His father's death—murder?—sat heavy on his heart. Despite the man's abuses, despite the slights and injustices King Dalen had made against Jairen, he couldn't bring himself to hate the man.

He watched the tongue of fire licking at the air, waving, beckoning him closer, inviting him to join Kedrick's remains in immolation. How simple it would be to burn to dust, just as his life had turned to ash in the space of a day.

Jairen took a step forward.

And another.

He stopped.

He felt the heat of the flames like Zekker's scorching judgment.

When he'd awakened in the alley, covered in mud and dried blood—both his father's and his own—he had vowed to himself to do what he could to right the wrongs he had done. Throwing himself onto the pyre, though likely a miserable way to die, would

be too easy. There was too much he had to account for to flee into death, the way he had fled into exile.

He would allow the fire to burn him, but not down to nothing. It would burn away the rot, the guilt—if possible—and make room for the purpose that had begun in the mud. He was a forest after a wildfire, sprouting anew.

He removed the falcon brooch that he had stashed in his doublet pocket during his flight from the castle and threw it into fire. He was a falcon of house Miraxes no longer. He would rise from this disaster of his own making like a phoenix out of legend.

He would right his own wrongs, and those of the system that created him. His father may have perhaps been a good king, but not a good man. The zealotry of Zekker's faithful and the theocratic monarchy the kingdom had been founded upon needed to—not fall, exactly—but change. And he would bring that change.

He would be that change.

Chapter 15

The next day's travel had passed with everyone in a bleary-eyed silence. They'd finished building the funeral pyre so late that they only managed a few short hours of sleep before dawn broke them from slumber. By unanimous consent, they pulled off the road near the edge of a forest and began making camp well before the sun had set.

Lex busied herself by attempting to pitch their one tent for Grans and Eva. They'd taken so long to build the pyre the previous night that the two slept in the uncovered wagon bed.

Lex very quickly realized she had no idea what she was doing. She knew vaguely what a tent ought to look like, but the spirits-damned tangle of cloth, cords, and poles defied her at every turn.

A soft chuckle from nearby drew her attention to the Princeling—if he refused to call her Alexandra, well, she could play at that game, too. He leaned against a tree a few feet away, hands jammed into his pockets, stupid smirk spread across his face.

"Something funny?" She glared up at him.

"Oh, aye," he said. "I'm having a raucous good time. Tis quite amusing watching you struggle like that."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks and she clenched the bundle in her fists. "Don't you have something better to do?"

"I'm rather enjoying myself." He waved a hand. "We're in the middle of nowhere, what would I possibly have to do, anyway?"

"Oh, dunno," Lex shoved the unintelligible bundle to the ground, "help us set camp, perhaps?" She began counting things off on her fingers, increasing her volume with each finger. "Gather firewood. Start a fire. Refill our water. Pitch this rutting tent?" She kicked the bundle at her feet. "Just a couple of things off the top of my head."

The Princeling's stupid smirk had disappeared. He stammered something, but Lex couldn't quite hear.

"Something to say, Princeling?"

"I," he cleared his throat. "Apologies. I just don't—"

"Jairen," Grans said. "Could you give me a hand? I'll cook some soup, but I'm afraid my old bones can't carry enough water." She gestured to a pot and a couple of mostly empty water skins. "Save me a few trips, would you?"

He hesitated a moment, and Lex thought he was going to refuse because he didn't want to get his princely fingers wet or some other bollocks like that. But he murmured something that sounded like an apology before turning to help Grans with the water.

Eva knelt next to the tent bundle. "I'll try to figure this out, love."

"It's fine, what else do I have to do anyway?"

Eva's voice was kind, just a hint of smile on her lips. "Oh, dunno," she said, counting off on each finger, "gather firewood. Start a fire. Jairen's already fetching water, so I suppose that's out, though." She smiled and winked. "And this tent, well, another night in the wagon doesn't sound bad."

"I deserved that, huh?"

"Aye, you did."

A while later, they sat around a campfire eating bowls of soup Grans had prepared.

"Thank you for cooking, Grans," Eva said, taking a small bite.

"Not much to work with, I'm afraid."

"Oh come now, Grans, it's fine," Lex said. In truth, the dried meat's excessive saltiness overwhelmed the few other ingredients Grans had used. "Not much to work with, at all."

"Lex," Eva's scolding tone told Lex that she'd spoken that last bit, too.

"Oh," she glanced at her grandmother, "Sorry, Grans, I just meant that I agree. I can," she scanned the trees ahead, "I can try to hunt tomorrow, I suppose."

Princeling scoffed. "Do you even know how to hunt?"

Lex balled her fists and glared defiance at the boy. "I'm light on my feet and I can shoot a bow, thanks."

"Oh aye," he held up his hands in a warding gesture, "I offer humblest apology, my lady." Had his stupid half grin not flashed across his face, she might have actually believed his sincerity.

She jabbed a finger toward him, staring the Princeling down across the fire. "I'll have you kno—"

He turned to Grans and asked, "So, where are we going? Your people, aye, but where? What province?"

"That's not an easy answer, my boy." Her gaze wandered through the night sky. "My people don't exactly belong to a province." She put a finger to her cheek in thought. "I'm not familiar with the borders, but I know our village is somewhere between Eastveil and Timberlan."

Spirits damn the boy for interrupting her, and while they were at it, damn her Grans for going along with it.

"Timberlan?"

Was it a trick of the flickering firelight, or had the Princeling's face paled at the province's name?

"Aye," Boz said. "Ain't you learned and such? Ain't you ever see a map?"

"Bozarth." Grans aimed a chiding finger at the man. "Of course the boy's seen a map."

The Princeling scraped one last bite from his bowl before meeting the locksmith's gaze, a sort of guarded ferocity in his glare, not unlike a deep river current. "Timberlan is my mother's family home. I haven't been to Timberlan Province since she died."

Princeling cleaned out his bowl and left the light of their fire. Nobody spoke much the rest of that evening.

They broke camp at dawn and Lex struck out alone into the woods, bow in one hand, quiver of arrows slung across her back. She wove her way through trees and

bushes, taking careful note of where she stepped. In the city, she was an expert at silent movement. She knew which bits of mud would squelch when she pulled her boots away, knew which alleys had cover, for spirits' sake, she even knew which portions of cobblestone streets her boots would rattle.

Yet the forest? She'd told the Princeling that she could hunt. How could she not have said so? He'd scoffed at the mere idea of her being good at something. He didn't know her. Spirits damn him. All men were the same: one look at her slight frame and they assumed she couldn't fend for herself. Yet—spirits damn him more—his disbelief hit the mark, didn't it?

She'd never truly hunted before. Not for game, at least. She'd hunted prey in near total darkness, she'd followed tracks in the mud, but instead of trees, ramshackle huts and rundown buildings had made up her forest. "After all, prey is prey, so what difference does location make?"

She hadn't even realized she'd said it until a spooked rabbit darted from cover under a bush not ten paces away. By the time Lex had knocked and drawn her arrow, her target had disappeared somewhere in the sea of shrubbery.

"Apparently, all the difference." She glanced up, through the tree branches at the darkening sky overhead. She'd better head back to the trail before it got too dark to find her way.

#

Lex trudged into camp a full hour after night fell, having followed the road in the wrong direction. She'd overestimated how far the wagon could travel in a day. Her feet

hurt, her belly ached—she hadn't brought nearly enough of their dried meat—and to top it all off, she hadn't managed a single kill.

"Ah, Alexandra," the Princeling said. Of course he would be the first rutting one to notice her return. "No luck?" His thin, flat smile showed his dimples, and while some part of her knew he wasn't exactly acting an ass, she'd be damned if he talked down to her, much less pity her.

"What, you don't see the deer slung over my shoulder? Bugger off, Princeling." She ladled some stew into a bowl from the pot over the fire and sat down as far away from the prince as possible—which she realized belatedly, put her directly across the fire from the spirits damned boy.

"Alexandra, I didn't mean it as—"

"Sorry I didn't get anything today, Grans," Lex said, turning to her right so that she didn't have to look at the prince.

"Oh don't you worry about it, Sweetling." She patted Lex's leg. "We'll make do."

"Didn't expect you to get anything on your first hunt anyhow," Boz said.

She smiled at the locksmith, gritting her teeth behind her closed lips. *He means well*, she told herself. *He meant well*.

Motion in her periphery drew Lex's gaze back to the Princeling, now standing across the fire from her. He clenched his spoon in one hand and the empty bowl in the other. "Oh you lash out at me when I ask a question, but when Bozarth says he didn't expect anything, you smile at him?"

She shot to her feet, spilling her soup as she did. "I—"

"Whatever." Princeling threw his hands into the air. "Enjoy your Zekker-damned tent." He walked off into the woods.

"Tent?"

She took in their campsite for the first time. The horse was tied to the wagon off to one side, creating a windbreak for the fire, someone had pitched a tent just beyond the light of their fire. She'd purchased the tent to give Grans and Eva a place to sleep, but she saw now that it would easily fit three.

Lex turned to Eva, "You figured it out?"

"No, Sweetling," Grans said, "Jairen did. Sit, now, have another bowl of soup."

Lex clenched her fists. The Princeling had figured it out when she couldn't? "How useless am I?"

"Lex." Grans' chiding tone told her that she'd said that out loud. "You are not useless, dear. You have your strengths. So do Boz and Eva and me."

"Grans, I—"

"I know you didn't mean to say it aloud, but you shouldn't be thinking it, either."

Lex opened her mouth to protest, but Eva cut her off. "You should know, I think Jairen took your criticism to heart."

"How so?"

"He didn't just pitch the tent. He helped with firewood and water, again, too."

Of course he did. He just—but Lex couldn't find a cynical excuse.

"He even wanted to go traipsing through the woods to find you when the sun set and you hadn't come back," Eva said. "I don't think you give him a fair chance."

"He's a stuck up, pampered little palace prig."

"Here here," Bozarth said, saluting with a water skin.

"That may all be true, Sweetling," Grans said, "but he *is* trying."

"As you say," Eva said, "he's pampered and palace born. As much a shock as this is to us, gotta be more to him."

"Why're you all taking up for him?" Lex stared at her refilled soup bowl. "I'm always at fault, huh?"

"Oh Lexi," Grans patted Lex's leg again. "You've had a long day. Eat and get some rest, my dear."

#

Lex tried to apologize to the Princeling a number of times over the next few days. After she'd calmed down, eaten, and slept, she'd realized that perhaps she had been a bit harsh on Jairen. As she saw him help more and more around the camp her anger disappeared, bit by bit, only to be replaced by something else. How could this—how had she put it?—*pampered little palace prig* adapt so easily to life on the run, while she couldn't even bring home a brace of rabbits?

Lex shook her head. She couldn't let herself fall down that hole. She focused on the road ahead, instead. Lex walked with Grans next to the wagon, while Eva and Jairen took their turns riding for a couple of hours. The Princeling and Eva chatted while they rode, but Lex focused on the old lady next to her. As they'd made progress northward, Lex had noticed that Grans had developed a bit of a limp—though the matriarch did her best to hide it. She was far too proud to complain, but her pace had definitely slowed.

By Grans's reckoning, they still had four or five days to go before they'd reach their destination, if they kept their current pace. Would the old lady make it? Would Lex,

if Grans didn't? Lex had lost too much, too quickly. Kedrick and Rollo in the same moment, Dorran hadn't come back, she'd fled the only home she'd ever known, would Lex even have a reason to go on if Grans left her completely alone?

Spirits damn her—she couldn't think that way. She had to make Rollo and Lucien pay for their betrayal. Only after she killed them both would she consider following Kedrick to the Vaile.

"Grans," Jairen called out. "Mind doing me a favor?"

Lex gritted her teeth. What could the Princeling possibly want?

"What do you need, child?" Grans asked.

"See, so my arse is definitely not used to bounce of this Zekker-be-damned wagon. I'm a prince, you know, I'm used to cushions, velvet and fleece and the like. You understand, right? Well, any chance you could spell my arse from any more of this torture. I'd really rather walk, I think."

That spoiled son of a—wait. Lex had seen the blisters on Princeling's feet just the night before. He still wore his stupid court slippers since Ked's boots didn't fit him and they'd had no spares. Her own feet held half the blisters that the prince's did, and she grimaced with every new step. Either the boy had a high pain tolerance or—

"Are you sure you would rather walk, child?" Grans asked. She'd rubbed the salve on his feet herself. "Surely your hind end hurts less than your feet."

"I think I'd rather one place hurt enough for two, rather than two hurting enough for one." He hopped down off the wagon and hissed in pain as he landed. "Go on, take my spot, would you?"

He helped Grans into his vacated spot on the wagon's bed and fell in beside Lex.

"Let me know if you change your mind, child. It's still your turn, after all."

"I will, though you'll find, I'm nearly as stubborn as my fa—" he cleared his throat but said no more.

Unbidden, a surge of pity welled up for the Princeling. He'd been about to say that he was as stubborn as his father is, like he hadn't killed the king. Nobody in the Fringe had liked King Dalen, overmuch, but nobody in the Fringe liked anyone overmuch—especially Highlanders. The king hadn't been a good man. Abuse was abuse, no matter which side of the Highland Wall you lived on, she supposed.

Yet, maybe Jairen loved his father a bit, in his own way.

Maybe she'd give him a chance.

Chapter 16

Signs of spring's slow advance grew subtler the farther north their party traveled. Trees in the warmer areas of the country around the capital had already leafed, yet, scarcely five days from the city, many of their northern counterparts had barely begun to blossom, taking on the bright pinks and greens of new life. Soon, though, they'd leave behind the leafy forests of the central empire and cross into the northern pines.

Jairen had spent too long away from the northern provinces. He missed the sweet almost-citrus scent of the evergreens, the homey smell of burning wood, the crisp air on a cold morning at the base of the mountains. That nostalgic scent had drawn him to Cici in the first place. The heiress of Eastveil's perfume had reminded Jairen so much of holidays spent in Timberlan.

Come to think of it, Cici had said her mom had pressured her into securing a match. Had the girl's perfume been a calculated affectation to aid her in seducing him? Oh Zekker take him—he'd drive himself crazy wondering about Cici's intentions. He'd poison the memory of their night together with schemes and politics. He just couldn't bring himself to do that.

So he focused on the here, on the now. Grans had said they'd but two or three days of travel before they'd arrive at her people. Her people whom he knew nothing about, save that they lived in a remote village somewhere along the border between Timberlan and Eastveil.

He recalled to mind one of the maps he'd seen of the northern provinces. They traveled along one of the main northward roads. It ran parallel to—and west of—the Renn River all the way from the capital. It also marked the border between the two provinces. Their current northeasterly tack meant they were just south of the two provinces' southern borders.

Was it Jairen's imagination, or had Alexandra been marginally less hostile toward him recently? He'd worried that the quick-tempered, knife-wielding street rat with an inferiority complex had thought his overtures at camp had been hollow. He supposed he *had* decided to play a role they didn't expect of him, to help out around camp, to ingratiate himself toward these people. But using those terms seemed so cynical. Wanting people to like him, wanting to fit in—he had no ulterior motive beyond that. And Zekker-on-High, he appreciated the help they'd given him. Doing his part couldn't be wrong.

The widow, Eva, had said to give Miss Green-eyed-red-temper some time. *Slow to love, fast to hate*, Eva had said. So he'd given her time. Kept his distance after that night when she'd returned empty handed from her first hunt. Perhaps he had been an ass. He hadn't meant to, though, had he? No, just an honest question. She'd exploded on him. Well, no. He'd exploded when she hadn't exploded on Bozarth. Still, her fault, not his.

Yet, over the last two days or so, she'd begun talking to him, just a bit. Merciful Zekker—she'd actually thanked him for setting the tent last night. Surely it'd been no coincidence that her change in demeanor toward him came about shortly after he'd let the old lady ride rather than watch her conceal a limp. That was just the decent thing to do.

Granted, she still bristled every time he called her by her full name, but that was all in good fun. Like the way she called him Princeling. He didn't mind the barb. Zekker knew he relished verbally sparring with someone other than Malkai and Luca. Still, it would be nice if she'd just get over whatever prejudice she held against him.

He sighed.

"What's wrong now, Princeling?"

Lex walked a few paces to his right. The thick forest had narrowed the road, forcing them to walk closer than she'd likely prefer. He didn't mind her company, though—at least not when she was in a good mood.

"I just wish this forest would end."

"We've been in and out of woods the last several days," she said, only a little bite—would that be a nibble?—in her tone. *A nibble*. He chuckled.

"Oh aye, and what's funny about that?"

He liked the way her Fringe accent broke through when she got perturbed. "Oh, nothing, Alexandra. I just miss evergreens."

"Evergreens?"

He stopped short. "Bide a moment. Are you serious? You've never seen an evergreen?"

"I've never been this far from the city." Perhaps any other girl would have crossed her arms to match the defensiveness in her tone. But not Alexandra. No, she let her hands stray to the daggers she wore on each hip.

Jairen tried not to smile at her propensity to solve problems with her knives. It was cute in a *well, until she stabs me*, kind of way.

"No, I suppose you haven't." He scratched at the scraggly growth of beard—more an ugly fuzz than anything—on his chin and said, "Picture a tree trunk, but instead of branches splitting off in a couple directions a few feet off the ground, the branches sprout straight out from the trunk, starting near the bottom. And," he shrugged, "and instead of leaves, their branches hold these green needles. They don't lose their needles in the winter, either, so they're always green. Hence, evergreen."

She turned to face him. "You think I'm stupid 'cause I'm a commoner? Well I'm not. Stupid. I'm not stupid. I am a commoner."

"I think you're neither stupid nor common, Alexandra." He twitched the right half of his mouth into a grin and only barely managed not to wink.

"Well then you're the stupid one, because I am. Common, I mean."

He shrugged. "I only mean that the trees—evergreens—are beautiful. Deep green, like your eyes, actually."

Her face went bright red, though, with her fists clenched at her sides, Jairen couldn't tell if she was angry or embarrassed at the compliment.

She huffed and turned away to follow the wagon just as they sprung the ambush.

Jairen heard the thrum of a bowstring just before Bozarth cried out in pain from his spot driving the wagon. He must have yanked on the reins because the horse swerved off the trail.

Four men ran at Lex and Jairen head on. Lex reacted immediately, her daggers hissing free of their sheathes. Jairen drew his borrowed sword a heartbeat later, just in time to meet the first man's overhead swing.

He parried and followed with a flick of his sword across the man's throat, then spun to avoid the next man's ax. He tried to hack at the axeman's arm, but Kederick's blade wasn't weighted quite right. He missed, splintering the ax's shaft, instead.

He drew the blade up and across the second attacker's belly, pulled it free and stepped forward to impale the third assailant's gut just as the man stumbled forward. He fell onto Jairen's sword, Lex's knives protruding from his back.

The whole confrontation had lasted less than a minute, and in that time, he had tripled his body count. Bile surged to his throat, but he swallowed, forcing the sick down. He had to steel himself against death.

Barely a week ago, he'd never raised a blade in anger, had never taken a life. Now he had three to his name. Four, if he counted the man that had caught Alexandra's knife with his back. He didn't want to count that life, but he would have claimed it without her assistance, all the same. If he continued down his new course, how many more lives would he take?

Jairen panted as he looked around. The wagon had run off the road, perhaps fifty paces away. Lex's face was flushed—exertion or exhilaration? Probably both, he supposed. He cracked a grin at her and cocked an eyebrow.

"Drop your weapons." A man emerged from the tree cover, bow trained on Lex, as another two men pushed into sight holding knives to both Gran's and Eva's necks. A third man dragged Bozarth, unconscious, behind him.

"Seems you lot don't have much for us to take. But you killed four of our folk." The one with the bow gestured to the men at Jairen's feet. "Blood demands blood. Blood or gold. Drop yer weapons," he said again. "Drop them and live."

"Slavers," Jairen said under his breath.

"He said drop them," the man holding the knife to Eva said, pressing the blade hard enough to her throat so that it drew a thin ribbon of blood. "It'd be a shame if I slipped."

"Do it," Lex hissed to Jairen, dropping her own knives to the dirt. "Do it."

Jairen sighed, but did likewise.

"Tie them up, boys."

#

The slavers' camp was smaller than he'd have expected. Four two-person tents stood in a half moon around a campfire, directly across from Jairen. He smiled, taking a grim pleasure in the fact that they'd killed half the slavers—judging by the four tents. He sat on his haunches, hands tied behind his back, attached to a stake in the ground by a noose around his neck. Two other posts jutted from the ground, one on either side. Lex and Eva sat similarly tied to the one on his right, with Grans and Bozarth on his left. They were more or less in the middle of the slavers' camp. If he strained his neck enough, Jairen could just make out the shape of a wagon behind him.

For the first few hours, the slavers left them well enough alone. But, as the night progressed and they grew more boisterous—drunk on some filched liquor, no doubt. The one who had held the knife to Eva's throat half sauntered, half stumbled over to the prisoners.

"Which one of you was it that killed Grent?" His breath reeked of some foul spirit and rot. He was missing about half his teeth and had a shaggy dark beard and ratty hair to match.

When none of them answered, he grabbed Alexandra by her lapel and half dragged her upright, until the rope that attached from her arm bindings to the stake went taught. The man stumbled forward, not expecting resistance and fell atop the girl with a grunt. She cried aloud and lashed out with her knees, catching the man between his legs. He groaned and rolled off of her, vomiting in the dirt between her and Grans.

He stood slowly, cursing, and kicked Lex in the stomach. She cried out and curled into a ball on her side, arms still restrained behind her. The man kept kicking, catching her shins and knees more than anything, but Alexandra grunted with each successive strike.

Jairen bucked and strained against his bonds which had begun to cut off the circulation in his arms and legs, feeling as though someone were jabbing pins and needles into his skin. He fought and pulled with all his strength to win free of the ropes. He hadn't known the group long, but they'd taken him in when he needed them, he couldn't sit by and watch one of them get beaten like this. He tried to scream, tried to stand, then all of a sudden, his vision took on a pale misty haze and weightlessness took over.

Distantly, he heard someone gasp, but he couldn't wait. Jairen lunged, trying to tackle the man, but felt no collision, no impact of body on body on dirt. He tried to wrap his arms around the slaver, but couldn't get a grip. The man flailed and clawed at his face, his mouth open in a silent scream. Jairen's vision began to darken and he felt a sort of current sucking at his very being. He lost all sight then as the suction became too much, darkness closed in but the white haze obscuring his vision remained.

Something jostled him this way and that, up and down, weightless as he was, he still sensed motion. He tried to tuck himself into a ball, but he had no form. The movement grew more violent, desperate, almost, and then just as suddenly as it had begun, it ended.

Jairen willed himself to stand up, to open his eyes, but he had no legs, no arms, no eyes. Then the suction began anew. It pulled him back the way he had come—if he had gone anywhere. But something happened, something must have reversed, because light returned to his senses, weight to his limbs, and the mist obscuring his sight dispersed.

He stood, unfettered, over the motionless body of Lex's assailant. Lex, Grans, Boz, and Eva all stared, eyes open wide as if he had claimed that he took his daily tea with Zekker, himself.

He looked at his feet, ropes gone. He looked at his hands, equally free. And then to his spot between Eva and Grans. The ropes that had restrained him lay there, still tied together, as if he had just slipped them off.

He felt light headed, like the slightest gust of wind would knock him sideways. He put his hands out to steady himself, but there was nothing to stop his fall. He fell to

his knees and braced himself on his arms before looking around. Lex had taken a couple of kicks to her face, the left side had already begun to swell. She, alone, spoke.

"Jairen, don't you pass out this time. Cut me free."

This time? What did she mean by that? But passing out didn't sound like a bad plan to him. The world spun. Was it supposed to spin like that?

"Jairen, they're coming." Eva said, urgency plain in her tone.

They? They who? Who was that man lying next to him? He shook his head. Bad idea. The world spun faster.

"Oh spirits no," Lex cried as heat blossomed in Jairen's back.

He rolled onto his side, something heavy slid out of his back.

"Jairen!" Lex's scream cut through some of the haze that had settled on his mind. He rolled away just in time to avoid a sword thrust aimed for his heart. He grabbed the knife that lay next to him in the dirt. Oh, Zekker damn it all. Had that been what slid out of his back?

He climbed unsteadily to his feet and aimed a clumsy cut at the attacker's midriff. The man stepped out of range of Jairen's knife with ease and return cut with his sword.

Jairen ducked the blow and half rolled, half tripped away, the heat in his back increasing tenfold. Then the second man was on him, tackling Jairen to the ground, gripping at his throat. He tried to breathe, tried to fight, but he was still dizzy, and the more he strained, the more his back burned.

He bucked his hips and pushed at the man's face, but the tingling in his arms had returned and his hands couldn't find purchase. The haze swallowed his vision again, faster this time. Formless, weightlessness claimed his limbs and all at once, he stood

above the man that had had him pinned just a moment ago. The white cleared from his sight as Jairen struck out with the knife, only it was no longer in his hand. He sensed, more than saw the first man's sword flash toward his head.

White mist, weightless motion, and he was behind the man, drawing the dagger from his attacker's belt and jamming it to the hilt at the base of the slaver's skull. The second man had regained his feet, but didn't advance.

Jairen picked up the first man's sword and assumed a guard position, body angled away, weight evenly distributed to move in any direction at a moment's notice, longsword gripped in both hands.

"What are you?" the slaver asked.

Jairen answered with a lunge, he feinted high but dipped his blade low at the last second. The man's parry missed and Jairen's sword took him in the side.

A bow thrummed and pain flared in Jairen's leg as an arrow entered and exited his thigh. Another arrow appeared in his gut. The bow thrummed again but the weightlessness took over and he stood in front of the bowman, fifty feet covered in the space of a breath. The hole in Jairen's leg was gone—had he imagined it?—but the arrow in his belly remained.

He no longer held his stolen sword, so he punched the dumbstruck bandit in the jaw and collapsed on top of the man. He screamed as he landed, the arrow shaft jamming deeper into his gut, pushing the arrow head out the other side.

He felt the man underneath reaching for something, but his arm was pinned underneath Jairen's weight. Jairen reached down and felt what the man had stretched for: an arrow discarded in the mud. Jairen grabbed it and plunged it into the man's neck.

He rolled off the dying bowman and screamed in pain as the motion disturbed the arrow sticking through him.

Darkness closed in. A true darkness, deep and complete.

Chapter 17

Lex slapped at the reins, urging their poor horses faster. At this rate, she might actually run the creatures to death. But they'd tied spares behind the wagon to avoid that. Still, these spirits-damned beasts needed to run faster. She couldn't, wouldn't let Princeling die. Not after he'd done—well, whatever he'd done to save them, to stop that man from kicking her senseless. It was a debt she refused to owe. He'd saved her, now she'd return the favor.

Grans had said they had about two days of travel left before they would reach the village, but that was before the attack. She'd make sure they got there sooner than that.

She slapped the reins again.

A shrill not-quite-squeal from behind her drew Lex's attention.

"What is it?" she asked, gripping the reins tighter in hand. Don't say he's dead. Don't say he's dead.

"Didn't he take an arrow to the leg?" Eva asked, her voice pitched loud over the bump and rattle of their cart. "And I *know* I saw him get stabbed. In the back, right?"

"Aye, he did at that," Boz said.

"What do you mean?" Lex asked. She felt, more than saw, the locksmith turn in the drivers' seat next to her. Her left eye had swollen nearly shut from the slaver's kicks.

"Well play me like a pipe and call me a flute." Boz said. Despite herself, Lex cracked a smile. What did that even mean? That man used some of the strangest sayings she'd ever heard.

"What, Boz?"

"They're gone."

She took a breath. Spirits—why couldn't the damned man explain with the same detail he swore in? "What's gone?"

"The wounds, Lex." Eva said. "Jairen's wounds are gone."

"What do you mean, gone?" Lex asked, not turning back.

"Just that, Sweetling. Both the knife wound from his back and the arrow wound in his thigh are gone."

"How's that possible? We all saw him get stabbed." And she would have sworn her life that an arrow had gone right through the meaty part of his thigh.

"All that's left are the tears in his clothes and fresh pink scars."

She recalled the boy—what? Solidifying?—in her flat, drenched in blood and rain and mud, clothes all torn up, but nothing to show for the cuts save lines of fresh pink skin. She breathed a sigh. She didn't understand it. But then, what about the damnedable Princeling did she understand? Wait.

"What about the arrow in his gut?"

They'd broken the arrowhead off to pull the shaft free and wrapped his belly tight in what few bandages the slavers had in the camp. She'd definitely seen that wound.

"Still there. He'll need new bandages soon, I think." Eva said. "Bleeding a lot."

Bozarth rubbed at his buttocks. "Damned wagon don't help much, though, do it?"

Boz probably had the right of it, but the Princeling would die if they didn't make it to Grans' people. He'd only probably die from the wagon's shaking. Surely urging the horses on was the right thing. She'd had too much loss in the past days. She wouldn't let this boy she barely knew die protecting her from some thugs. She didn't need protection. She could take a beating. He should have just sat there and watched with the same uncaring disgust on his face that all nobles got when they saw the struggles of the Fringe.

No, noble or commoner didn't matter. She wouldn't accept anyone getting hurt—much less, dying—to protect her. She owed him a life debt, so she'd save his stupid one in turn. They'd be even after that.

She slapped the reins again, just as the first—what had he called them?—evergreen trees came into view.

Chapter 18

Jairen sailed on choppy water, sea salt spraying the deck around him. The ship didn't so much rise and fall with the troughs and swells of the waves as cut through them, bouncing like no large craft ought. Or at least, he assumed the vessel was large. He couldn't rightly see the ship through the storm's dark. He recalled his first experience on a storm-tossed sea.

Jairen had been—what?—eight years old? He and his family had sailed aboard the royal family's best ship—Majesty—on their way to some coastal lord's home for a few weeks during the summer while his king father negotiated some trade deal or something of the like. A storm had sprung up out of nowhere, wind and water batting the ship around like a cat with a ball of yarn. Jairen had gone below decks with his mother and brother while his father exhausted himself, using Zekker's Will to guard against the worst of the waves. His mother had spoken to him then, the same soft look on her face she held now.

Bide, when had his mother shown up on this ship? Had she shown up? Was she even here? He was below decks on the Majesty, but no, he stood on the deck of some

other ship. His memory played out before his eyes even as the events on this other ship did, the two images—neither solid, neither clear—warred in his mindseye as though he saw one through his right eye and the other through his left.

He shook his head as both visions of his mother smiled, her deepest-green eyes not unlike another set that tugged at his mind just as a child pulls at his mother's dress to get her attention. His two mothers merged, though imperfectly. One appeared just as he remembered her from his memory aboard the Majesty, long dark hair tied up to keep it from her face amid the ocean wind. The other was gaunt, skinny, a pale shadow in comparison. One, the mother he admired, the other, sickly and dying, but no less fierce. Yet the two were one. They spoke in unison, not quite one voice but not quite two: "It will be over soon, my darling boy," she murmured into his ear. The same words she had spoken just before the Siphoning on his thirteenth birthday. "Just close your eyes and open your mind. It will end quicker than you know. Trust me, my sweet boy."

So he did as bade, closing his eyes and opening his mind just as his tutors had taught. He felt a twisting, wrenching sensation in his gut, blinding pain in his belly. But that wasn't right. He felt like he should vomit, wanted to, in fact. But couldn't. The agony in his stomach was too much. He tried to close himself off from the pain, close his mind, despite both his mothers' insistence not to.

He shook his head, thrashed it, fighting against the pain, against the urge to quit. And the memory disappeared. He stood on that dark ship's deck, a mist creeping in, flowing over and around him.

"Relax, my boy," his gaunt mother said. "Your pain will be over soon enough."

Chapter 19

The flat was just as Baxley had described. Near to empty, save for a cot with no blankets, a double doored cupboard with a few dishes on one side, and an empty clothes rack on the other. An empty slop bucket sat in one corner, and a larger bucket and small tub sat in what must have equated to a kitchen—a small table or counter top scored with knife marks and framed with two rickety looking chairs. The whole dwelling would have fit inside Malkai's sitting room twice over and with room to spare.

He prided himself on his ability to understand the perspectives of others, but he actually could not fathom living his whole life in rooms this small.

Malkai didn't know why he had wanted to see the flat, and understood the desire less now that he had. Baxley had said the occupants left no trace of where they might have gone, nor when they would likely return.

His search efforts had yielded no results, and though perhaps a third of the city still remained untouched, Malkai found it unlikely that his brother was still within the city. He'd sent patrols out, ranging farther and farther afield, but to no avail. The only trace, the only oddity that could *possibly* be attributed to his brother's flight, was the

remains of a funeral pyre several hours north and west of the city. If Jairen had gone with the group from this flat, they may have cremated the corpse Baxley had seen.

He felt his Cloak—the magical sphere of power four feet in diameter that he wore draped about his person at all times—ripple, alerting him to the figure that stood behind him. Malkai sighed. He had told Rico to guard the door whilst he inspected the flat alone.

"Your Majesty." Rico's voice, quiet and low, sounded from just inside Malkai's sphere. The man always did know exactly how close to stand for Malkai to feel his presence. As small as the flat was, merely speaking from the door would have sufficed. But Malkai took solace in Rico's company, a fact that Rico well knew from their time spent together in the training yard, from growing up, and more recently as Malkai's personal shadow.

"Your Majesty," the captain said again. "A man claiming some knowledge of the flat's previous occupant requests permission to speak with you. Shall I send him away?"

Finally. "Any information is welcome."

Malkai turned and followed his friend from the flat and up the alley, past the large puddles, and to the mouth of the alley, where the rest of Malkai's escort stood guard. A mountain of a man wearing one of the bright crimson sashes across an obviously muscular chest stood, hands splayed out palms up and surrounded by Malkai's men. The man bore no arms about his person, though Malkai reckoned the brute could probably beat any two of his guards to death before they had subdued him.

The big man peered over the guards' heads to spy Malkai's approach. When he got within easy earshot, the big man dropped to a knee, a motion that saw two of the guards draw steel. But the man didn't so much as flinch before he spoke. "Your Majesty, I'd like

to offer my truest condolences on your father's death and wish you good health in the years to come." His Fringe accent marred the formal tone he had no doubt practiced.

"My thanks, man." Malkai replied, taken aback by the fact that this man knew who he was. Perhaps he hadn't achieved the inconspicuous visit they had planned, but to be recognized outright? "My captain told me you may have information regarding the previous occupants of the flat behind me?"

"Aye, I might do. Well, not exactly." He had definitely practiced the condolences, for all pretense of eloquence had fled his speech.

"Do not waste His Majesty's time, peasant," one of his guards said to the big man, who still knelt in the mud.

"Forgiveness, Your Majesty. I don't have the information myself. That'd be my l—" he paused, clearly changing his mind on what to say. "My boss," he decided. "My boss can tell your kingliness about them that lived there."

Malkai felt Rico take a breath at his side, but raised a hand to cut him off. "If you know who I am, then your boss does, as well. But he sends an emissary, rather than coming himself. Yet you likely expect me to trudge through these streets to pay court to him?" He waved. "No, don't deny it. I understand the politics of court quite well, and the power inherent in hosting me, rather than the reverse. Why should I come to your boss when he couldn't bring himself to meet with his king in person?"

"Your Majesty, my boss is a very busy person," the man began.

"More so than the king?" another guard said before Malkai could respond. Malkai really needed to address the issue of these men speaking in his place. Just another thing to add to his already overfull list of things to do.

A number of troubling reports had come in as of late. More troops massing along the border with Au'Dovier, a reported skirmish between scouts and one of the Renmarran border patrols. All signs had begun to point toward war. And that didn't even include the final preparations for his father's funeral or the ongoing search for Jairen. And to top it all off, Cici had fled the capital.

"Forgiveness, Your Majesty," the big man said again.

"What is your name, man?" Malkai asked before the man could say more.

The mountain of a man blinked once. Twice. "I be Rollo, Your Majesty. Rollo be my name."

"And your boss's name?"

"Lucien, sir."

Malkai sighed. He had too much to do to play politics with some commoner. "Stand, Rollo. Lead me to this Lucien who is too busy to meet with me in person."

#

The foyer of this Lucien's manor, though decorated in a minimalist style, was gorgeously wrought. Rugs black as night and trimmed in the same crimson as Rollo's sash lined the polished hardwood floors and a small, tasteful silver chandelier hung from the high ceiling. Malkai dipped his hands in the traditional hospitality basin on a table by the door.

Though the manor resided in the merchant quarter of the lower city, it pleased Malkai to see the noble traditions upheld by those who could not claim noble lineage themselves.

A servant dressed all in black, save for yet another crimson sash across his torso, led Malkai, Rico, and two more of his household guards into a sitting room with fine leather couches, a hearth, and a short wooden table on which sat a crystalline basin full of fruit. A second servant, identically dressed, appeared and placed steaming mugs of tea on the table in front of each man. Neither Malkai, nor his guards took the offered mugs. Neither did they sit as the man invited.

"Your Majesty," a too-smooth courtier's voice drawled from behind. "What an honor it is to have you grace my humble home. I hope you have found my hospitality to your satisfaction. I am but a lowly merchant and could never dream of impressing such lofty company as yourself. Please, please, have a seat," he gestured toward a couch. "We have much to discuss."

So the man could speak as a noble, as well—all self-deprecating words meant to seem humble. Indeed, even his dress bespoke his pretension: a tasteful black doublet embroidered in the crimson that he seemed to love so much, an ermine half-cape of similar hue, and plush black court shoes. Perfectly quaffed golden hair topped angular features and cunning blue eyes.

Malkai did not take the proffered seat, his message quite clear in the refusal: You may have succeeded in getting me here, but I will not cede all my power to fan your ego.

Lucien's smile flickered for an instant, no doubt registering the insult. "I do apologize for dragging Your Royal Majesty through the city like this, but I was in the middle of quite an important trade deal when one of my men saw your escort enter the lower city. He reported to me and I sent one of my most trusted men, Rollo, to fetch you."

"One does not fetch a king," Malkai said.

"Too true, too true. Again, my apologies, Your Majesty, for the manner of this meeting. I would not have done so had I not believed my information of gravest import. No doubt you are wondering why, if my information was so important, I did not come straight to your court in the first place?"

He had, indeed, wondered, but there was power in silence.

"I tried, you see. But as my name is not a noble one, I have little recourse with the guards. Oh true, the folk in these parts call me Darkmont, and I have amassed a humble fortune, but blood does tell, as the saying goes."

Malkai sighed and broke his silence. "What information have you, my good sir Darkmont." He emphasized the man's faux-noble surname. This man's pretension suddenly making more sense. Reportedly built from nothing, Darkmont Trading had risen to the pinnacle of mercantile companies in the empire. Any information this man offered would likely come at great cost.

"I'm not in the habit of bargaining with merchants—lofty as they may be. Name your price."

"My price, Your Majesty?" The man genuinely seemed taken aback. "My intelligence is not for sale, no indeed not. I would not dream of possessing anything worth a king's coin. No, I offer my information free of charge. Think of it as a belated coronation gift."

"Spit it out man," one of Malkai's guards grumbled.

"Enough. Keep silent or keep watch outside," he told his guards, but didn't look away from Lucien. But my man has a point. Say your piece, merchant."

"But of course." Lucien nodded low to the guard and then proceeded to tell a tale of intrigue and theft. He described how a dark-haired girl, a redheaded man, and a large dark-haired man had broken into one of his warehouses, how Rollo had apprehended them and as they made their escape, how he had stabbed the tall man, but that they had gotten away nonetheless. He had men follow the fleeing criminals to the very flat that Malkai had visited less than an hour before. His men had intended to fetch the watch, but the criminals had left the city in such haste that they'd not had the time to go for help.

"My man reported that the tall man must have died from Rollo's wound, and that they were accompanied by an old woman, a blond girl, and a slim youth with brown hair reaching just past the base of his neck."

Despite Malkai's years of experience in schooling his facial expressions, his brows shot up and his eyes widened.

"Yes, my king. I had much the same thought when my man told me. Though he only saw the youth from a distance, the description does seem to fit that of a certain runaway prince, does it not?"

"Do you know which direction they traveled from the city?"

"Why, north, Your Majesty."

North, like the pyre. North to Timberlan. He had suspected Jairen might flee there, but now, now he could reroute some of his patrols. He could send riders to apprehend his brother on arrival.

"I assume I need not express the gravity of this information and that it must necessarily be kept in the utmost confidence, my good sir."

"Oh certainly, my king. No word of this shall pass mine lips. I would truly be loath to betray your confidence and thereby hinder any future favor I might garner."

Ah so there it was. The cost of this information. Lucien Darkmont played not for monetary gain, but for political favor.

Malkai nodded, his head reeling from the information the merchant provided, and took his leave, already running through the potential avenues by which he could act on this intelligence.

Chapter 20

"Speak your mind, Rico." Malkai reclined on a couch in his sitting room, a crystal chalice of wine balanced between two fingers in his left hand, his feet kicked up on the short table in front of him. "No need to hold back in private."

He supposed he didn't exactly strike a kingly visage in that moment, but Rico had seen him at his worst—and this was far from that. Besides, it had been a long day—he'd followed the trip to the city with three hours in the council chambers scanning maps of Au'Dovien troop movements and debating the best patrol routes for finding Jairen.

"Of course, Your Majesty." Rico nodded, but said no more.

"I don't like him either, man." Malkai took his feet off the table and turned in his seat to stare at his friend who stood by the door, as proper at attention now as ever. He knew that look—the almost imperceptible furrow of his brow lending the slightest crease to his caramel skin, the set of his strong jaw that told Malkai of his friend's clenched teeth. "Oh shove off, Rico. Say your piece. You are my oldest friend. If you won't be honest with me, who will?"

That seemed to mollify the captain to a degree as some tension drained from his shoulders and the clench of his jaw relaxed—though he still stood straight as the sword in his scabbard. "My king, I apologize. You have enough on your mind that I ought not burden you with my own worries."

Malkai rose on unsteady legs—how many glasses of wine had he had?—and crossed the room to stand in front of his friend. He poked the captain in the chest as he stared into the sandy brown eyes of the southeastern Nelaman region his people called home. "My title has changed, but I am the same man I was. Grown from the same boy who you used to duel through the castle, wooden swords as real to us as the battle going on in our mind. The same boy you saved from being trampled when he thought to ride that beast of a stallion the stablemasters couldn't break. The same boy you would chide for poor sword from despite only being two years my elder. Chide me now, my friend. Speak your mind, Zekker damn you." By the time he finished, his right index finger throbbed from jabbing Rico's breastplate over and again as if to punctuate each point. His breath came heavy and he could feel flush in his cheeks, though that was likely from the wine. Why did Rico's silence injure him so much more than his father's scolding ever had? How could his disappointment get under his skin like no other man could?

"My ki-" He cleared his throat. "Malkai, my apologies. I did not want to burd-"

"Vaile take you man, I know you didn't want to burden me, but I need your council." Malkai threw open his arms, sloshing some wine from his near-empty glass. "And I swear to Zekker on High, if you apologize again, I'll have you on latrine duty, captain or not."

"As my king commands." Finally, there was that smile Malkai cherished so much. He hadn't seen his friend grin since that morning in the practice yard before his whole life turned upside down. But the grin slipped almost as fast as it had arrived. "I do not trust him."

It took Malkai's wine-addled mind an embarrassing length of time to discern who the captain spoke of, lost in the heat of Rico's targetless glare as he was. "Who? Lucien?"

"Aye." And only as Rico's head grew near Malkai's own on the downward swing of his nod, did Malkai notice how close to his captain he yet stood.

Malkai sighed and turned away, walking to the bottle of wine that sat, near empty, on a table against the stone wall. A shame to waste the rest of such a superb vintage. He poured the rest into his glass and turned back to face Rico. "I do not trust him, either, my friend. He is far too adept at court politics for someone who has never been to court." He took a long swallow of the wine, savoring the chocolate tones on his pallet. "Yet, he provided valuable information. And despite his antics in getting the audience with me in the first place, I see no reason not to take him at his word. Best to keep an eye on him though, I think."

"As you say." He shifted his stance. Rico *never* broke perfect posture.

"Zekker help me," Malkai muttered as he looked skyward. "Please for my sanity's sake, speak."

"What will you do if his information leads to Jairen's capture?" An edge had crept into his tone, brittle and cautious. Malkai well knew of Rico's fondness for Jairen. The captain had helped to train his brother in secret in the years following Dalen prohibiting any further swordplay. Malkai had been glad when he found out. It had been his fault that

Jairen had been punished, after all. Though he had never spoken to Rico about the man's relationship with Jairen, Malkai suspected the captain thought of Jairen as a younger brother. The three of them had grown up together. Two years separating Malkai from Rico made them close enough in age that friendship had flourished. Yet the five years between the captain and Jairen likely made their dynamic something different entirely.

"Now who has gone silent?" Rico chided, half a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

"Hmm? Oh, Jairen, yes." Malkai rubbed his bald head, wishing for the hundredth time that day that he had hair to comb back instead of scalp to rub. "We will hold a trial, I suppose."

"And if he is found guilty?" Rico pressed.

This exact line of thinking had driven Malkai to send for wine earlier in the evening. He didn't want to consider it. He loved Jairen. He had cherished the idea that his brother might one day help him rule and had hated the anguish Jairen felt at knowing his life wouldn't reach past the council chamber.

So too, Malkai hated the way their father had treated the boy. Some of the beatings his brother had endured at Dalen's hands had left Jairen near to broken, whimpering with each shuddering breath, lying in his bed for days, scarcely eating or drinking. Seeing Jairen like that had broken Malkai's heart anew each time. Malkai accepted that his father had likely deserved whatever Jairen had done to fight back. One man could only take so much.

His kind and caring brother who had scarce left their mother's sickbed, had finally reached the limit of what he could endure. Yet, King Dalen's word had been law. To lay

hand on a king in any manner was a punishable offense, but to do so in violence—in self-defense or not—was to invite the harshest of penalties.

Malkai swallowed the rest of his wine in one gulp and wiped at his chin with his sleeve. "I know not."

Chapter 21

Lex sat on a log near a campfire, elbows braced on knees, hands hiding her silent tears. Nerves alone had kept her going through the night. Without the constant rattle of the cart or desperate slap of the reins urging the horses faster still, she felt parchment thin and frayed at the edges.

"All will be well, child." Lex almost mistook her for Grans, their age and voice held such similarity. Though this woman had the darker complexion of a life spent largely outdoors, her white hair framing a tanned face proved the difference that lifestyle made on one's appearance, even for sisters. This regal woman, the matriarch of her people, was Gran's sister. That made her—what?—Lex's Great aunt? "You did well, daughter. You did all you could. But he is in the hands of the Spirit Warriors now. Take solace in that."

"He saved us, Sammaa." Lex used the matriarch's title, whose translation meant something akin to *mother of spirits*. "He saved me, and I could do nothing for him in return."

"Nothing for him? Give yourself more credit. Despair, I understand. But do not diminish what you did for him." Aged fingers, rough and bony, tilted Lex's face to meet

the matriarch's gaze. "I saw your horses when my rangers escorted you into camp. I see the bags under your eyes and the blisters on your hands from gripping the reins so tight. Lex, take heart. You covered much distance in the past few hours alone."

That much, Lex had to admit, was true. Not even a full day had passed since they had left the slavers' camp, Jairen dying in the back of their wagon. They had left the camp well past midnight, and arrived here under escort just as the sun's last light fell beneath the trees. Grans and Eva had described Jairen's ability to turn into mist, and noted that the arrow had been iron. Sammaa had given a curt nod and called in the language of her people and several men carried Jairen into the only stone structure in sight, locking the door behind them.

"Go and find rest with your companions." She gestured toward a large wooden structure at the center of the tidy little village. "Your journey is done, child."

She trudged past several smaller structures and made it to the longhouse that served as both village center and communal sleeping place for those who needed it. The log building looked drafty from the outside but she found the air inside a cozy contrast from the chill night air outdoors. A fire near the center provided a warm light to navigate by. She spied an empty mat between Grans and Boz and lowered herself down. She kicked off her boots and curled beneath the deerskin blanket, falling asleep almost before she settled her head on the thin pillow.

#

A hand gently shook Lex awake, "Arise, child," said a familiar voice.

Lex rolled onto her back and opened her eyes. Samaa's face hovered above her. Lex's world sharpened into focus, her heart fluttered, the fog of sleep all but forgotten.

"Where is he?"

"The poultice is complete. We will administer it soon. I thought you might want to be there."

"Poultice? What poultice?" Her mind raced. Had she known what they planned to use to treat Jairen's wounds?

"His injury was dire, child. Beyond our skills to heal." Sammaa's colorless eyes bespoke the sadness in this truth.

Why had they woken her if they couldn't do anything?

"Come, child. I will explain on the way."

So Lex stood and followed the matriarch through the rows of cots and out into the cool gray of pre-dawn.

"Your friend is rinnaard," she said. "A spirit walker, in the common tongue.

"A what?"

"You saw him walk with the spirits, did you not?"

"When he turned to mist?"

"Yes, child." Sammaa dug a key out of a pocket in her furs and unlocked the door to the stone structure they'd brought Jairen to on arrival. "Rinnaard heal their own wounds when they commune to walk with the spirits. But with Jairen unconscious, he cannot commune to heal himself. Hence, our stridaard."

She knew that word from her Gran's stories, didn't she? "Spirit warriors or something?"

"Yes, Lex. Once, all rinnaard strove to become stridaard—all spirit warriors are spirit walkers, but not all who walk become warriors. Yet, since Zekker's betrayal, fewer rinnaard are born each year. We aren't quite so selective now."

Zekker's betrayal? Lex wanted to ask more, but she followed the old woman through the door and down several stairs, and through a second door, this one made of some sort of metal. Bronze? Brass? She couldn't tell in the low light.

They emerged into a small circular room—perhaps twelve feet across—lit by eight torches. Jairen lay on a stone plinth that dominated the room. They had stripped him to the waist and removed the arrow, but not bandaged the wound. Five men and three women stood in a circle around the plinth, each in line with the torches on the wall behind them.

A man, with a long dark braid reaching almost to his waist, stepped forward holding a mortar and pestle in his hands. He smeared a green-gray paste onto Jairen's wound. The unconscious prince groaned when the man pushed a small handful of the paste deep into the hole in Jairen's belly. Had Sammaa not laid a hand on Lex's shoulder, she might have lunged forward and throttled the man. How could that be anything but harmful?

"He induces communion," Sammaa explained in a low whisper. "We make the poultice from herbs sacred to our people. Herbs the stridaard once chewed before battle to make communing easier. Your friend is beyond our healer's aid, as I said. But he can help himself, if only he communes. The poultice works best on open wounds. Quicker path to the blood. Watch."

Nothing happened for several long moments. A tightness built in Lex's chest as she watched in anxious silence. The men and women around the chamber all released a collective breath as Jairen's figure grew fuzzy at the edges, the contours of his chest and line of his collarbone melding, becoming indistinct. Lex looked to a trail of mist rising from his hands and feet as fingers and toes dissolved before her eyes. As they watched, more and more of the boy turned to vapor and hovered just above the plinth, swirling, spinning, but never dispersing into the cloud she had seen before. The mist-that-was-Jairen still resembled something vaguely human in shape.

The man that had administered the poultice stepped forward with both arms outstretched, fingers splayed wide, having set the mortar and pestle on the ground, and half spoke, half chanted in his strange language—Rinnaard, the only word she could make out.

And finally, as gradually as he had dissolved, Jairen reformed on the plinth once more, a pink patch of skin the only trace of the wound that had nearly killed him.

Only when she saw his chest rise and fall did she breathe again, as well.

Chapter 22

Jairen regained consciousness in bits and starts. Sensations returned to his extremities, toes noticeably still attached to his feet, fingers to hands. Feeling spread up arms and legs into shoulders and hips, belly and chest, neck and, finally, his head. Other senses returned as well. The scent of woodsmoke lingered, mixing with a damp earth and stone smell. He heard breathing, deep and even, off to one side.

He opened his eyes and stared into a dark stone ceiling arching several feet above. He sat upright on some sort of stone table, his limbs stiff and sore. Where was he?

Low burning torches hanging in wall sconces around the circular chamber offered the barest light by which to see. In the near darkness, he could just make out the figure of someone sitting with their back to the wall, curled more or less into a ball, with their head resting on their knees. Was that Lex? Eva? He couldn't tell in the low light.

Jairen swung his feet off the table, and though he couldn't reach the floor, he could see it less than a foot below his dangling legs. He scooted forward intending to slide off the table and walk to the sleeping figure, but a half second too late, he realized

how weak he felt—deep fatigue from head to toe. His legs collapsed under him, the world spun up to meet him, even as he fell forward to meet it.

He fell on his chest, trying to brace his fall on his arms, but as with his legs, he hadn't the strength to do so. He gasped in pain as the air whooshed from his lungs, and then laughed at his own stupidity.

Lex—he could see now that the figure was indeed the green-eyed girl—woke from her slumber to what Jairen could imagine was a hilarious sight, sprawled awkwardly on the dirt floor at her feet, laughing like a crazy person. Picturing himself from her viewpoint merely made him laugh harder.

"Jairen?" She scrambled to her knees and crawled to his still-cackling prone form. "Jairen?" Only the concern in her voice sobered him, though not completely.

Still chuckling he said, "You should see the look on your face right now, Alexandra."

She tensed, like he had struck her, and he regretted the comment immediately.

"I'll have you know, Princeling" she narrowed her eyes when she emphasized the nickname she thought he hated, "that waking up to see a dead man laughing in the dirt a few feet away is," she paused, probably looking for the right word, "jarring."

That killed all levity he had felt at the ridiculousness of the situation.

Dead man? How was he a dead man? The last thing he could remember was being aboard a boat with his mother—two of his mothers?. But no, that couldn't be right. She was dead. And so was his father, thanks to him. Then what? He had fled the city with Lex and her family and then? The slavers. One of them had beaten Lex, hadn't he? He strained to roll over and failed. So he tilted his head and looked at her swollen face, he

saw how she favored her right side, keeping one of her arms pressed tight to her ribs.

"They beat you? Where are they? Where are we? Are you well?"

She blinked. "Don't you remember?"

She helped him stand and shuffle to the wall, taking more of his own weight than he did. After getting him seated, back to the wall, she explained the events of the past two days. She started with Jairen escaping his bonds and killing the bandits, and then recounted their desperate race to this little village. When she told him about how they had healed him, he stared at her for a long moment. He couldn't possibly have done all that. He was a fair hand with a sword, he supposed, so killing the slavers, while unlikely, was at least within the realm of possibility. But turning to mist and choking a man to death from the inside? Zipping around a bandit camp as a cloud of fog, only reforming to kill someone with their own weapon before moving to the next?

He thought he had dreamed all of that. But then, turning into mist to heal the arrow wound in his belly? No. Not possible. Even the most powerful practitioners of Zekker's Will couldn't heal wounds with their power. But he looked down at his bare chest and stomach. He saw the pink patch of skin two inches left of his naval.

"How?" he asked.

"Sammaa will be able to explain better."

"Who is Sammaa?"

#

Lex helped Jairen through the bronze door, bearing more of his weight on her slight frame than he could, his arm draped over her shoulders, leaning on the

left—uninjured—side of her body, her arm wrapping around his back. Zekker-be-damned if he wasn't weak. But more than that, his throat felt dry as a dead spring in summer.

"Lex," he said, using her preferred name aloud for the first time, "Thank you."

She turned ever so slightly to look up at him. That shift in motion made him stumble on the next stair, which made her stumble. They fell sideways and she grunted as her injured right side made contact with the stairwell wall, Jairen's weight adding to the force of the impact.

"You can't walk on your own and I was the only one down there," she said, irritation or pain in her voice.

"You saved my life," he said. "You barely know me. You didn't have to do that. So thank you."

They climbed two more stairs in silence before she spoke again, voice barely above a whisper. "I couldn't let you die."

He wanted to say something, but for perhaps the first time in his life, found himself at a loss for words.

They mounted the last step and she reached out to open a wooden door blocking their path. "You nearly died because of me," she said, her voice still soft. "You killed the man kicking me. And nearly died fighting his friends." Her voice trailed off, and they stood motionless, silent on the top step for several heartbeats before she pushed the door open and they stepped outside into the light of the midday sun. "That was stupid," she said, the sharp edge back in her tone. "I didn't need your help. I've took worse beatings before." She bit off each word as her uncultured street accent returned. "Only saved you 'cause I didn't want to owe nobody anything."

She dropped Jairen near a fire pit and stormed off into a large log building nearby. He sat there, taking in his surroundings. Dozens of small wooden buildings with thatched roofs spread out from the longhouse Lex had disappeared into, the stone structure that he had emerged from, and the central fire pit at which Jairen sat.

Almost all the people bustling about the village had Lex's same dark hair, though their complexion was a bit darker—all seemed lightly tanned from a life spent outdoors. Most folk wore furs, though some few bore more modern city garb. As he watched the seemingly random movements of people around the town, he picked up on certain patterns. One group of men and women moved building to building, filling barrels of water from buckets they refilled at the well between the longhouse and stone building. Two men with axes split wood that two women fetched from a diminishing pile of short logs, while two children gathered the split firewood and added it to a separate pile near the stone building. He saw one mix-gendered hunting party armed with bows return with a large buck. They began skinning it near the fire as a second hunting party left the village to begin their own hunt. Everyone had a role, and everyone performed it, moving with grace despite the apparent chaos.

Yet, something else entirely had grabbed his attention as he watched the group fetching water with more scrutiny. He hadn't noticed it before, but while the well from which they drew their water had a line to lower and raise a bucket, the group didn't use it. Instead, one woman stood beside the well and, when a water runner proffered their bucket to the woman, she made a sort of wild swirling motion with her arms, almost as if she were pulling on something. Water would rise from the well and deposit itself in the waiting pail. Jairen rubbed his eyes to make sure he saw that right.

"Your eyes do not deceive you, young Rinnaard." An old woman, almost the spitting image of Grans sat next to him on the log. Her sightless eyes focused unerringly on Jairen's. When did she get there? How had he not noticed?

"What magic is that?" Jairen had never seen, nor, indeed, heard of such power. Or at least not in such a manner. Some of the more technical nobles could create a sort of funnel of Will to direct liquids. He had seen his father and brother do so—albeit in small quantities—but never with the alacrity the woman possessed.

"The same as your own, after a fashion," she said. "You are rinnaard, just as Rika is rinnaard." She nodded toward the woman by the well. "Though Rika communes with eibaarda—water spirits—while you commune with lufaarda—air spirits. The translation is not exact, but close enough, I think."

"What do you mean, we are rinnaard?" The term sounded familiar to him, yet, despite his keen memory, he could not place where he had heard it before. Perhaps he hadn't, and the word merely reminded him of something else.

"Rinnaard are spirit walkers, ones who walk between our realm, and the spirit realm. When we commune, we exist neither wholly in our plain, nor in theirs."

"We? Are you a spirit walker, too?"

"I am Sammaa of our people. All Sammaa are rinnaard," she said. "I commune with aggenaarda—light spirits."

"What cruel irony." Jairen shook his head. If what all she said was true—and he did not yet believe it so—to commune with light spirits as she claimed, yet to be blind? A cruel joke indeed.

"My blindness is not irony," she said, picking up on his line of thought. "It's the price I paid for communion over the years. We merge our bodies with the aarda and they lend us their power for a time. But it is not free." She stood and looked down at Jairen, her milky eyes unerringly finding his. "But enough of this talk. Come. My grand niece says you haven't eaten in days."

Samma—the Samma?—left him at a table in the longhouse where he ate his fill of cold venison with a strange berry jam, and drank the only-slightly-stale water until he was certain food and drink filled every bit of his cavernous stomach.

He couldn't recall having eaten a better meal.

Chapter 23

Lex left Jairen on a log at the fire pit and stalked off to find Sammaa. How could the stupid Princeling get under her skin so easily? He had thanked her for saving her life, for spirits' sake. She had intended to thank him for stepping up to stop her from being beaten. Well, she had thought about intending to thank him.

She found Sammaa in the longhouse speaking with Grans.

"—communes in full with no training," Sammaa said as Lex moved within earshot.

"I didn't see his first communion, I was asleep. But I suspected from my granddaughter's description," Grans said. "Then, multiple communions in rapid succession, and in the heat of combat, no less. He is stridaard in all but name, Ali."

Sammaa sighed, a small, sad, smile creasing her already aged face. "No one has used my name since Jhonan died. But yes. You may be right, sister."

"Excuse me, but" Lex said, stepping forward. "he's awake."

"So soon?" She stood. "Dederic said he likely wouldn't wake for several days."

"He is weak," Lex confirmed. "But awake." She gestured behind her. "By the fire pit."

#

Cones littered the carpet of needles on the ground as she made her way from the village, the scent of northern pines filled her nose. Lex emerged from a copse of trees near a stream and took a seat on a boulder. She brought her knees to her chest, bracing her feet against the rounded surface of the rock and retrieved the ledger page from the bottom of her pack.

Transit had crumpled the parchment so she spent a few moments flattening it out until she could read the words on the inside. From what Lex could tell, the page detailed shipments of lumber to Au'Dovier, though she didn't recognize the name of the lumber mill the caravan left from. She had torn the page from near the end of the filled portion of the ledger, so the most recent entry was dated just three weeks before they had fled the city, which meant nearly a month had passed. According to the dates, the shipments left on the twelfth day of each month like clockwork, and each shipment was numbered, the most recent entry read: "32 - Lumber - Forty Chords" with an X in the box marked for payment. Some entries had check marks instead of X's in the payment box, though she saw no pattern for which received payment and which did not.

The page, which she had hoped would bring insight into how best to destroy Lucien's trade empire, offered nothing but the date each month that shipments left—wherever Winniver Mill was.

How could she get back at Lucien with that scant bit of information? Why couldn't she catch a break? She still had no idea how to enact her revenge. She crumpled the paper and threw it back into her pack.

Lex sat for hours, knees aching from their position pulled close to her chest, backside growing sore as she thought over what little she knew. She would ask around for Winniver Mill, of course, but she doubted anyone around here would know it. Yet with the sky turning a dusky orange, she trudged back through the pines in search of Sammaa, the seeds of a plan growing in her mind.

Chapter 24

Jairen wandered through the village searching for Alexandra, belly full, mind spinning from his talk with Sammaa. The girl had seemed angry with him as she deposited him on the log that morning.

"Rinnaard," a male voice called.

Jairen turned to see a lean, but well muscled, man with that sort of ageless look that could mean he was thirty or fifty, a long dark braid stretching far down his back.

"Rinnaard," the man said again. "I am Dederic." He brought his left hand—four fingers extended—to his heart and gave a deep nod—though well short of a bow.

"Well met, Dededic." Jairen proffered his right hand, though Dederic was a peasant and did not warrant such respect, Sammaa mentioned that Dederic had helped to heal Jairen's wound the night before. "My name is Jairen of—" he stopped short of saying his family name. This far from the capital, Miraxes would still be recognized. But more than that, he didn't know if he deserved such a name, having killed his father and fled the capital. "Jairen," he amended.

"Well met, Jairen of Jairen." The man smiled and took his hand. "Your injuries are healed, yes?"

"Aye," Jairen said. "Thanks to you, I hear."

Dederic gave a quick nod, not near so deep as his last and said, "I merely helped you commune. You and the aarda did the real work."

"Yes, how does that work?"

"When we achieve full communion and walk with aarda along the border, we take them into our bodies and merge our aardi—what you might call our souls, though they are very different—with the aarda we invoke for communion. Despite most damages to our body, our aardi remains whole. When the spirit leaves us, they return our body to the state our aardi recognizes as whole." He shrugged. "Within reason, of course."

Jairen's mind whirled for several heartbeats trying to reconcile all that he had learned. This entire principle of communion overturned everything he had ever learned about Zekker.

"I'm a walking blasphemy." Jairen only realized he had said it aloud—damn, it's spreading. Lex must be contagious—when Dederic raised an eyebrow. "It's just that, if I am this rinnaard like you say, I defy every belief that my people hold. I was taught from a young age that Zekker—"

The man made a slicing gesture with his hand. "Do not speak that traitor's name."

Jairen blinked, waited for an explanation, and when Dederic did not provide one, he asked, "What traitor? Zek—"

"I said do not speak his name. He is feiraarda. A spirit traitor to our people. You would do well to never speak his name in our presence again."

"Everything I've ever learned about Ze—about him—claim he was a philosopher who ascended to something more." Even those who don't believe in his ascension—despite his Will proving otherwise—at least respected his philosophies.

"But we do not speak of him to outsiders. And rinnaard or not, you are not one of us." He beckoned Jairen on. "But come, young rinnaard. There is much I must show you." Dederic strode from camp and into the forest beyond.

Jairen sighed and followed the man into the woods. They walked for nearly two hours, more or less in silence, save for their footfalls and labored breathing. The pine forest reminded Jairen of similar hikes he'd taken with his mother and brother years ago, the last time he'd visited her home. Over the years, they'd explored the land for miles around both Timberlan Mill and the castle—Timberlan Keep—that his mother had grown up in. No one hike stood out any more than the next. They'd forded streams, explored caves, or just took in the sights from cliffs, each day a new adventure, bringing the three of them closer together. Funny how the most innocuous of memories could sometimes be the most potent.

They started up one of the steepest hills Jairen had ever seen. He paused to catch his breath and look for a path up the slope, but to no avail—on both counts. Dederic, despite panting even more heavily than Jairen at the exertion, didn't so much as slow when they hit the incline. Jairen sighed and followed the man's lead, scrambling on all fours in parts. Near the top of the hill, Jairen's boot slipped while he tried to lever himself up on a root that jutted from the mud. He clung to the root even as he fell backwards, the rough wood in his grasp tearing at his palm. He cried out and let go, tumbling several yards down the hill until a fallen tree kindly broke his fall.

Jairen lay with his back against the stump, gasping for breath, for several moments before Dederic's head loomed into sight above him. The man still panted from exertion but helped Jairen to his feet nonetheless. Together, they resumed their climb, Jairen taking care to brace himself better as he levered himself up on that selfsame treacherous root.

Jairen crested the hill and took in the view as he hunched, hands on knees, trying to catch his breath. A stone monolith stood at the center of the hilltop, seemingly sprouting out of an otherwise rockless sea of lush grass. Jairen hadn't realized how high they'd climbed, but the hill towered above the northern pines like adults over children.

Even as Jairen beheld the rippling sea of evergreens, he fell to his knees, still trying to catch his breath. Captain Rico would have scolded him, saying that standing upright leant itself to catching one's breath better, but considering Jairen wanted to flop down on his back, kneeling seemed a good compromise. Jairen grimaced at the thought of Rico, though. He viewed the man almost as a second brother and wondered if the captain of the guard, the man in charge of the king's safety, would want Jairen dead now, too. Jairen shook his head to banish thoughts of home. Home? No, he didn't have one of those anymore. He clenched his fists and cried out in pain as his nails aggravated his palm where he'd held the root.

He glanced at his hand then. Red blood mixed with brown mud and nearly white scratch marks that turned pink in the deeper troughs of the scrape. That would be tender for days.

"Communing will," Dederic said, hands on his hips, still trying to catch his breath, "help with that."

Jairen was not in top physical condition like he'd once been, so his heavy breathing made sense. But why did Dederic struggle so much? The man looked fit as Rico, despite the age difference.

"Communing?"

"Aye," he wheezed. He straightened and closed his eyes, making visible effort to control his breathing. Just when Jairen thought Dederic would say no more, the man went on, "When you take on your mist form," he took another slow breath, "you commune with a—"

"No, I get that," Jairen said. "Sammaa told me. But how do I commune?"

"You mean to say that you have achieved full communion on multiple occasions without consciously invoking the lufaarda?"

Jairen rubbed at his patchy beard growth. He barely understood any of this. "Let us pretend I know nothing about any of this."

"Most people meditate for hours before achieving their first full communion. And spend years learning partial communion before even that." He tilted his head. "Can you partially commune?"

When Jairen just stared at him, the man sighed and swirled his hands in the air until Jairen felt a small but concentrated gust of wind blow into his chest. The sensation wasn't totally dissimilar from being hit by Zekker's Will. Though, this dispersed around him on impact, whereas the Will merely pushed until its user stopped exerting force.

"Bide. Can you turn into mist too?" Jairen asked.

The man smiled and closed his eyes. A mere breath of a second later, the man had completely transformed into a cloud a swirling vapor. He no longer resembled anything

even slightly humanoid in form, but something more akin to a vortex. The tiny fog tornado circled Jairen once and then condensed in on itself, forming a misty cloud that looked approximately human in shape before Dederic's features came into focus and the man solidified in front of Jairen once more.

Jairen forgot years of court training to mask his expression in a single instant. He knew his eyes gaped as wide as his open mouth hung, but he didn't care. Couldn't care. Not after what he had just seen. Is that what he looked like when his vision went white like it had in the slavers' camp or when he had broken into Alexandra's flat? No wonder they had gaped at him as his vision cleared that night.

A grin spread across the man's face. "Our communion is perhaps the most impressive of all the eight." Then he chuckled and said, "Though, I did the vortex bit for show. Mostly, we resemble a small cloud of dense fog."

"How does it work?" Jairen asked.

"Tomorrow, if you want, we will make this climb after breaking our fasts. I will begin instructing you on the basics of communion."

Jairen nodded, this time keeping his expression neutral. In truth, while the prospect of learning this new power excited him, he couldn't help but feel the wrongness of it as well. Though his relationship with Zekker was... strained, he couldn't help but see this power as anything other than blasphemy. Perhaps blasphemy was necessary, though. Had he not decided to topple—or at least reform—the theocracy of his people? If some alternative to Zekker's Will existed, and all evidence pointed to the truth of that eventuality, then was it not necessary to explore its possibilities?

"Bide a moment. How can any of this be possible? How can *I* use this—this magic? I was siphoned when I was young. They gave a piece of my soul to my brother so that he would be stronger. I haven't been able to work the Will since."

Dederic focused on Jairen. "Just who are you?"

Bullocks. He'd said too much. Only nobles—Second Son's mainly—underwent the transference ritual. Maybe Dederic wouldn't know that much.

"That's my business. How's it possible?"

Dederic pulled his braid over his right shoulder and rolled its end between his forefinger and thumb. "The traitor's power is similar to ours, at its core—both involve our aardi. But while our power comes from sharing ourselves with a spirit, the traitor forces the spirits into servitude. I don't know how you discovered communion on your own, but it probably relates to the emptiness in your aardi after the Will-bound spirits were removed."

Servitude? Will-bound spirits? Jairen regretted asking.

"Look, I can't explain any more to an outsider—I don't know too much more myself. Do you want to learn to commune tomorrow or not?" He tossed the braid back over his shoulder.

"Why climb back here, though?" Jairen asked.

"Perhaps I like it up here. Nice view."

Jairen didn't bite. He just leveled a flat look at the man.

Dederic shrugged. "New rinnaard always learn to commune with lufaarda up here. This is a sacred sight for my people, but I can't tell an outsider more than that."

Jairen decided not to push any harder yet, but oh how he loved uncovering secrets. He smiled and nodded as Dederic turned and led them back to the village. The return trip proved far easier than the first leg of their hike, and he endeavored to enjoy the leisurely walk as light from the setting sun filtered through the needles of the pine forest around him. As his mind wandered, the evergreens called to mind a similar hue in the eyes of a quick-tempered girl.

He had dealt with girls and women of all sorts at court, yet never came to understand the supposed gentler sex. He could understand the motivations behind much of a courtier's behavior—usually power, prestige or political favor—but the extent of his understanding ended there. Yet, Lex defied all logic. She played by different rules—Zekker take him—she played a different game entirely.

Jairen decided to ask Lex about it when he got back to the village, yet, it was nigh on midnight by the time he and Dederic returned. They ate a quick meal of cold venison—again—and then Dederic showed him to a cot in the longhouse near Grans and Boz. Lex lay in her cot as well, already asleep.

Jairen sighed and removed his boots before laying down for the night.

#

Jairen woke the next morning, bleary eyed and not nearly well rested enough, to the startling sight of Dederic smiling down on him. It wasn't the smile, or even the man's visage that startled Jairen—Dederic was actually a moderately attractive man, Jairen supposed—so much as waking to see a barely familiar person looming above.

"We have much to do today, rinnaard, and you've slept too long. You may break your fast as we hike." The man turned and walked away before Jairen had a chance to respond, much less climb out of his cot.

Too long? Jairen could see the graying sky through one of the longhouse's windows. Dawn hadn't even broken, which meant this was the absolute earliest Jairen had ever awoken. Where was Sorcha with his tea when you needed her? That thought hit him with the force of a blacksmith striking a hammer as memories of that last morning in the palace came flooding back. He wondered what happened with Cici, given that Malkai knew of their relationship. Not that one night could be called a relationship, but he felt a hollow ache in his chest when he considered what could have been. But no. That was his past. This was his future. At least for now. He would learn these people's ways, learn as much of their strange magic as he could. And then he would find a way to fix his kingdom's misguided ways.

He climbed off his mat to start his day.

Some minutes later, Jairen found himself running through the brisk morning air to catch up with Dederic, a dense biscuit and a thick slice of a nutty cheese in hand. He knew the general direction of the hill they had visited the day before, and that Dederic said they would return there today, but the hike was long enough that he didn't trust himself to navigate there by himself. Especially not amongst the trees. At first, Jairen had little trouble following Dederic's trail. His boots left prints in the mud around the village, but as clearing gave way to forest, Jairen's progress slowed. He had lost the man's trail altogether and considered doubling back to the village to ask for another guide when a twig snapped from somewhere to his left.

He spun and looked in the direction of the sound, but saw nothing. A rustle in the brush made him turn to look behind him. The sharp prick of a blade against his kidney made Jairen grow still. His heart beat at twice its normal rhythm, his breathing shallowed, and sweat broke out on his palms. Could he step forward, draw his sword, and turn before his assailant could cut him?

"Dead," a familiar voice said as then the press of the knife disappeared, allowing Jairen to turn around, brow furrowed in concentration, jaw clenched in anger.

"What in Zekker's na-" The slap stole the words from Jairen's tongue.

"Zekke—" The second slap. Jairen bit his tongue, and blood filled Jairen's mouth.

Furious, Jairen stepped away from the man, preparing to draw steel and demand satisfaction, but Dederic spoke first.

"I told you not to speak his name in my presence again. He is a traitor to our people, and above all, to the aarda. I will strike you each time you say that traitor's name in my hearing."

Jairen spat blood. "I will allow your disrespect just once. This is likely a culture shock. But you have been warned."

"Who do you think you are," Jairen drew, insensate at the taste of his blood in his mouth and the indignity of this savage slapping him. He could not stand for this level of disrespect from someone so far beneath him. "striking a pri—"

"You do not wish to fight me, boy." Dederic drew a second bronze dagger with his left hand and took up a ready stance.

Some part of Jairen's mind knew this was stupid. Dederic had warned Jairen not to speak Zekker's name in his presence. Moreover, fighting Dederic with a sword while

the man only wielded two daggers was hardly a fair match. But he had had a trying ten or so days. And he was tired. Tired of roughing it on the road—and now a thin mat—tired of not having the luxury of the castle about, and tired from lack of sleep. What's more, he hadn't had his morning tea for the entirety of his journey. So, if he couldn't say Zekker, then spirits damn this man.

He lunged forward, only realizing too late that these were not dueling blades but live steel that could kill. Despite his irritation, he did not want to kill this man, not over a couple of slaps. But the momentum of his thrust found no resistance, parted no flesh.

Dederic had vanished in a swirl of mist and again, Jairen felt the prick of a blade at that same kidney.

"Dead."

Jairen dropped his sword to the ground and fell to his knees. His ears burned at having been bested so easily, yet a chuckle rose in his throat. Equal parts amusement at the symmetry of Dederic's attack, relief that he hadn't killed the man, and chagrin at demanding a duel for such a small slight.

He started to apologize, just as a thought struck him. "Bide. How did you bring daggers with you when you shifted?" In what few flashes of his battle at the slavers camp that he could remember, each time he'd communed, he'd lost the weapons he'd wielded.

Dederic moved into Jairen's line of sight. "Bronze," he waved his dagger dismissively, "can travel through communion." He shrugged. "Well, bronze and anything that once knew life."

"That once new life?"

Dederic walked in front of Jairen and offered him a hand. "Aye. The aarda can move anything living or once living through their world."

Jairen took the proffered hand and asked, "Why bronze then?"

Dederic shrugged. "I do not know. No one does, to my knowledge." He tilted his head sideways. "But bronze is the only substance that can harm us while we commune. Cutting our communed form with bronze cuts our true bodies. Bronze is like poison to the aarda, and they cannot heal wounds inflicted by bronze."

Something about the explanation tickled at the back of his mind. That was the issue with his near perfect memory: he could remember most everything, but with so much information in his head, sometimes he failed to make important connections. And very little distracted like aching cheeks and bruised pride. Even if Jairen didn't understand Dederic's hatred of Zekker, he should ha—He gasped aloud. That's the connection his mind had tried making.

"Is that why the traditional noble swords used to be bronze?"

"I don't know your noble history, but perhaps. Given the traitor's influence in your society, he'd likely have known of bronze's usefulness against those he betrayed."

"Explain what you know," Jairen demanded.

"I will do no such thing. Not until I know who you are."

Jairen let his silence ask the question.

Dederic sighed. "You are still an outsider."

Still? Did that mean he wouldn't always be such?

"But come." Dederic turned and started away. "The sun rises and we have not yet reached the hill."

Chapter 25

Malkai leaned back in his chair and rubbed the bridge of his nose with forefinger and thumb, trying in vain to stave off the coming headache. He tossed yet another report onto one of the ever-growing piles on his desk. He had to get out of his study. Usually quite comfortable with its large hearth and plush leather chairs, it had grown oppressive over the last few days. Spending so much time in one room—Zekker's truth, in one chair—couldn't be healthy. But he had work that needed doing.

Grain prices continued to rise as the threat of war with Au'Dovier loomed. Just that evening, a bird had arrived from one of his spies along their border noting a further massing of Dovien troops. All signs pointed toward a pending invasion, and Malkai had called for his family's bannermen to rally forces of their own. He'd even sent an official request for aid from the noble houses of the kingdom to do the same. If Au'Dovier wanted to invade a fractious kingdom while it transitioned from one king to another, Malkai would make them pay dearly. He would not allow his nascent tenure as king to end just months after it began—not without a fight, at least.

In truth, war might actually help him cement his rule. And more importantly, postpone any more pressure for him to take a wife. He had always known he likely wouldn't marry for love. Neither prince, nor king, had that luxury, it seemed. In the days since his coronation, a growing number of his councilors broached the topic. And though she remained neutral in the discussions, Varlys's name had been chief amongst the candidates.

Malkai thought of the brief bath he had shared with Varlys on *that* morning before his world had turned upside down. She had a sharp intellect and a quick-enough wit. He even supposed she was comely enough. And tying her house to his could prove beneficial. Yet, for all the reasons marrying her made sense, some part of him said marriage shouldn't make sense, because love damn well didn't. Malkai shuddered, trying to turn his thoughts back to the matter at hand: war.

Provided his forces arrived in time, he would have twice, maybe even thrice the Dovie numbers. They would be the defending force, augmenting their superior numbers with defensive fortifications, and therefore at both a numerical and tactical advantage. With those numbers on his side, his councilors assured him of victory. Indeed, his entire council, other than Rico, and potentially Varlys—he could never tell where his chief military adviser stood on the matter—claimed that defeating Au'Dovier would provide little more challenge than training maneuvers. Yet, wouldn't the Dovie leadership know that as well? Despite his councilor's surety, Malkai had doubts. He was missing some key bit of information.

A knock sounded.

"Who comes?" Rico asked from his position by the door.

"Just me," Malkai's uncle said.

"Let him in."

Rico opened the door at Malkai's bidding, and the old adviser waddled into the room, a stack of books and scrolls in his arms.

"I have your requested texts, as well as some more I thought might be of use." He dumped the load quite unceremoniously onto the table in the center of Malkai's study.

Malkai had requested all the information about Au'Dovier he could get his hands on, especially those texts related to their magic. They were possessed of the Will as well, having supposedly descended from one of Zekker's children, yet their magic functioned differently, by all reports. But *how* it differed varied source by source, and his spies could only provide so much information.

Some reported seeing magical fireballs, while others described some sort of mind control. One even claimed to see a man simply fall, bleeding from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears before dying in screaming agony. If any or—Zekker forbid—all the reports proved true, any conflict could prove difficult, to say the least. Zekker's Will, in its unpolluted form was strong, improving a body's strength, stamina, and speed in its least skilled practitioners, and could turn aside entire volleys of arrows by those more skilled in its use. Yet, historically, Au'Dovier's forces always managed to thwart Renmarran attempts at pacification, despite their inferior numbers.

"Thank you, Uncle." Malkai stood and walked to the table. "Any thoughts on where to start?" He picked up a particularly thick leather bound tome with *On Magicks: A comprehensive history* written in scrawling calligraphy across the cover.

"I suggest these scrolls first." He gestured to the three scrolls that, unlike the books, he had placed carefully on the table. "They are from the royal reserve library. Documents we have kept from public eye for—well—as long as our family has ruled, I believe."

Malkai sighed. The existence of a private library did not surprise him, really. Yet, he hated—even if he understood—the necessity of withholding certain information even from the nobles that helped to run the kingdom.

So too, did the prospect of yet more reading annoy him. Was it too late to step down as king? Reading had never been among his interests. That was always Jairen's passion. Where was his brother now? He'd have given anything in that moment to have Jairen back. And not just to avoid further reading, though that would have certainly been an added boon. No. He shook his head, trying to perish the thought. His brother was a criminal.

But Malkai missed him all the same.

A slow smile spread across his face as he looked up from the pile of books and scrolls to see Rico still standing guard by the door.

"Oh Captain," he said, his voice sweet and melodic. "I have new orders for you."

#

Malkai had read until nearly dawn, Sorcha providing them with an ample supply of coffee to fuel their minds long into the night. Only when he heard Sorcha's light snores as she slept on her feet where she leaned against the wall did Malkai call an end to his research. Rico had long since fallen asleep as well, sprawled on one of Malkai's couches. He stood, stretching, and woke the servant who had begun to slump sideways.

"Sorcha, dear," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Her eyes went wide as she jolted awake at his touch. "Y-your Majesty, my apolo—"

Malkai cut her off, smiling. "You should find your bed. I've kept you here for far too long."

"Is there anything I can get you?" she asked.

"No, dear. You have done plenty. Run along now."

"Uh, thank you," she yawned, "thank you, Your Majesty." She turned and shuffled through the door to find her own quarters.

Malkai walked to the couch where Rico still slept, a book open across his chest. He extricated the tome from the captain's grip and draped a blanket over the man.

He poked his head outside his door to alert the other on-duty guards. "The Captain has fallen asleep. See to your own shift changes this evening. No, don't bother waking him. He is fine on my couch."

Malkai made his way to his bed, yet, despite his headache, mental fatigue, and lack of sleep, slumber did not find him. He lay in bed running over all that he had learned that night. One scroll had detailed a very different origin story for Zekker's Will than what the High Zekkite taught. Apparently, Zekker had come from a tribal people up north, near his mother's homeland in Timberlan Province. Their people utilized some strange kind of spirit magic, distinct from the Will, or even from the disparate reports about the Dovien variety. Though the dossier was vague on details explaining how it had happened, it claimed that Zekker had harnessed the power of his people and changed it to shape the Will.

Gone were the teachings that Zekker had been a scholar and philosopher, teaching others to achieve enlightenment as he had done. No wonder the scroll had been part of the restricted collection. It blasphemed the very foundation of their religion, of their society as a whole. Could it be true? And if so, what would that knowledge change?

He sighed and climbed from bed, abandoning all hope of sleep. He donned his boots and a light tunic and breeches, leaving the slumbering captain behind as he headed down to the training yard, resorting to his tried and true method of clearing his head through physical activity.

Malkai nodded to the guards on dawn watch as they opened the doors to the training yard and he passed through. He had scarcely finished half of his first set of sword forms when a messenger in city watch livery approached with one of the dawn watch guards as escort.

"Your Majesty," the teenager bowed low, "I bring word from the Highland Wall Garrison. A Lucien Darkmont seeks audience."

Malkai sighed. He felt like he was doing that more and more recently. "Allow his passage," he told the messenger, then turned to the guard. "Pass word to prepare the throne room, and send a servant to my rooms. Your Captain is asleep on my couch. Have him meet me there in half a turn. In full uniform."

The messenger bowed again and scurried away, the guard saluted and likewise turned to do as Malkai bade.

Malkai sighed once more, sheathed his sword, and trudged inside to take a dip in the baths and change clothes. It wouldn't do to meet with the posturing Lord Darkmont in training clothes, even if he hadn't had time to break a sweat.

Chapter 26

Malkai sat on the Alabaster Throne freshly bathed and not at all rested. But he had changed out of the training garb and now at least somewhat resembled a king. Rico stood at the base of the dais looking resplendent in his full regalia: polished steel hauberk and full scale mail coat reinforced with plate at the joints. He wore equally polished pauldrons shaped to resemble falcon heads trimmed in gold, and a short, sleeveless surcoat of sapphire emblazoned with a falcon and unsheathed sword to signify his position as royal guard captain. Rico had even worn the matching blue cloak that he despised for its impracticality.

Malkai hadn't expected the captain to dress in full splendor, rather, the full uniform, complete with chain mail, tabard, helm, and sash, but he had to admit, this looked far more impressive. After being caught unawares for their first meeting with Lucien, Malkai refused to present his side as anything less than regal. He wore purest white breeches, a sapphire and gold doublet, and the gold circlet of office upon his brow. He had considered wearing the full ceremonial crown, but dismissed that as ostentatious, opting for the more dignified, subtler option, in its stead.

The brazier behind the throne was lit, casting the seat—and Malkai—in shadow. He had always liked the mystery created by that effect, and he hoped it would leave an impression on Lucien—this, the man's first trip to the castle.

The doors to the throne room opened, revealing two figures. The figure on the left—the herald—called, "Master Lucien Darkmont." Whereupon Lucien strode down the long, pillar-lined carpet of the throne room, eyes straight forward, to his credit, until he stood two paces from the stairs leading up the dais, and well within the reach of Rico's sword. Was that a conscious choice speaking to the man's confidence? Or did he simply lack the courtly experience to know that he had just committed a social faux pas?

Lucien waited just a moment too long before bowing after coming to a halt, but his bow was low and respectful, "Your Majesty, what an honor it is to stand before you as I do now. Never in my wildest dreams would I have ever expected to gain private audience with a king, nor look upon the Alabaster Throne with mine own eyes. Truly, thank you for entertaining my company."

In the days since their first meeting, Malkai had almost forgotten how much this man liked to hear himself speak. He really did suit the courtier's role well, even if he was Malkai's least favorite sort.

"What business have you for me, Master Darkmont?"

"I'm unsure as to whether the term 'business' is appropriate, yet I am a businessman, and this meeting may yet result in profit. Mutual profit, that is. Though not of the monetary variety. But I digress. Our business, such as it may be, relates to further intelligence on your brother's whereabouts, or at least his movements rather than his exact location."

Malkai shifted in his throne, leaning on his left arm, affecting an image of disinterest. His men had scoured the northern countryside, but had nothing to show for their efforts beyond clearing out a few camps of bandits and highwaymen in the process. "Go on."

"My—" he trailed off, "My contact sent word back to me that Prince Jairen's, shall we say, retinue was set upon by bandits, leaving four dead in the initial skirmish, and the remainder dead in the aftermath, some hours later."

No, Jairen couldn't be dead. Not just like that. He felt a sob rising up but forced it back down, though he could do nothing about the tears welling in his eyes. Despite his brother's crime, the news that Jairen could have died—from anything, let alone—from something as inglorious as a bandit attack gnawed at the very essence of his being. "My brother is—"

"Wounded, but alive, according to my man's last report," Lucien interrupted.

"I don't understand," Rico said. Zekker bless the captain for speaking Malkai's mind so that his own voice couldn't betray him. "You claimed that all perished in the aftermath of the assault. Yet the prince lives?"

"I did," Lucien said, inclining his head. "But I did not say who perished. Twas not the prince who died, nor any other member of his retinue. Nay, the attackers were the victims. His group killed three of the four in the initial attack, and later, he escaped his bonds to kill the remaining bandits. Though he took an arrow to the gut in the process. According to the last report I received, their group loaded the injured prince in a cart and drove their horses at breakneck speeds hard to the north, though their destination is

unknown. My man follows on foot, you see, and was unable to keep up after they fled the bandit camp."

Malkai's mind reeled. Jairen had killed three bandits in one attack, and more besides after he escaped? How could any of Lucien's report be true? Yet what motivation might the man have for providing false information of this sort?

"Zekker damn you man," Rico nearly growled at the merchant. "Why did you not lead with that information?"

"My apologies, Captain. Twas not my intent to mislead. I am but a humble merchant awed in the presence of our king. Perhaps my tongue failed to express all that I meant to say."

While Malkai was glad of the news—though admittedly, worried about the arrow wound—something about this did not quite fit. "Why did you not inform me of your man's pursuit from the outset?" Malkai demanded, finally in control of his voice.

"I did say that I had a man watching the flat in question."

"But failed to mention that your man tailed their group. I have men in the area. I could have sent patrols on ahead."

"Again, my apologies," Lucien bowed. "I was loath to give my king hope whilst I was yet unsure as to the success—nor even the progress—my man made. He sent word via messenger services that delayed the word reaching me. When we spoke, I had not yet received even the first report. Even now, the message of the attack is several days old, though I received it but late last night and sent the request for an audience well before dawn."

Malkai sighed for what felt like the hundredth time that day. "And where did this attack occur? On what road?"

"The exact location is not mentioned. The bandits likely attacked between towns, and we know the prince had been traveling north. The message is marked as having originated in the town of Pinehollow which is located a few miles into Timberlan province, if my memory proves true. So one may assume that he fled somewhere within the province. Perhaps to a larger town with a physicker to treat the wound?"

Malkai picked up on Lucien's train of thought. Timberlan Mill, or perhaps even the Keep, itself, would both be likely destinations. Given the town's size, it would surely have a few skilled physickers as residents. But he had men stationed there. If Jairen's group had fled toward Timberlan, Malkai should receive news on their capture in the coming days.

"Very well," Malkai said. "Keep me apprised of any further reports. If you can get in touch with your man, have him report to my troops in the area."

"As you say, my king. As you say."

Malkai had meant his words as a dismissal. Yet the merchant lingered.

"What is it?" Malkai asked, restraining yet another sigh.

"It's just, I know not how to word this next question."

Profit, he had said. Mutual profit, but not of the monetary variety. That sly, conniving little—

"Isn't it bad business to bargain the price of a service after the service is rendered?" Malkai asked.

"Ahh yes, my king. Bad business indeed. That is why you are the king and I am but a merchant, lacking any real station or even a noble name of mine own."

"We will consider the matter." He would not grant the man a title of nobility or a position of power merely at the man's request. Though, his information had been solid—provided it proved true. Malkai stood. "We will be in contact. Good day to you, Master Lucien. Your information may yet prove valuable."

Lucien Darkmont took the cue, bowed, and strode from the throne room.

Chapter 27

Lex had quite literally not seen Jairen since she left him to fetch Sammaa on that very first day. He was always gone before she woke up and didn't get back until after she went to sleep. The only signs that he was still in the village were his rumpled blankets every morning. That boy didn't know how to fold to save his life. Princelings probably have someone to fold for them, she supposed. Even on the trek north, Eva had generally folded his blankets for him, after his first couple of attempts that became more of a wad than anything else. How could someone be so bad at something that simple?

But over a week had passed since Lex had seen him. That hadn't exactly been a bad thing, though. She'd had too much to do, too many plans to make to let Jairen distract her. Yet, as the days passed and Lex's plan grew in her mind she likewise grew more certain that she needed the prince's knowledge of the area. Sammaa's people were insular by nature and very few knew much about the countryside beyond their woods, but Sammaa had provided Lex with a rough map of the region purchased by one of the few villagers who had actually traveled more than twenty miles from the town.

When Lex awoke on the ninth morning since they had arrived and found Jairen's cot empty, yet again, she went in search of Sammaa.

She found the matriarch at the stream, almost in the same place that Lex had spent many of her last days. It really was a peaceful place. Just far enough from town that it received few visitors, but close enough that she didn't mind the walk. She had never liked the river back in Renhold. Always dirty with waste and commerce, it was the opposite of this stream in nearly every way. Where the Renn reeked, the area around this stream smelled of flowers and pine, where the Renn's water looked a murky gray, this was crystal clear down to its rocky bottom.

Lex approached the boulder where Sammaa sat. "I need Jairen."

Sammaa chuckled and Lex felt heat in her cheeks. "I only mean that I need to speak with him. I know you said he is learning the way of the aarda—whatever that means—but I can't do any more without him."

"I see," the old woman said. "And what are your plans?"

"I think I want to steal a shipment heading south."

"And why would you want to do that, child?"

So Lex explained. She told Sammaa everything from the first meeting with Lucien, including the setup job that got Boz captured and the subsequent rescue that got Kedrick killed. She told the matriarch about the page from the out-of-place ledger and her suspicions about the shipments from this Winniver Mill.

"I see," she said again. "And you think that stealing this shipment will soothe the ache from losing your uncle?"

"No." She took a deep breath, trying not to lash out at Sammaa's skepticism. "I know nothing will bring him back. Grans says that only time will heal the heart. But I have to do something. I want to do something. I want to make Lucien Darkmont regret all of his life's choices that led to Ked's death. I will destroy that man's work, and then I'll take his life, just like he killed Kedrick. Darkmont and Rollo both."

"Ahhh so revenge drives you on." Sammaa shook her head. "Lex, revenge is no tonic, but rather, poison, for your soul. I caution you against such actions."

"My mind is set. I will end that man, but only after his world crumbles around him."

"See that your world does not crumble along with it, then." Sammaa stood from her place on the boulder and hopped down, more nimble than Lex had expected.

"Come child, Rika will take you to where Jairen learns."

#

Rika—a dark haired woman with tattoos snaking down her arms like rivers—led Lex on an hours-long hike through the thick pine forest, over ever-inclining terrain. The woman, perhaps forty years old or so, seemed nice enough as the two made conversation, asking about one another's upbringing. Lex spoke about Renhold and growing up in the Fringe, how she had never known her father and how her mother had died of a cough two years past. She told the woman of Kedrick and Grans helping her through the loss and how she joined Kedrick's crew.

Rika, in turn, spoke of the village. She had been orphaned by age nine, having lost both her parents in a mudslide while they were out hunting the slopes, and how Sammaa had taken her in. That made them family, cousins, more or less, by Rika's reckoning. Her

people, the Aardena—people of spirits, which was not the same as spirit people, Rika insisted—were an insular folk, focusing on community prosperity, rather than that of the individual. For instance, Sammaa could not mother any children of their own, as per Aardenan tradition, because they were mothers to all, and therefore, cared for all the orphaned youths of the village.

The hike, itself, was pleasant enough. The brisk northern air kept Lex relatively cool despite her burning calves and thighs, though Rika seemed to fare worse than Lex, stopping at increasingly short intervals to drink from one of the three—compared to Lex's one—waterskins she carried. After what felt like forever, they broke through the last of the pine cover and into a large clearing with a few small boulders near the center. Jairen and another man, the one who had smeared the salve onto Jairen's wound that first night, sat motionless on two of the boulders, eyes closed. Yet, though their approach had been nearly silent and they had emerged from the trees a good fifty feet away, the man held up a hand to halt their approach. Rika and Lex stopped, stood silent, and watched.

Jairen's form dissolved right before their eyes, much faster than the night he had been healed, though, slower than when he fought those men at the slavers camp. He had gone from solid to mist in the space of two heartbeats. Lex waited for something else to happen, for him to move around, blow away in the wind, something. But Jairen's cloud of vapor just hovered there above the rock, swirling slowly like lazy clouds drifting in the sky. Then, almost as quickly as he shifted into the mist, he solidified in the same seated position on the rock, though his clothes dripped with moisture as they had that first night when he had misted into her flat.

Beside Lex, Rika shook her head. "He hasn't figured it out yet, it seems."

"What do you mean?"

"See how his clothes drip?" She gestured as Jairen's sodden clothes and the growing puddle underneath him. "He achieves full communion, but not perfect communion. He is unable to rein in the lufaarda completely. It gathers moisture from the air around him while communing and that moisture lingers on his clothes when the aarda leaves his spirit."

Unsure how to respond to that, and understanding only a portion in the first place, she strode toward the boulders at the center to speak with Jairen. He turned at her approach and broke into a brief smile that brought heat to her cheeks. But only because she remembered her conversation with Sammaa earlier. Yes, her blush was only due to her embarrassingly worded statement to Sammaa. That was all.

"Oh, Alexandra," he said, smirking that infuriating half grin of his. "What brought you all the way out here. It is a long hike, I can see you're flushed from the exertion." His half grin turned full as Lex's fingers twitched towards her knives.

This boy could really be quite infuriating. After a moment of contemplation wherein she weighed the pros and cons of drawing a knife on the Princeling, she decided that her plans relied too heavily on his information to cut him just yet.

"Princeling," she began, "I need your help with something."

Chapter 28

"Oh you do, do you?" Jairen laughed. "Why that is rich, is it not?" He looked at Dederic. "Dede, you catch a load of that, man? Alexandra needs me now. She didn't a week ago. And she said she didn't want to owe me, either." Jairen dabbed at fake tears of laughter. He knew he'd overdone the performance, and in actuality, he didn't mind helping Alexandra, so long as her request wasn't too fantastical. Yet, he knew he had made a mistake when her initial blush had turned from endearing pink to wroth red.

She advanced on him so that she stood maybe a foot away. If she truly wished him harm in that moment, she could draw any of her plethora of concealed knives and skewer him before he could defend himself. But if—

He communed and her finger passed straight through the swirling cloud of vapor right where his chest had been. Had she only planned to poke him in the chest? When she tensed, he had reacted, which was a good thing, in his estimate, though he may have *overreacted*.

He congregated a half inch past her extended index finger and laughed, sheepish in face of his overreaction. Her eyes, which had been wide—likely from the shock of his

sudden communion and congregation—narrowed and, before he could react this time, she slapped him.

He just stood there and blinked at the red-faced girl before him. The slap didn't hurt, exactly. He was more surprised by the blow. He hadn't expected Alexandra of all people to opt for something as—well—as benign as a slap in the face. How many times had she threatened to cut him on their trek north? He had run out of fingers to count with by the second day.

Rika and Dederic laughed almost in unison, her soprano melding with his baritone in perfect harmony.

"Well done, Rinnaard." Dederic slapped Jairen on his back. "If I had known all it would take was a pretty girl's anger, I would have fetched young Lex, here, a long time ago."

What? Jairen looked between the two older rinnaard and then to the still glowering *pretty girl*. Dederic's words, not his own. Though when she got mad like this—

Bide. He looked down. His clothes no longer dripped from his earlier communion. But he had just communed again. He should still be sodden. More so, even.

"That was a perfect communion," Rika said, gesturing at his dry clothes. "Dried you off completely."

"I'd wager you could see perfectly, too?" Dederic asked.

"I did? It was?" He had seen her finger pass through him, clear as glass.

"Lex's," Rika cocked an eyebrow, "violent attack," she smiled, all mischief, "gave you the scare you needed, it seems."

Jairen schooled his features then into the humblest expression he could muster and gave his most elegant court bow—though, the furs he now wore didn't quite lend the same gravitas to the gesture, especially given the distinct lack of cape—and said, "My fair lady Alexandra," he reached out to grab her hand, but she pulled away, so he dropped to a knee, as if he had planned it all, "it seems, I am in thine debt. What boon wouldst thou have of me? Pray, name it, and if 'tis in mine power to grant, it shall be thine."

"Oh shove off." She aimed another slap at his face, though he dodged back, avoiding the halfhearted attempt. "I just need your knowledge of the countryside." She pulled a map out of the pack on her back and laid it across one of the boulders. It lacked in the way of details, location names, and general accuracy. "I need to know where Winniver Mill is."

"That is not an accurate map."

"What do you mean? It's a map. How is it not accurate?"

"Well, for one, it doesn't even show any of the smaller tributaries. Also, what good is a map without location names? If it was a topographical map, I suppose I could forgive the lack of names, but this doesn't even accurately denote the mountain ranges. Who gave you this?"

"Sammaa."

"Oh." He hesitated to disparage it any more, yet it honestly lacked any usable information. "I could not even begin to guess where Winniver is based on this map." He flipped the parchment over to its blank backside and held his hand open toward Lex.

"Plume and ink?"

She only had a thin piece of charcoal, but he supposed that would do. Jairen had always had a fair hand for drawing. That fact had often earned scoldings from his uncle, as Jairen had taken to drawing instead of writing notes to pass the time. At least, on the days he hadn't moved to his window seat and fallen asleep mid-lecture.

He closed his eyes and called a map of the region to mind. He smiled, recalling how Malkai had always envied Jairen his ability to see things once and remember them in detail, despite that the talent hadn't ever proved terribly useful until now.

With an image of a map he had seen in the castle in mind, he began drawing. Jairen could feel three sets of eyes watching him work, but he did his best to ignore it. He supposed that watching someone draw a—more or less to-scale—map from memory might prove interesting to unlearned folk like Dederic and Rika. Despite their proficiency in communing, he had noted certain small-minded worldviews, or perhaps more aptly put, community-centric worldviews. Their knowledge of the world only extended about twenty miles in any direction from town.

It took him the better part of an hour to sketch the map to something approaching his satisfaction. It necessarily included both Eastveil and Timberlan provinces, the northern portion of the Renn River that made the border between the two, and many of the more prominent tributaries of the river. He had left off many of the smaller details, and had only named the larger cities or more prosperous mill towns. He could always add more details later, but his hand had begun to cramp and his audience—who had lost interest after a quarter hour or so—had devolved into restless conversation that kept drawing Jairen's attention away from his work.

"And Winniver Mill," he said, drawing a dot along one of the larger tributaries, "is here, more or less."

Lex squatted in the grass next to him to look at his work. "That is," she rocked backwards to sit, rather than squat, "detailed," she said. "Very detailed." She looked up at him, right as she looked at her, their eyes locking for a brief second before she averted her gaze to the map. "How?"

"Dunno," he said, some of her vernacular slipping into his own. "I remember things." He shrugged. "Now, mind telling me what this was all about?"

He had already heard most of the story of Kedrick's death. But she began her explanation with a shady meeting with Lucien, talking more to Rika and Dederic than to Jairen. After covering Rollo's betrayal and Kedrick's death, she pulled out a crumpled piece of paper, speaking as she attempted to flatten it. "When I broke into Lucien's office, I went through his things and found a ledger out of place. It was a ledger for lumber shipments. Didn't have time to read all of it, but I took a recent page."

"May I?" Jairen took the paper and looked it over. Replaying some of his uncle's lectures on commerce in his mind.

"Out of place, how? If it just shows lumber shipments, maybe he simply misplaced it?" Rika suggested.

"No," Jairen said. "I think not." It may be so much more than that. More than Lex likely expected.

They all looked at him, but rather than answering the obvious question they all held, he turned to Lex. "Why, aside from it being out of place, are you interested in this?"

"I want to destroy Lucien's world. I want to make his business crumble, shatter his livelihood, and make him regret Kedrick's murder." She said, green eyes all ablaze.

"And your plan is to steal a couple of lumber shipments?"

"There has to be something special about these shipments." She bit off each of her words, her irritation belying that she wasn't quite following Jairen's line of thought. "His office was so neatly organized, though. Why else would it be out of place?"

"Why indeed? I asked myself the same thing. But more pressing a question is why lumber?" Jairen looked around the semicircle that had formed in front of his map.

Lex's answer came out more of a question than a statement. "Because he runs a shipping company to cover his illegal business?"

"But why lumber, specifically?" He didn't give them a chance to answer. "These shipments run from Winniver Mill," he pointed to the town on the map and traced his finger down the length of the Renn, "But they move over land, not down the river, according to the ledger. It takes far longer to travel the roads—not even taking bandits into account—than to travel by boat down the Renn. What's more," he pointed to the ledger page, "the shipments are going to Au'Dovier, of all places."

"What's significant about that?" Dederic asked.

Jairen sighed, remembering that these people lacked the education he had received. "One of Au'Dovier's prime exports is lumber. Why would a businessman like Lucien pay extra to send shipments of lumber overland to a country that doesn't need lumber imports? As Alexandra said, the man is a criminal covering his activities with his legitimate mercantile empire. I don't think he is shipping lumber, at all."

"What then?"

"I have my suspicions, but why don't we take a trip to Winniver and see for ourselves?"

Chapter 29

Malkai sat back in his chair, resting head on his right arm propped against the armrest. He let his eyes drift to the few decorations that hung from the council chamber's walls. Maybe he should have it redecorated. Perhaps Rico would like to help. Might be a nice distraction from the dusty tomes the two spent their nights combing for information about Au'Dovier. They had very little success tracking down any sort of helpful insight into Au'Dovier's variant of Zekker's Will. Yet, with every new scrap of intelligence from the border, Malkai grew more and more certain that they would invade. That knowledge seemed not to trouble his advisers in the slightest, however. They stood unified in their disregard for the situation, claiming that if Au'Dovier attacked, it would prove folly on their part. Malkai, however, was not sure the folly would lie with the Dovien leadership.

Count Greenmont cleared his throat, breaking Malkai's thoughts. "Your Majesty?"

Malkai cleared his throat. "Yes, quite right." What had they been discussing?

"Apologies, my lords, could you run through that one more time? I'm afraid I didn't follow." Rico—bless the man—saved Malkai from his own wandering mind. King's Defended indeed.

"We were discussing the effect this—shall we say—pending invasion is having on the economy." Lord Eldwin, Malkai's Councilor of Commerce, glanced between Rico and Malkai before directing his comments at the Captain. "Grain prices continue to rise, and with harvest still several months hence, they likely will continue to climb. The call for arms has not helped the matter, with various minor households buying up large stocks of foodstuffs to feed the men they now garrison."

Malkai barely stifled a sigh. This again. Eldwin had been chief amongst the advisers who had counseled against raising their forces. "What would you suggest, Eldwin?"

"Majesty," my stance remains the same. "I do not support this armament, and advise that you cease the call for troops before any more damage may be done."

"And if the threat proves worse than you anticipate?" Rico asked from his place at the foot of the table.

Eldwin scoffed. "Their forces are minuscule, Captain." The councilor used Rico's title as a slight, though Malkai knew Rico was proud of his position. Very little affected his cool demeanor. "Even our city watch garrisons would be enough to repel any attempted siege for a long period of time."

"And what would happen to grain prices, Councilor," Malkai countered, "if we are drawn into a protracted siege?" He didn't give the man a chance to answer. "They would rise even more. A large force seems the only way to prevent a siege. We could meet them in the field and decimate the body of their army while they're still leagues from the city."

"Far be it from me to council against armed conflict, given my position," Lady Varlys, Councilor of Combat, paused while the others chuckled, "but perhaps meeting

their forces in open combat is not the most," the redhead looked up, as if asking Zekker for the right word, "prudent approach."

"Explain," Malkai prompted.

The councilor nodded her head. "While I believe our military will have little trouble dispatching any threat from Au'Dovier, I believe something is amiss in our assessment. The more I go over the reports from the border," she nodded at Lord Anmar in appreciation of his efforts, "the more I believe we're missing something vital. They know our strength just as surely as we know theirs, yet they still prepare."

Malkai blinked. "That is my position as well, Varlys." Varlys had originally been among those opposed to his plan to raise the army. "Have you any thoughts on what that missing information may be?"

"Either treachery or magicks, Your Majesty."

"My pardon," Eldwin cut in, "but I do believe we have gotten off the topic at hand." He looked around. "Grain prices. And the other economic anomalies."

"What anomalies?" Malkai must have missed that in his reverie, too.

"Lumber shipments have steadily increased out of the north, yet prices have remained the same. As in, exactly the same. There has been no fluctuation over the past several months. One of my aides noted that peculiarity just this morning, in fact."

"Why is that strange?" Rico asked.

"My good captain," Eldwin spoke, his words clear and deliberate, as if speaking to a child, "prices *always* fluctuate."

The next hour of their council meeting passed with dull economic discussions—iron prices shot up while stone devalued, silk prices declined as cotton and leather grew more expensive—until Eldwin cleared his throat.

"And, while we're on the topic of economics," he looked directly at Malkai, holding his gaze for what might have been the first time that meeting, "It has come to my attention that you've been in contact with a certain merchant. I've had the pleasure of working with Lucien on multiple large scale supply orders before, for your father, primarily—Zekker, preserve him."

"What about Darkmont?" Rico asked.

"Well, it strikes me that, while his talents are diverse, so I can't guess at your business with him thus far, might I council Your Majesty to perhaps avail us of his services, if conflict with Au'Dovier does escalate?"

"What did you have in mind, Eldwin?"

"Perhaps we could contract out some of the provisioning to Darkmont Trading. I'm not suggesting we rely on him completely—monopolies are bad for the economy. But even just a forty percent would do wonders for our coffers. It would be a loan of sorts, but given the size of the order, no doubt Lucien would offer a good rate."

The suggestion made a deal of sense. But— "Why Darkmont Trading?"

"Why else but for the fact that we both seem to have a working relationship with the man. Given whatever your relationship with the man is, I am hopeful we could reach favorable terms that might benefit both sides in the long run."

"Draw up terms. I'll decide once I've seen what you two come up with." Malkai stood. "Any other topics for today? No? Good. Dismissed, then."

"Varlys," he called before she left the chambers. "Attend me in my sitting room after luncheon." He wanted to grind his teeth as a number of his councilors shared knowing glances. But he merely wanted to pick her brain more about the pending conflict in the south.

He and Rico took their meals together in his study as had been their habit over the last several weeks. Malkai found it refreshing. They hadn't spent so much time together since they were boys. He had missed his friend's constant companionship. Their relationship had changed when he became king, to an extent—he had to remind Rico from time to time that they need not stand on formalities while alone—but he found himself craving the captain's company more and more, perhaps in solidarity as they combed through tomes, or perhaps just the desire for a friendly face. Being king, he'd found, was lonely.

Their meal passed in amiable banter, teasing one another as only close friends could.

"You only finished four scrolls last night?" Rico fingered the stack of discarded scrolls from the night before. "I daresay you must be as bad at reading as you are at swordplay."

Malkai threw a half eaten apple at the captain, who caught it and took a bite, himself. "How many did you finish, then?"

"Tis not the quantity that matters, but the quality, my good sir." Rico waved his hand.

"Well, *good sir*, do divulge, what quality did you find in the *one* scroll you read to my four?"

"It was quite a long scroll," the captain demurred.

A knock sounded and Sorcha's voice called from beyond. "Your Majesty, the Lady Varlys here to see you?"

Malkai sighed despite having invited her himself. He had enjoyed his brief reprieve from being king. "Send her in."

The councilor had changed out of her dark robes of office, opting, instead, to wear a plain yellow gown and matching shawl that complimented her red hair quite well. Despite the casual dress, she did strike an impressive figure. The comely redhead had toned shoulders and moderately muscled arms gained through years of martial training.

Council seats were not hereditary, though councilor's heirs were often groomed as obvious replacements. Yet many had thought it strange when Dalen had appointed her the Councilor of Combat after her father left the post empty upon his death, making Lady Varlys the first female commander in the kingdom's history. But she had filled the post well in her near decade of service. Though her temperament matched her fiery hair, her tactics often proved cautious—a fact that Malkai intended to use.

"Thank you for coming," he said and gestured to the couches still littered with books and parchment. "Sorcha, clear off the couch for Lady Varlys."

Sorcha scurried forward from the door and cleared the couches off herself.

He turned back to Varlys. "Please, have a seat. We have much to discuss."

Chapter 30

Lex stepped out of the shadow of an alley. "Four men at the entrance, two at the rear door." All wearing crimson sashes, but she kept that to herself. The detail would mean nothing to Jairen, Rika, or Dederic. The latter two had volunteered to accompany Jairen and Lex on their scouting expedition to Winniver Mill.

Jairen flinched. "Zek—uhh," he glanced at Dederic's shrouded form, "damn you Alexandra. Some sort of warning would have been nice."

Rika chuckled softly. "You may be rinnaard after all. Nearly invisible when you stalk the shadows."

Her, a spirit walker? She supposed it wasn't impossible. Grans had it in her blood, so Lex may have gotten the trait too. But she had never communed like Jairen could. She dismissed the thought. "There will be time for that later."

"Time for what?" Dederic asked.

Lex flushed, glad for the low light.

"Oh don't mind her. She can't tell the difference between thought and speech sometimes."

Spirits damn the Princeling. "Not that he was wrong, mind. But he could've said it different."

"And how would you rather he said it?"

Jairen barked in laughter before Rika shoved a hand over his mouth.

"Sorry, sorry. My apologies. I just love hearing her inner monologue." His attempted whisper was laughable. The Princeling had clearly never had to hide for fear of death before. "Though, I suppose in her case, it can't really be called an inner monologue, can it?"

Lex's fist flashed out and only barely managed to lower its initial target range to his chest. Would do no one any good to unhinge the Princeling's jaw. At least not before their mission.

Jairen grunted, "What was that for?"

Rika changed the subject. "So how will you get in?"

"Just me?" Lex asked. "I thought we were all going in."

"We are rinnaard. Our entry will pose little trouble." In the half light from a lantern across the street, Lex saw Rika's grin. "Especially not for me. It's a mill."

"What?"

"Water, Alexandra. She communes with water, as I do with air."

"That is not precisely tr—" Dederic started.

"I know," Jairen cut him off. "But it's close enough."

"I am not sure," Dederic—always the teacher—replied.

The man had lectured Princeling almost the entire two day journey to Winniver Mill, and had even attempted to explain communing to Lex. She had actually found some

of the information fascinating—and terrifying. Final Communion, most of all. The idea of forcing communion on someone else—as opposed to inducing it like how Dederic had saved Jairen—made her shiver, and not just the cost. Paying the full cost of a life's communion in one instant. Lex shuddered. But it also explained why Sammaa had gone blind, if not her eerie ability to always look someone in the eyes, despite her sightless stare. Achieving Final Communion with light spirits—Lex couldn't remember what they were called—had stolen the light from her eyes leaving her blind whilst not communing. A once—or she supposed sometimes twice—in a lifetime level of communing. After paying the full cost once, the second time meant death.

"So?" Rika asked. "How will you get in?"

"Oh," Lex shook her head to focus. "I saw a few second story windows. I'll just climb in one of those."

"You're going to," Jairen pointed at the nearly sheer face of the lumber mill's storage warehouse, "climb that?"

Lex blinked. "Yes." She had told him that she was the best climber in Ked's crew, right? "It's what I do. I climb things."

The prince grunted what sounded more skeptical than anything and stood.

"We'll meet you on the inside, then." Rika put a hand on Lex's shoulder. "May the spirits speed you along your path."

The rinnaard, Jairen among them, turned and headed down a side street paralleling the river bank, and hunkered down behind a merchant stall a mere hundred yards from the warehouse before turning to look back at her.

"Oh," Lex said aloud. "I should be climbing. They can get in faster than me." She shook her head, realizing she had thought aloud again.

She took off through the alley, tracing the path she had followed about a quarter hour before, winding through streets not nearly as twisted as those back home in the Fringe, until she made it to the back corner of the warehouse. She shimmied up a gutter pipe, swung one leather-soled foot onto a narrow ledge, and scooted across to a closed window. She tested it. Locked. There were two more windows on the river side of the building, so she slid further along the ledge and peered through the second one. The room beyond was dark. She tried the window and found this one unlocked. She shoved it open with her left hand and then levered herself inside.

She poked her head back out the window and waved toward the merchant stall where Princeling and the others waited. She could just make out Rika's figure as the woman strode to the river and dove in. Lex cringed, waiting for a splash that never came. Rika's form simply disappeared into the water.

Lex turned her attention back to the stall and watched as Jairen and Dederic stood and ran in half crouched toward the warehouse on a straight path to the wall directly beneath Lex's window. As one, they jumped and shifted to mist. Their clouds streaked upward, heading straight for her.

She stumbled back as fog billowed into the room, separated into two swirling vortexes, and formed back into the defined forms of Dederic and the Princeling. Even in the near darkness of the room, Lex could see the wide grin on the latter's face. Despite the initial shock of seeing two clouds of mist streaking up a building at her, she smiled back. It truly had looked impressive.

"It worked," Princeling said and looked to Dederic. "It actually worked."

"Bide." She cursed herself for using one of Jairen's favorite words. "He had never done that before?"

"No, never." Jairen didn't even comment on her spoken thought for once. "Similar things. But never straight up a building. That was," he trailed off. "Damn. What else can I do like that?" He turned to Dederic.

"Lectures later, Princeling." She cringed. She hadn't used her nickname for Jairen around these people yet. He had asked to not tell them his story. Or at least not all of it.

"Princeling? Hold fast. Jairen is a prince?" Dederic said.

Jairen shot a glare at Lex.

"I'll explain later." His voice sounded like weathered and crumbling stone, simultaneously hard and brittle both. She had never heard that edge to his voice.

"Let's go down and find Rika," Lex suggested.

She breathed a sigh of relief when Dederic nodded and Jairen turned to the door.

They hurried through the nondescript second story hallways until they found a staircase leading down to the warehouse floor. They only saw one crimson-sashed guard patrolling on the inside and ducked behind some logs to avoid him.

"I'll find Rika." Dederic communed, shifting to mist that flattened itself low to the ground before slipping away toward the water.

When they could no longer see his mist form, Jairen turned to her and hissed, "Why, in Zekker's name, did you call me Princeling in front of Dederic?"

"It was an accident, Jairen. I'm sorry, spirits damn you. I'm sorry."

The contrition in her voice may have surprised her even more than it did him. And though his eyes had softened at her apology, she could still see anger there. He opened his mouth to respond, but the fight seemed to have left him. He closed his mouth again and just looked at her, his blue-green eyes meeting hers for what could have been a second or an hour.

Footsteps approached, and the moment fled in their wake. Dederic ducked around the logs with Rika close behind. They broke into pairs to search the warehouse for any sign of something that was not as it should be. She and Dederic took the north portion of the building, while Rika and Jairen took the southern half.

Half an hour of dodging the patrolling guard later, they regrouped and shared their findings: nothing. Neither group had noticed anything out of the ordinary. Though Jairen had noted that they had far less lumber than they ought to have had, given that their next shipment was set to leave in less than a week—if they kept to the pattern from the ledger.

They left by the same ways they had entered, Rika slinking off into the water, while Dederic led Lex and Jairen back through the window. Lex didn't bother climbing down the storm drain again, opting to lower herself from the window ledge before falling a short distance and rolling to her feet. Dederic had jumped from the window and communed mid air before solidifying safely on the ground. Jairen, however, communed inside the building and flowed down the building, a vaporous waterfall that pooled into human form on the ground before them.

The three of them hurried back to their campsite where Rika would meet them. Lex led the way through the streets. They could have likely gone the same way Jairen and Dederic had, but with three of them, especially with Lex unable to commune as they

could, she reckoned the longer way the safer option. They made it back to their first meeting place and headed out of town.

Rika awaited their return, already having started a fire. "So, what now?" she asked Lex. Despite Jairen having the initial idea to scout the mill, Lex had formed the detail of the plan.

"I think the only way to get answers is to take the shipment. Given their lack of security inside, I don't think they will have many guards on the caravan."

"I agree," Jairen said. Lex looked at him and he shrugged. "Seems the only course of action."

"And what if something changes between now and then?" Rika asked.

Dederic tilted his head. "What kind of change?"

"Security, shipment size," she shrugged. "That sort of thing."

"We should leave someone here to watch for changes over the next few days, while the rest of us go back and fetch more bodies for this heist."

"We're robbing a caravan, Jairen. Can hardly call that a heist," Lex said.

"Semantics." He waved a hand. "Whatever you want to call it, Alexandra."

"I'll stay," she said by way of reply. "You three go back." She wanted to poke around in there more, anyway. She would take any chance she could get to hurt Lucien's operation. Or the man, himself, preferably.

"You shouldn't stay alone," Jairen protested.

"I've told you," she said. "I can take care of myself."

"I didn't mean it like that." Jairen put his hands up, a pitiful shield against her words. "Just that you can keep a watch rotation with two that you couldn't with one."

"Oh. That made a bit of sense, actually."

Jairen chuckled and heat bloomed in Lex's cheeks, realizing she'd thought aloud again.

Rika cut in. "Then I will stay with her, as well." She stood and motioned at their two tents. "Get some rest," She nodded at Jairen and Dederic. "You'll have to ride hard tomorrow. I'll take first watch."

Chapter 31

"What word have you from your man?" Malkai sat atop the dias, the throne room empty again but for Rico, garbed in his full armor, and Lucien in a brilliant crimson tailed doublet. Malkai had grown tired of being on the back foot with this merchant and had summoned Lucien for this meeting, taking the initiative for himself, this time.

"My king." Lucien's bow, as always, bordered on obsequious. "Unfortunately, I have bad news to report. Our assumption was that your brother would make haste for your mother's land in Timberlan Keep or the surrounding town. Yet, my contact has spent the better part of two weeks searching the town and poking around the keep whenever he could. There has been no sign of the Prince, neither in the inns, nor with the physickers in the surrounding areas."

Malkai sighed. "Do you have any leads?"

"The next closest large holding to his last known position is Eastveil."

"Cici," Malkai said, realization dawning.

"Pardon?" Lucien tilted his head.

"Claudia Calley—Cici—and my brother were," he chuckled at the memory of walking in on them that morning, "close. Her family home is Eastveil, *and* she fled the capital the same day as my father's," he refused to call it a murder, "death."

"I will relay a message to my man to make his way to Eastveil then."

Malkai would send word to his forces at Timberlan, as well. While the information Darkmont provided might be sound, he wouldn't rely on the man, alone—though Malkai's troops would take far longer to mobilize than Lucien's one.

"Now," Lucien stepped forward and Rico shifted his stance accordingly, "about the proposition Lord Eldwin drew up?"

"Your counter offer was too high. We are willing to accept a fifteen percent up-charge on the goods—paid over the next year, but only if you provide their transportation—including the baggage train if we march to battle."

"Not a bad addendum, Your Majesty. But perhaps the throne could compensate the expenses for such an endeavor?"

"Ten percent up-charge if we do. We'll cover the expenses, but you front the fee. Add the sum to whatever we'll owe you for the provisions."

"You'd have made a shrewd businessman, Your Majesty?"

"You'll need an office in the palace, of course, for handling any logistical issues that may arise." Lord Eldwin had guessed that, should Darkmont accept their terms, he'd request something of the sort. Malkai wanted to keep an eye on the merchant, though.

"Perhaps sleeping chambers, as well. In case any emergencies occur after your normal business hours."

Lucien bowed low. "You really have thought of everything, my king."

"Sorcha will be waiting beyond the doors to provide you with the official papers of your residency within the castle, and will show you to your new chambers. You need not live within the castle, as you likely have business to do in the lower city, but I expect you to be readily available when the need arises. Keep me apprised, Darkmont."

"I thank you again, Majesty. You have been most kind to me, and I hope to repay your confidence tenfold."

"See that you do."

Lucien bowed low and turned to leave, but right as he reached the end of the rug, a messenger from the aviary burst through the doors and ran the length of the throne room, only stopping when Rico, hand on the hilt of his sword, barred his path.

The messenger bowed, "Your Majesty," he wheezed, "Au'Dovier invades."

Chapter 32

Jairen and Dederic woke before dawn, ate a cold breakfast, and began their trek back to the Aardenan village, leaving Lex and Rika still asleep in their tents. Walking in silence, the better part of an hour had passed when Dederic finally broached the topic Jairen had expected since Alexandra had called him Princeling the night before.

"Princeling," his adoptive mentor said, inviting Jairen to explain in the silence of an unspoken question.

Would this man have taught Jairen if he knew the truth of Jairen's heritage? "Aye, that's what Alexandra called me."

Again, Dederic kept his silence.

"I am—was—Prince Jairen Miraxes, Second Son of King Dalen Miraxes, brother to new King Malkai, and am likely wanted dead or alive for—" his heart raced, his eyes burned, his breath caught in his chest, choking the words in his throat. Why was this so hard, when he had already told his story to Lex and the other? "Regicide," he finally managed.

This time, Dederic's silence invited no further explanation, though it also seemed to hold no malice, accusation, judgment, nor even sympathy. Rather, the man walked on, stoic in his gait, eyes forward, barely blinking.

"And Madeline?" Dederic asked at last.

Jairen blinked, taken aback by the question. "My mother?"

"Yes. How was she when you left the capital?"

"My mother—" How did Dederic not know about his mother's death? Or maybe more germane to the issue, why did he care? "My mother died some three years back."

Dederic's steps faltered for the space of a breath, but he kept walking as if nothing had happened. "I see."

"Why do you care?" Jairen winced as his words came out with more bite than he intended. "I just mean, why does it matter to someone from such an insular people as yours?"

"Madeline is—was—Aardenan, Jairen."

Jairen shook his head. "My mother's family home is Timberlan Keep."

"That is true enough." Dederic tilted his head in acknowledgment. "But she is also Aardenan." Dederic stopped walking, forcing Jairen to a halt as well. "Her mother's father was exiled from our village. After his death, your grandmother was allowed to rejoin our people, though she had already married your grandfather according to Renmarran tradition. But she and her daughter, Madeline spent summers in our village. Madeline and I grew up together, one summer at a time."

Jairen opened his mouth to speak—his mother was Aardenan. But something in what Dederic said struck him as only half true.

"You could have been my son, you know."

Jairen gaped. "What?"

"I courted your mother when we were—what?—sixteen? She was my oldest friend. The months she spent in the village were my favorite." A slow smile turned his lips up at the edges. "When summer ended and she would leave, I would count down the months, the days remaining until she would return. That summer after our sixteenth birthdays, I tried to court her. I confessed my feelings for her, and I think she felt the same. She certainly didn't spurn my affections." He shrugged. "But when the summer ended and I asked her mother for her hand, as is our custom, your grandmother smiled and said that I was sweet. That she'd relay my request to her husband, because their tradition dictated that he, not she, choose his daughter's groom. Madeline didn't come back the next summer. Or the one after that."

Jairen nodded. Dederic's story fit the timeline that Jairen knew. She had left Timberlan for the capital just after her seventeenth birthday and had been betrothed to his father shortly thereafter. He had known that his mother had been initially reluctant to marry Dalen—then merely a prince—because she had entertained a suitor from a lower station that her father had turned down.

"My grandfather sent her to court to find a husband after she turned seventeen."

"I heard. Back then, Lex's grandmother still made frequent trips from the capital with her children. She brought me news of Madeline's engagement. But no news had reached my ears for nearly six years now." Dederic's smile didn't touch his eyes as he turned to continue their walk.

"I'm sorry you found out this way," was all Jairen could say, following close behind. His mind raced. This man could have been his father. This man should have been his father. All would have been so different. Simpler. Smaller. Less painful if he had grown up among his mother's people. *His* people—after a fashion—he realized. But did he really want that? Would he like who he would have been better than who he actually became? Did he even like himself now? If he hadn't grown up in the castle, he never would have met Cici, never would have met Lex. Why did he think of them together?

"How did she die?"

How did who die? It took him a moment to rein in his thoughts. "A fever took her. Her senses left her, sight first, then speech. She could hardly breathe." He trailed off.

"Barely two weeks between falling ill and passing."

Dederic turned back to Jairen, eyes wide. "Did she ever commune? Did you ever see her commune?"

"No. Commune? She wasn't rinnaard."

"She was, Jairen. She was one of the most talented rinnaard of our age. Lufaarda like us, and eibaarda like Rika. But the more talented we are, the more we must commune. After our first communion, our aardi sort of crave that communed state. If you do not commune, you can fall ill with what we call sumensaardi—lonely soul is how you would translate it. Most rinaard recover, but some talented few grow too sick, too fast."

"So my mother died of this lonely soul?" Jairen's voice quivered. "Because she didn't commune enough?"

"Based on your description, I believe so." He turned to resume their trek once more. "But why would she not have communed? She knew what would happen."

Jairen fell to his knees and wept. Each falling tear shed a little of the weight that he bore. He had prayed to Zekker to end his mother's suffering and blamed himself for her death shortly thereafter. But as the weight of guilt lifted with each tear shed, a new weight settled in its place. Dederic had the right of it. If she knew the consequences of not communing, why hadn't she communed, even briefly, even in secret? The only answer he had fit about as well as a dagger into a sword scabbard—it would go in, but the scabbard deserved a larger blade. Did she not want her blasphemy to be found out? He recalled his father's words. *Jairen, I don't blame you for the ritual going wrong. If anything, it revealed your mother's lies for what they were.*

He didn't know how, but his father had had a hand in his mother's death.

He stood, fists clenched, tears still streaking his face, and strode past Dederic to continue their trek.

#

Smoke from the village's fire pit drifted through the trees just before midday the next morning, reaching Jairen and Dederic ahead of their arrival. They emerged from the trees following a small game trail into the hustle and bustle of the Aardenan's daily chores. Jairen smiled to see that very little had changed in their four day absence. Indeed, perhaps the only difference he noted on brief inspection was at the well. A young girl—perhaps twelve years old—with sandy blond hair frowned in concentration as she communed to fill buckets in Rika's stead.

"Come," Dederic said, "Let us find Sammaa."

The man led the way between the circular wood-and-thatch family homes, past the stone chamber where Dederic and the others had induced Jairen's communion to save

his life, and finally to the longhouse. Sammaa, Grans, and Bozarth sat around the crackling fire, their words indistinct from so far away.

Jairen cleared his throat. "Your pardon, Sammaa."

"Ah Jairen, Dederic, you've returned earlier than we'd have expected," the matriarch said. "But where are Lex and Rika?"

"They're still in Winniver, watching the warehouse we scouted." Dederic explained the peculiar findings.

"And you're back, why?" Sammaa asked.

"Lex wants to take the shipment, I suppose." Grans said.

"Aye." Jairen bobbed his head in acknowledgment. "We," he nodded at Dederic, "are here to ask for a few more people to help us take it. We only saw evidence of a token guard force, but more of us means we have more margin for error."

"Oi," Bozarth said in that strange lilt of his. "Reckon you can count me in boyos. If we're gonna be stealing from that sad excuse of a donkey's hind quarters, you can bet your britches that I'll be there too."

Sammaa and Grans shared a glance, the latter smiling as she shook her head.

"I will assign no person to assist you, though if anyone," she nodded at Bozarth, "else volunteers, I will not stop them from accompanying you."

Over the next few hours, Jairen, Dederic, and—to a lesser extent—Bozarth managed to recruit a hunting party and two younger rinnaard of around Jairen's age. They'd even convinced Sammaa to let them bring ten horses—one each for the party leaving the next morning, and an extra for both Lex and Rika.

The sky had barely even begun graying when Dederic's face loomed above Jairen, waking him too soon from the much needed sleep.

"Up," his teacher said. "Time to go."

Jairen groaned and tried to cover his head with his pillow, but Dederic snatched it from his grip. "Tis a beautiful morning for a ride through the woods." He yanked Jairen's blanket off.

Jairen sat up and glared through his right eye as he tried to rub the sleep from his left. He reckoned he'd never truly understood hatred until that moment.

But then, Bozarth ambled over and offered Jairen a steaming cup. "Grans and Sammaa thought you might like some tea."

Jairen reckoned he'd never truly understood love until that moment. He smiled and took the life-giving nectar from perhaps his new favorite person in all the realms.

After two quick cups of tea—every bit worth the scalded tongue—Jairen and the others set out for Winniver, arriving just before nightfall. They rode into Lex and Rika's campsite and dismounted.

Lex strode up to Jairen, face drawn and grim, lips pressed thin. "They've increased security."

Chapter 33

"Who are they?" Dederic asked from Lex's right.

Lex, Dederic, and Jairen lay prone under some brush across the river from the warehouse and mill they had snuck into several nights back. Where they had found only a handful of guards, crimson sashed and undisciplined, a dozen soldiers in silver crescent livery now patrolled the area surrounding the warehouse.

"La'Lune," Jairen said from Lex's left. "They wear the silver moon of house La'Lune."

"Who are they?" Dederic asked again.

"La'Lune is an Au'Dovien house. Among the most powerful of the Au'Dovien royal court. Each of their soldiers will likely have some capacity with the Will, though my uncle said that Au'Dovien magicks function differently from our—from that of the Renmarran nobility."

"Different how?" Lex asked.

"I don't know, precisely." He relayed what little he knew, reports of fireballs and the like. "Few of our practitioners survive long enough in direct combat to discern more details."

Though their numbers appeared close to even, the La'Lune troops were more heavily armed and armored than what amounted to the Aardenan hunting party that Jairen had brought back. "How many rinnaard did you bring in your group?" Lex asked Dederic.

"All are rinnaard in that they commune, but of different strengths and skills. Though, one has little enough capacity that he may not be useful in that regard. He is an excellent shot with a bow, though."

"There is one more lufaarda, like Jairen and myself. Two eibaarda including Rika and one agenaarda, like Sammaa. Of the others, all but one are stenaarda—ground spirits."

When he didn't continue, Lex asked, "And the last?"

"Boskaarda."

"Tree spirits," Jairen translated. "Boskaarda sort of manipulate branches and roots or, if they're strong, other vegetation. Full communion allows them to sort of become a tree."

"They can do what?"

"I turn to mist, right? Well they meld their bodies into a tree and wield its branches like their own arms," Jairen shrugged—an awkward gesture while lying prone.

"That is a lot to process. How do we use any of that to our advantage? I've never planned a heist like this."

Lex didn't realized she had said it aloud until Jairen nudged her hip with his and said, "What, the great thief, Alexandra, doesn't know how to plan an ambush?"

She kicked him not-quite gently in the leg. "And I suppose you do?"

As it turned out, he did. After they climbed out from under the foliage, Jairen began his explanation.

"Why did the slaver's ambush work so well against us?" he asked Lex.

"They had more people than we did," she said. "But our numbers are pretty even this time."

"That's part of it, I suppose." He shrugged. "But their biggest advantage was surprise."

"Jairen, I think you're doing it wrong if an ambush isn't a surprise. Even I know that much."

"They hit us at a narrow point in the trail where they had cover to shoot from, to hide their true numbers. They hit us right as we rounded a bend in the trees so couldn't see anything ahead of us."

"So your master plan is to hide in the trees and shoot their troops."

"Something like that." The firelight from their camp illuminated his face just in time for Lex to see that infuriating, pretentious, charming half smile of his.

"Damn him," Lex thought aloud on purpose this time, running a finger across a dagger hilts. "Maybe I should cut him."

#

Lex felt like she'd hidden in a lot of bushes and trees over the last few days: scouting the mill, showing the increased security to Dederic and Princeling, and now,

listening for the rattle of the approaching lumber caravan. She and Rika waited together with two other hunters on one side of the road, while Dederic and Jairen, along with two more rinnaard waited on the other. Their remaining force had climbed trees where they waited to pick off as many of the La'Lune soldiers as possible.

The Princeling had seemed anxious about the new guards, all restless energy and none of his normal calm, though she couldn't figure out why. Nor was she even sure that he did feel nervous. Was it in the way his eyes had narrowed when he named them as La'Lune troops? Or maybe the quiet surety that they needed to take the shipment now that Au'Dovier seemed more involved than they ought. Lex didn't know if guarding an inbound shipment was a common practice, but she reckoned that the group selling the goods typically took responsibility for safe delivery.

The orange light of the setting sun had all but faded to gray by the time the bird call sounded from high in a tree several meters up the road. They had chosen to spring the trap just as the lead wagon rounded a bend in the trail and had erected a small barricade blocking the path ahead—just a few logs that would ensure the horses couldn't pass. Jairen had wanted to rig a second barricade to collapse into place behind the last wagon, but they simply hadn't had the time.

Lex strained her ears for some few minutes after that initial bird call warned of the team's approach before she could make out the sound of their progress. Soft at first, the rattle of axles and bouncing wheels grew into their discernible parts, and the first horses rounded the bend.

The first arrow took the driver of the lead wagon in the shoulder, but a second took him in the chest a mere second later, stifling his scream of pain into little more than

a grunt as he slumped from his seat. It took the horses a good thirty feet to realize they had their head and slowed to a stop.

Three more guards fell in the seconds that followed. A quarter of their numbers died before they knew they were under attack. Then Jairen burst from cover, drawing his bronze sword—a gift from Sammaa, he had said—and met blades with the first defender to react. Beside her, Rika emerged, daggers in hand, and Lex followed a step behind.

Lex whirled into motion, slashing out at the first soldier to check her progress. He wielded a spear and shield. He thrust at her face and she stepped to her right to avoid. His shield slammed into her, blocking her thrust at his ribs.

She stumbled back and he swung low. She jumped to avoid the spear and again his shield battered her to the ground, landing on her back, air whooshing from her lungs.

He stood over her, reversed his grip and lunged down, eyes bulging, as she flicked one of the knives from her sleeve at his face. He batted it away before it could hit him, but the damage was done. She just needed the moment of distraction.

She rolled left and spun up to her knees, bringing her right dagger across the back of his right knee. He crumpled and she drove her second dagger home for the killing blow.

She stood and took in the battle. Jairen held two armored men at bay, neither giving, nor taking ground as they matched his faster swordsmanship with two swords to his one. Dederic—she assumed the cloud of mist was Dederic—flitted through the La'Lune ranks, only solidifying his arms long enough to whip his daggers through this man or that. She watched as a young stenaarda boy—perhaps fifteen—fell to a fireball

right as he emerged from the ground, ready to deliver a killing blow from behind one of Jairen's opponents.

Why were there so many soldiers? They had only counted a dozen at any time in the past few days and had not found any camps in the surrounding areas. Where had they come from? Had more arrived while they set their ambush?

Lex flung herself to the ground, narrowly avoiding a gout of flame. She rolled to her feet but couldn't find the source of the fire. She charged the nearest soldier and stabbed his unarmored armpit as he lifted his sword overhead to cleave her in two. She saw an archer taking aim from atop one of the wagons but before Lex could throw one of her knives, an arrow appeared in the man's ribs.

Lex's heart nearly stopped when Jairen cried out in pain. One of his two opponents had made it through his guard and cut a deep gash across Jairen's right bicep. She had barely taken two steps toward the Princeling when he vanished into a cloud of mist and reappeared long enough to cut one of his assailants down from behind. The remaining soldier turned in time to swipe his steel through fog before Jairen's bronze blade poked free from the man's chest.

"Retreat," someone yelled. One soldier after another turned and ran. Lex counted maybe eight or nine that made it into the woods and out of sight. Nearly twenty La'Lune soldiers lay dead or dying, some from sword or dagger wounds, but most to arrows. The archers in the trees had done their jobs well.

Only three of their own numbers had fallen, though Rika had taken a nasty gash to her leg.

"Don't you worry about me," the woman said as she limped to join Lex amongst the bodies. "Just need to get to the river and commune. I'll be right as rain after that," she elbowed Lex in the side. "Get it? Right as rain."

But Lex hadn't really listened. She found Jairen and Dederic standing together, a bloody smear on the former's right arm where he had taken the sword thrust, though communing had left only a thin pink stripe of skin to mark the wound at all.

"Are you well?" Lex asked, still several feet away, but closing fast.

He turned and smiled that stupid, beautiful smile that made her want to cut him, kick him, kiss him. Kiss him? She grabbed his collar and pulled his face down to her height and crushed her lips into his. He tasted of salt and sweat, dirt and even a little blood, but she didn't care. She got lost in him. When he had cried out in pain, she had nearly lost it. Until he had communed. Why in the spirits names had he not communed in the first place? She broke their kiss, reared back, and slapped the dumb look from his face.

"I," she jabbed him in the chest, "am," she jabbed again, "the only one," she punched him in the chest, "who gets to cut you." She stormed off to inspect the wagons.

Why had she done that? Why had she kissed him? That was so stupid. Exiled or not, he was a prince and she was—well—not a princess. No, that didn't even matter. That was not the issue. He was stupid, and dumb, and irritating, and hardheaded, and a good kisser, and—wait a good kisser? She flung open the back hatch of the middle wagon and kicked a crate inside.

The crate clanked. Lumber didn't clank. She pried the top open and peered inside. Swords. A crate full of swords. Bronze and steel alike.

"Rika," she called. "Dederic," then after a second, "Jairen. Come look at this."

Chapter 34

Jairen stood, dumbstruck. What had just happened? His chest heaved, the rush of battle still coursing through his veins. His sternum ached from where Lex had jabbed—and then punched—him, and his cheek recently slapped cheek stung in the cold air. But more than that, the kiss. It just, well, the whole series of events—it was so out of character.

He tilted his head in thought and conceded. No, all of it fit Lex pretty well. Hot one minute, cold the next. And only she could stab him? Aye, that was definitely something Lex would say. But the kiss? Where had that come from? Sure, she blushed when he teased her, he had never gotten a read on her. She just made no damned sense.

Dederic shook Jairen's shoulder, "Jairen?" The man had a wide smile on his face. "About time that happened, eh?"

"Huh?" Jairen asked, too lost in his own head. "What?"

His teacher just laughed.

"Rika, Dederic," Lex's call came from the rear of the small battlefield. "Jairen. Come look at this."

Jairen heard the frown in her voice and followed close on Dederic's heels.

They joined Lex and Rika at the rear of the middle wagon. The back hatch was open, revealing that the pile of lumber rested atop a false bottom. With the hatch closed, it would have looked like a standard wagon load of pine logs. Yet with it open, they saw that the maybe two foot high compartment underneath the wood was filled with crates. One such crate had been pulled halfway out of the wagon and opened.

Jairen's heart sank. "Are those bronze swords?"

"Aye, 'nd steel, too, by the look." Bozarth said from Jairen's left. He hadn't noticed the locksmith approach. The two hadn't always seen eye to eye, but Jairen was glad the man had made it through the battle unscathed, save for a gash across his right thigh and an already swelling eye. "Why's it matter?"

"Could they have been expecting Aardenan opposition?" Jairen asked no one in particular.

"Au'Dovier is far to the south. To my knowledge, we have had no interaction with their peoples," Dederic said.

"Not since the split," Rika amended.

"The split?" Jairen and Lex said in unison. They glanced at one another, but she looked away just as quickly.

"Rika," Dederic's voice had taken on the hard tone that Jairen had begun to associate with mentions of Zekker.

"They have a right to know, Dede," Rika said.

Dede? Since when did Rika call the man Dede?

"They're outsiders," Dederic said. "Enough."

"It has something to do with Zekker," Jairen dodged his teacher's backhand. "Yes, I said his name. You will tell us what you know. What happened? Why is he a spirit traitor?"

Dederic stalked away, but Rika stayed, looking between teacher and student, as if unsure what to say.

Lex filled the silence.

"With our strength at its height,
there came a man with a power so great,
that few could rival his might,
for he could commune with all the eight,
and bind them to his will.

Though blessed with great talent,
he sought ever more strength.
Some found his goals gallant,
and flocked to him at length,
their spirits empty to fill.

The man grew well famed,
and though but an innovator,
spirit incarnate they claimed,
yet others called him traitor,
dissenters he vowed to kill.

Factions split our kin,
war spread across the land,

and the traitors won through sin,
spirits at their command.

And though we lost that way,
we know there will come a day,
when Zekker pays the bill."

Jairen only vaguely realized his mouth hung agape until Lex glared at him, "Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you."

He considered for just a moment what her closing it for him would entail, but decided it wouldn't be as enjoyable as the last time she closed his mouth. He took her warning.

"Where," Rika's voice faltered, "Where did you learn that?"

"Grans used to sing that to me when I was little." She shrugged. "Never knew what it meant, but the rhythm always helped me sleep. Dunno why I thought of it just now."

"Lex, that is the story of Zekker's betrayal of our people," Rika said. "And the faction that split off to follow his teachings."

"And the group that split founded Renmarr?" Jairen asked.

Rika blinked. "No. Well, not completely. Zekker's sons founded Renmarr, but his disciples were discontent with his sons' rule, and split, forming what's now Au'Dovier."

"So that song is some sort of origin story?" Lex gestured at the crate, "What does it have to do with the swords?"

"If Zekker's Will is a derivative of the Aardenan communion, it stands to reason that bronze could affect the Will similarly to its effect on rinnaard, meaning these swords

are meant to combat Renmarrans, not Aardenans." Jairen looked to Rika for confirmation, but the woman's eyes looked distant, deep in thoughts of her own, he assumed.

"But why?" Boz asked. "Why is that wart on a donkey's rear end of a merchant hiding swords in a lumber shipment?"

"My uncle said that Lucien has been making plays for power for years now, but my father turned him down every t—" he looked back to Rika. Jairen had forgotten that he had only told Dederic his identity. He had reacted well due to his ties with Jairen's mother, but would Rika do the same?

"Later," Lex said, holding up a hand to stop Rika's question.

Jairen breathed a sigh of relief. He did not want to have that conversation yet.

"So, you thinking that Lucien's been arming those wankers down south for a while now?" Boz asked.

"I think we have always had less than friendly relations with Au'Dovier—to put it mildly—and I haven't heard any news of them—for what? Nearly five months now?—since I left the city."

"How does this affect your plans for revenge?" Rika asked.

"At the very least, Rika," Jairen said. "It means that I now want to stop Lucien as much as she does."

Lex looked up, locking her green-eyed gaze to his. "What?"

"I helped first out of boredom and curiosity, Alexandra," he winked at the moniker, but she didn't seem amused so he hurried on, "But Renmarr is still my home, and its people are my people, on the run or not. I love my kingdom, even as I want to

change it. I will not stand to see it fall to the likes of Au'Dovier, and certainly not through some up-jumped gangster's treachery. Let us turn this shipment back on our collective enemy."

He smiled as the idea formed before him. They would need troops, though. The closest source was, of course, Timberlan Keep—his mother's home—but Malkai would likely have informants there. His smile faltered as he realized the potential complication with the next option, but what choice did he have? "We ride for Eastveil," he said at last. For Eastveil, for House Calley, and for Cici.

Chapter 35

Malkai sat on the plush window seat in his chambers looking down on the courtyard that served as his honor guard's staging area. Already, six banners marked the sand where the various divisions would array themselves on the morrow. Six hectates of six hectons each, 216 of the most highly trained men and women in the kingdom. How many would survive their battle with Au'Dovien forces? Was he doing the right thing, meeting the invasion head on?

Most of his advisers had argued against the idea. Indeed, only Varlis had openly voiced her approval—and only after a protracted discussion in private, wherein they went over all of the information Malkai and Rico had found on the subject of Au'Dovien magicks. The battle plan they had drawn up—a large scale cavalry charge with a contingent of practitioners skilled in mobile shields, with an infantry charge following close on the cavalry's heels—was relatively simple. Rico claimed that fewer moving pieces meant that fewer things could go wrong. If they could shatter Au'Dovier with one charge, then all these men and women could return to their everyday life, and the economy, as Malkai had argued to Eldwin, would return to normalcy.

A knock sounded and Rico's voice filtered, muffled, from beyond the door. "My king?"

Malkai smiled, the indecision about tomorrow's march diminishing at his friend's presence. "Aye, Rico, I'm awake."

The captain entered, closing the door quietly behind him, but stopped short, just a few paces from his usual couch. "What troubles you, my king?"

"It's just us Rico, for Zekker's sake, drop the formality. I hate having to tell you that every time we're alone."

"Yes, my—Malkai." He cleared his throat. "My apologies. What troubles you, Malkai?"

"What else but tomorrow's march?"

"You wonder if you are making the right decision to meet the invasion head on?"

His friend had always been so perceptive of Malkai's thoughts. "Aye," he said at length. "I worry that I'm marching those men," Malkai gestured toward the window at the courtyard below, "and the army besides, into a trap. Am I doing the right thing? Am I going to prove a bad king?"

Rico closed the distance between them and, after a moment of hesitation, placed his hands on Malkai's shoulders so that they stared one another in the eyes. Goosebumps rose on Malkai's neck at the contact, at the fierce look in Rico's eyes, at the way his brow scrunched as he planned his words. "Malkai, right decision or wrong, the fact that you worry, that you lose sleep over this—over the potential loss of life—is the very fact that makes you a good king. That is one of the reasons I bear this love for you," he cleared his throat, "My king."

Malkai blinked. That was just an expression, yes? Friends love one another, and it is only right for a vassal to love his liege, is it not? Or was using his title an afterthought. He narrowed his eyes and scrutinized his captain's face. Rico's caramel tanned skin and deep brown eyes met Malkai's own and darted away for a second before locking back into place. Malkai's gaze drifted down to Rico's mouth as the captain's tongue darted out, moistening his semi-chapped lips.

"Rico, I—" But Malkai's words cut off when the captain dropped his arms and broke their gaze to look out the window over Malkai's left shoulder.

Why had their broken contact stopped him short? His palms grew moist with sweat, his heart raced. "Rico," he tried again, but the man kept his stare fixed on something beyond the window. Though Malkai noted that the captain's breathing had quickened.

"Rico," Malkai steeled himself and reached out, placing a hand under his captain's chin, pulling it so that they faced one another again. Malkai took half a step forward, leaned halfway in, and Rico returned the gesture, but stopped, their lips an inch from one another. Their breath mingling, shallow and rapid.

"My ki—"

Malkai closed the remaining distance, halting the captain's formal protest as their lips grazed one another before collapsing together in true. Their kiss was tender at first—tentative almost—as they explored whatever this was. It grew fiercer as they pulled each other closer until a tightness in his chest told him that he had forgotten to breathe. They broke apart, Malkai to take a breath, but Rico to pull away.

"Malkai." Rico stiffened into his rigid on-duty stance and took a full step backwards, his face a mask. "My king, I apologize. I have acted improperly. Tis not seemly for a captain to presume such relations with his charge. Should you require my resignation, I will have the paperwork drawn by morning."

"Oh, in Zekker's name, shut up, Rico. You and I both know that I kissed you. You will not resign, man. I forbid it."

"Even so, Your Majesty, such a relationship is not proper, if for no other reason than to ensure the line of succession."

Malkai sobered at that. He hadn't considered the consequences. He had just known beyond a shadow of a doubt, that in that moment, he had needed to kiss him. Yet, Rico was right. If their kiss turned out to be more, did they have a future of any sort? He had to run the kingdom. He had to produce an heir?

There would be time to worry about that later, Rico was here, now, but—

"If that is all, Your Majesty, I will retire for the evening. We have a long march ahead of us tomorrow."

Rico bowed and left, not giving Malkai a chance to protest before he swept from the room.

Malkai sighed, undressed, and climbed into his bed, hoping—but not expecting—to find a few hours of sleep before tomorrow's march.

Chapter 36

"Eastveil, huh?" Lex asked as she sat down next to Jairen near the campfire. They hadn't really talked since she had kissed him after the battle. What had she been thinking, anyway? She didn't even like the Princeling that much. In truth, he infuriated her most of the time. Not that it mattered anymore. Jairen probably despised her now. She had kissed him, slapped him, and then punched him. Not to mention the fact that she had berated him for getting stabbed.

Still, she needed him around for a while. His knowledge of military tactics—from what little Lex had seen—seemed vast. At least compared to her own. Or any one of the insular Aardenan folk. She just didn't want to lose a resource like Jairen when her plans of revenge might hinge on his information. Aye, that was all this was.

"Oh, Alexandra." Jairen startled at her approach. "Aye. Eastveil seems the only logical destination to seek more aid. My brother will have people looking for me at our mother's home in Timberlan Keep. And I am—" she saw his throat rise and fall in the firelight as he swallowed, "well acquainted with the Calley family."

"What is he not saying?" She cringed, realizing she had thought aloud. Again.

"How is it," he said, the ghost of a smile flickering across his lips, "that you speak fully half your thoughts aloud, but I still understand so little about you."

Doing her best to sound indignant, she said, "I do not think out loud that often."

"Do you think that often, though?"

Lex gasped. Of all the rude thi—She saw his smile then. It was a joke? She should punch him, right? That would totally be warranted. Or maybe a mild stabbing. One of her smaller knives perhaps? Now that he could heal himself by communing, what harm could it do, really? She blinked. "Don't change the subject."

"I'll take the distinct lack of retort—and more germane to the issue, the fact that one of your knives isn't protruding from my chest—to mean that you concede the point and actually do speak half of your, albeit few, thoughts aloud." He had turned his face perhaps an inch in her direction and watched her reaction with his narrowed left eye.

She fingered the hilt of the knife strapped to her left forearm with deliberate slowness, meeting his gaze the whole time. "Don't tempt me, Princeling. Answer the question. What are you not saying?"

He sighed. "The Lady Claudia Calley—Cici—and I have," he swallowed again, "how can I put this? A *brief* history."

Her heart stopped, and she wasn't entirely sure she could breathe until, finally finding words after an indefinite length of silence: "What kind of history?"

His silence said all that she needed to hear. She stood and stalked away. Fists clenched at her sides so that she didn't draw a dagger as she broke into the trees at the edge of their campsite. She was only vaguely aware of the remaining Aardenan from their ambush watching her go. But when footsteps scuffed against the dead pine needles

underfoot, she started to run. She didn't want to talk to anyone, especially not the Princeling. Why was she so upset, though? He was perfectly free to rut whoever he liked.

"Alexandra, wait." He called from behind just as she lurched into a run. "Lex, stop."

She didn't stop. Not until mist flowed past her and coalesced into a Jairen-shaped being, and solidified just in time for her to slam into him, knocking both to the ground. A dazed moment later, Lex had scrambled to her feet, but Jairen tugged her by the wrist and spun her to face him.

She could scarcely see his face, but his wide eyes reflected the moonlight.

"Let go of me," she said, her voice low. Her eyes burnt as senseless, traitorous tears welled, threatening to spill.

"Lex," he didn't let go, but his grip wasn't exactly tight, more firm than anything. Solid. "Let me explain."

She sighed and put as much steel into her words as she could. "You have exactly thirty seconds before I draw a knife and cut you."

"Things are different at court, I was a prince—"

"Spirits damn you Jairen, I know you are a prin—"

"Let me finish. Cici was a suitor. And a bold one at that. She snuck into my chambers one night and—"

"You are perfectly free to rut whoever you damn well please," she almost screamed at him, echoing her thoughts from before. "Now let me go."

"It was just one night. I don't think it meant anything."

"Then why did your mood change after deciding we have to go to Eastveil?" She no longer pulled at his grip, but neither did he release it.

"I don't even know that Cici will be there, Lex. But the thought—"

"Excites you? You want to rekindle your old flame?"

He laughed and finally let go of her wrist, turning in a brief circle and running both hands through his overgrown hair. "You have it exactly wrong, Lex," He said, completing his circle and turning back to her. "I'm worried that she will try. I told you, it was one night several months ago. Look, I'm not going to say I wasn't fond of her. I enjoyed her attention, sure enough, but she was just trying to secure a match, in the end."

"Then I suppose you'll enjoy her attention in her castle?"

"I told you, it's not like that," he said, taking a step closer to her. "I don't want anything from her. I don't want one night—what, almost six months ago now?—to define me, to ruin," he paused like he was going to say something and changed his mind, "to ruin my life."

Lex didn't know what to say. Spirits, she didn't even know why she was so angry at the Princeling. Yes, they had kissed. But it had been in the aftermath of a battle and he had just gotten stabbed and she had never been in a battle before and the excitement of the day had been high and—and she shook her head. It didn't mean anything. She certainly hadn't laid claim to him or anything. It was just one kiss. It wasn't even her first kiss. And it clearly hadn't been his first kiss. So nothing special. Their kiss meant nothing.

He stepped forward again so that he stood maybe six inches from her. His breath formed clouds almost a full foot above her head before drifting away on the chill night air.

His hand on her chin sent shivers down to her toes as he tilted her face to look at his. She shouldn't have been able to see anything of his expression from that angle with the moon almost directly behind him, yet she could make out the curve of his jaw and focused glint in his eyes that traced such a perfect path down his nose and to his lips.

She realized that she hadn't breathed since he grabbed her chin. She took a shaky breath, his face following as air filled her lungs and then promptly deserted her once more as his lips met hers. She felt those traitorous tears finally spill from the corners of her closed eyes and she tried to push away. But Jairen had wrapped his arms around her waist and they felt right, so she let them stay.

Jairen broke their kiss and leaned back, hands still on the small of her back. "Oh come now, why the tears? I'm not that bad a kisser, am I?" Oh how she wanted to slap that stupid teasing grin off his face.

She barked a shuddering laugh and he wiped the tears away with his thumb. She reached up and grabbed his lapel, pulling his lips back down to hers, arching up on her toes as she did.

Claudia Calley be damned, this felt right.

Chapter 37

Malkai sighed as he pushed past the tent flaps.

The command tent had all the accoutrements one would expect from a royal study: an elm desk with stacks of parchment detailing the minutest scrap of troop movement, the state of the army's rations, and even to an extent, the disposition of the troops under his command; two plush velvet couches; a too-large feather bed behind a curtain partition; and of course, a massive rectangular table and a map of the countryside to match.

While Malkai appreciated all the amenities his tent offered, he couldn't help but find them surplus to requirements. He would have been fine with a few chairs, a cot, and a table for the map and reports. Malkai turned to say as much to Rico, but the captain wasn't there. His friend had assigned another member of the guard to see to Malkai's safety after that last night in the palace. Malkai almost felt the acute ache of loss, of loneliness as clearly as he had felt his father's death. He shook his head. It was too late to worry about that now. It was done, and he couldn't change it, no matter how much he

wanted to. Not that he regretted kissing Rico, but merely that it had caused this rift, this awkwardness, this separation.

Zekker damn it all, he had to stop thinking about Rico. There were more important issues at hand.

His army was camped perhaps two miles from that of Au'Dovier. Tomorrow's battle would prove decisive, his advisers told him. They meant that his forces would crush the invading army irrevocably, but an uneasy feeling in his gut said otherwise. He needed to talk with someone, talk out what felt wrong about this situation.

"Fetch the captain," he told his guard.

The man scurried off and returned a few moments later—despite the pretense of distance between the two, Rico had insisted that the royal guard tent be located immediately next Malkai's own—with the captain in tow. The other guard—Corbin? Corwen?—hovered near the opening of the tent, obviously trying to decide if he should stay or go. Everyone in the court knew that Rico and Malkai were longtime friends, but the blonde-haired man was still on duty.

"You may go," Malkai dismissed the guard at the exact moment Rico told him to stay.

The guard's face twisted, his brow furrowed and he opened his mouth to speak, but Rico cut him off. "Do as the king says, Corbin. You are dismissed."

Corbin's face relaxed. He saluted first Malkai, then Rico, turned with military precision, leaving King and Captain alone.

"My King, what may I do for you?"

Malkai took two steps toward Rico but drew up short when his friend stiffened into that rigid guard posture that the captain wore like the armor strapped about his body.

Malkai sighed. "Rico, I'm sorry."

"You need not apologize, Your Majesty." Rico's shallow bow appeared little more than a nod of his head, though the motion came from his waist. "I am yours to command at all hours, even when not technically on duty."

"That is not what I—" Malkai sighed again. "Never you mind, then." He balled his fists at his side. "Talk me through what I'm missing, once more, while we still have a chance."

Rico's posture relaxed.

"Sit, Ri-" Malkai cleared his throat and gestured to one of the couches. "Sit, Captain."

Rico took the proffered seat but Malkai paced the length of the tent. They discussed all the potential flaws in tomorrow's battle plan but found no real cause for concern. They outnumbered the Au'Dovien troops two to one and had thrice the cavalry. A simple charge would precede the infantry's advance. Each hectate would bring along one practitioner for shielding and the day would be won. Right?

Malkai finally ceased his pacing and sat on the same couch Rico did—though as far away from the captain as he could. He folded his left leg underneath him and turned to stare at his friend. Were they still friends? Could they be, now that Malkai had complicated matters? He felt a tightness in his chest as he thought about losing even the platonic relationship they had developed since childhood.

"Rico." Malkai barely breathed the word. "I don't want t—"

"Will that be all, Your Majesty?" Rico stood to leave.

"No, damn it." Malkai stood, too. "That will not be all." He took a step forward, cutting the physical distance in half. "Talk to me Rico, please."

"Is that not what we just did, my king?"

Malkai felt the blow as surely as if Rico had punched him, and physically recoiled at the rebuff.

Rico sighed. "What would you like to talk about, Majesty?"

"Drop the formal title first. I'm Malkai in private."

"With all respect, Majesty, this is a tent. In the middle of an army. I would hardly call this private."

Was that all this was? This distance was only born from Rico's perceived lack of privacy? Malkai didn't read any guile in his friend, saw no indication in his dark eyes or sun-kissed face that spoke to another reason. Yet still—

"Your Majesty," Corbin called from beyond the tent flap, as if to emphasize Rico's point. "Lucien Darkmont here to see you."

"Send him in."

Rico took up his preferred close quarters position ahead and to the left of Malkai, right hand resting on the hilt of his sword so that he could draw and strike in the same motion.

"Ahhh, your Majesty," Lucien said as he pushed past the tent flaps. He approached to just inside Rico's sword range and bowed. "Thank you for seeing me today on such short notice. I bring news, you see. A messenger from the castle found me. Word from my man with the Calley's has finally arrived."

Information, rather than provisioning logistics, then. As much as he wanted to end the search for his brother, the coming battle had to take precedence. "Spit it out, man."

"Forgive me, but perhaps you should sit, Your Majesty."

"Say your piece. I have a battle to plan for."

"Very well, your Majesty." Lucien bowed low and continued, "As I said, I've received word from my man up north. He secured a position within House Calley's employ. His missive, well, it brings interesting news."

Despite the battle, his heart surged. "He found Jairen?"

"Not quite, your Majesty. You see," he turned his palms up in a noncommittal shrug, "Claudia Calley is with child."

Surely Malkai hadn't heard that right. Claudia Calley—Cici—pregnant?

"How far along?" Rico asked.

"My man is no nursemaid, you understand," Lucien hedged, "but he estimates perhaps six months." Darkmont stroked his chin as though he had a beard. "It occurs to me, Majesty, that, but no, surely that is mere coincidence, right?"

Malkai's world spun. He crashed back onto the couch as his mind whirled. If Lucien's man was right, the child could very well be Jairen's.

"Pardon my intrusion if I overstep, Your Majesty, but, you know how rumors fly. I couldn't hope but overhear once that some of your councilors have urged you to seek Lady Varlys's hand. Especially now with this child on the way—whether it is your brother's or not—might it not be wise to marry?"

Malkai only just withstood the urge to look at Rico. What would his friend's reaction to that be? Ever the honorable Captain, he'd probably council the same,

regardless of any feelings the man had hidden deep within. Somehow, that thought, that he might never even know how Rico truly felt, brought months of pent up anger, frustration, and betrayal to the surface. "By what right do you counsel me on my private affairs?" But even as he said it, he knew that his marriage could never be just a private matter, not while he was king.

Lucien took a step back at Malkai's ire. "I assure you, Majesty, I did not intend to instruct you. I merely spoke my thoughts aloud. My apologies, but—"

"By all that Zekker blessed, speak in straight lines, man."

"Of course, Your Majesty—" Malkai's glare forced the merchant along, "—My man also sent word that House Calley has called its banners. They muster for war."

"Of course they do. I ordered them to do so. Though, they took their sweet time to do so. The war will be over by the time they arrive." He waved, batting Lucien's words away, wishing his worries dispelled so easily.

"On the contrary, Your Majesty. He claims it's larger than the token force required to answer your call."

"You think they have other motives?" Rico asked.

"Yes Captain. If my man is correct and the pregnancy matches the timeline of Jairen's flight, then might it be possible Eastveil marches on the capital."

"But what would they gain? They'd be slaughtered."

"Not if this battle tomorrow goes poorly." The merchant's face lit up. "It strikes me as strange timing, to say the least. If Miss Calley is with Jairen's child, and, with Jairen wanted for regicide, would the child not lack upward mobility?"

"Yes, I understand the ramifications, Darkmont." Malkai sighed. "What is your point?"

"My point, your Majesty, is that the baby sits at the heart of the issue. Were there no baby to worry about, would the threat not disappear? Would that, then, not leave you free to pursue," Lucien's eyes shifted to Rico, "matters of the heart?"

Chapter 38

In the days since the ambush, Jairen's world narrowed to the trail ahead and the pine trees on either side, his party moving at a snail's pace. He pushed the group as fast as the three wagons of weapons would allow. Still, it took nearly three days to cover the distance that his mounted troops—could he call a handful of hunters troops?—less than a day to traverse.

Lex swung up into the driver's seat of the lead wagon and plopped down next to Jairen, making his heart beat just a touch faster.

"How much farther, do you think?"

Despite the size of the seat, she sat close enough to him—almost touching—that he could feel her body heat. The extra warmth felt nice in the chill autumn air this far north, and Jairen had to restrain the urge to scoot closer or—Zekker, no Spirits forbid—put an arm around her to draw her in. He wasn't positive that she would stab him at such a public display of affection, but he definitely wouldn't put it past her either. Besides, keeping two hands on the reins was probably safer.

"Hard to say. All these trees look the same. These wagons are so much slower than horseback. A few more hours." He glanced skyward to look at the sun's position.

"Somewhere around dusk, I'd guess?"

"If I never see another wagon," she left the rest unsaid.

"I know what you mean. This is even slower than dragging the cart north. At least we set the ambush this time."

She punched him lightly on the arm and then—to his pleasure—leaned into him.

He held his breath and, with the utmost caution, put his right arm around her, reins be damned. She tensed at first, but then relaxed almost as quickly.

"Do you regret it?"

He blinked. "Regret what?"

"All of it. The ambush, running north, your father?"

Where was this coming from? It was so unlike Lex to ask that sort of question, much less worry about it at all. Wasn't it? He had begun to suspect that her particular proclivity for all things stabby was just a mask she wore to make up for her entirely non-threatening stature. Yet even her slips usually preceded at least the threat of stabbing.

"All of it, no. I regret killing my father, of course. Even if he could be a right prick. He wasn't always like that, you know. When my mother still lived, he was actually quite pleasant most of the time." He swallowed twice before continuing. "So yes, I regret my father. But none of what came next would have happened if I hadn't. This has been an adventure, to say the least. And besides," he swallowed again, "I wouldn't have met you." He winced at his own words. Malkai would have given him so much grief if he had heard Jairen say that. He frowned as he wondered how Malkai's rule was going. He had heard

so little news from the capital. But he suspected that would change when they reached Eastveil.

"I think I just wretched a bit," Rika said, riding up alongside their wagon, even with the driver's seat.

"Honestly, I did too," Lex said, pretending to push Jairen away. "That is the grossest thing you have ever said. I'm sure of it. Not even the grossest that I have heard you say. But, without a doubt, the grossest you have ever said in your life."

Jairen chuckled at the probable truth in that statement. "You asked the question, Alexandra." He winked down at her as he placed the emphasis on her name.

True to form, she elbowed him in the ribs. But he smiled and she didn't pull away.

"Ahh young love," Dederic said, pulling his horse to the other side of the cart's driver's seat.

"You're lucky her arm is pinned, Dederic. She *probably* can't reach her knife right now." Jairen glanced at his teacher.

"I do have other knives, you know."

"It's true," Rika confirmed. "I share a tent with her. The pile of blades she removes before bed is truly startling."

"And don't forget it." Lex leaned forward, ensuring the full force of her not-at-all comical glare bore into Dederic.

"Anyway," Dederic cleared his throat. "I rode ahead. The way seems clear. I estimate two hours before we arrive."

"Well and good." Jairen said, and sighed. "I don't know how much more of this my arse can handle."

Dederic chuckled. "Well worth it, I think. We won a great victory, and claimed valuable spoils, too."

"Great victory and valuable spoils?" Rika asked. "I say this as your friend: You will never make it as a bard."

Despite the levity, Jairen couldn't help but wonder. Was it a great victory? He did feel that the information, if not the armaments, would prove valuable. He just hoped that the lives saved with that information would outweigh those lost in the ambush, and the coming engagements.

He wouldn't ask the Aardenan people to follow him into war, despite the surprising boon they had proved during the attack on Lucien's caravan. Yet, he suspected that Dederic, and perhaps Rika, would join him. And Lex. He smiled as he recalled the chain of events that had led him to this point. Who would have thought that he'd become the de facto leader of a small company of fighters? Still, a small band of hunters didn't quite meet his childhood fantasies. But if all went well, perhaps that would change.

Not that he had done any of this just to lead troops into battle. He merely played with the cards life had dealt him. The Aardenan people just happened to be one of his cards. He wouldn't even ask for volunteers. But if any did offer, well, that would just be a boon. Aye, he would stop at the village and distribute any of the bronze weapons that the Aardenan desired, and then he would continue on with anyone who wished to follow.

To Eastveil, and all that would entail.

#

Jairen steered the lead wagon off the main road and down what amounted to little more than a trail. He sat forward in his seat and tightened his grip on the reins. Though

wide enough for the wagon to pass through, a steep drop into a small creek traced the right edge of the path for nearly a hundred yards. And while the drop to the creek-bed likely wouldn't prove fatal for him—only about fifteen feet from top to bottom—not only would the fall injure the horses, but it would also mean losing a full third of their shipment to the creek.

He wished that Lex was still with him, and had felt strangely alone when she had left his side to steer one of the other wagons. The Aardenan were good at a great many things, but had only rarely driven wagons. And while several had taken shifts steering during their trek back to the village, Lex and Boz had decided to drive the second and third teams themselves.

They made only slow progress along the path as the wagons threaded their way through. The sun had nearly completed its path by the time Jairen pulled his wagon into the Aardenan village. Someone must have noticed their approach and told Sammaa, for she awaited their party in the open space around the central fire pit.

"Welcome home, Rinnaard," Sammaa said as Jairen hopped from the driver's seat.

He put two hands on the small of his back and leaned backwards, stretching the stiffness out of his muscles. "It is good to be back, Sammaa."

"I trust your mission was a success?"

"Aye, Sammaa. It was." Dederic swung down from his mount. "Young Jairen here knows how to plan an ambush, to be certain." The man clapped Jairen on the back before leading his horse.

Lex's wagon rattled to a stop next to Jairen's and she jumped down. "Have you told her what we brought back?" Then she turned you the matriarch and said, "Oh, uhh hello Sammaa."

The old woman chuckled. "Hello child. Welcome home. But no, he has not told me. What is in the wagons? All I see is lumber."

Lex and Jairen glanced at each other, apparently Lex's thoughts mirrored his own. How could Sammaa's blind eyes see the lumber at all?

"Perhaps I should show you." Jairen motioned for Sammaa to follow and lead the way to the back of the wagon. He opened the smuggler's compartment and dragged a crate of swords out, prying it open as he did.

"Oh," Sammaa said. "Oh, I see." And by the tone in her voice, Jairen wagered she actually did understand at least a portion of the significance. "Bronze and steel, alike."

"Sammaa, I think it is time we heard an explanation of Zekker's betrayal. Lex remembered a song," he nodded toward Lex who took his cue and sang.

Jairen had never heard her sing before—after the battle, Lex had merely recited the lyrics in rhythm—but she had a lovely and rich mezzo-soprano. He'd heard better performers to be sure, but he hadn't expected anything like she'd produced.

"What?" Lex demanded when she had finished. "Shut it before I shut it for you." But the barb of her threat withered and died as blush blossomed on her cheeks.

Jairen felt his heart race, a light fluttering in his belly, and only just stymied the urge to kiss her right then and there. He would have liked nothing more, in truth. She could shut his mouth any way sh—No. This was neither the time nor place. So with no small amount of effort, he closed his mouth and swallowed once before speaking. "We

need to know what he did. We need to understand the true nature of Zekker's Will, not just what the Zekkites teach in the capital. And we need to know more about Au'Dovier's magic, as well."

"We do not share our secrets with outsiders, Jairen. Lex, at least, is blood."

"Apparently, so am I. Not your blood, but my grandmother came from here. Dederic said my mother used to spend her summers here as a girl. Until her father arranged for her place in court, where she married my father."

"Who are you, really, my child?"

"I am Jairen Miraxes, Second Son of Dalen and Madeline."

Jairen expected—well, some sort of reaction. Everyone else who had learned of his parentage—from Boz to Lex, Grans to Dederic—had all reacted with some sort of explosive emotion, be it panic, fear, startled joy, or in Boz's case, greed. But Sammaa only pursed her lips and nodded twice.

"That explains a great many things." She smiled. "Madeline was like a daughter to me, you know. I never had children, myself, for all Aardenan are my children, but if I'd had a daughter, I would have liked for her to be like your mother."

Sammaa turned and walked away. Jairen and Lex looked at each other and then followed her into the stone building and down into the chamber where he'd woken up all those months ago.

The circular room, lit by only eight torches in wall sconces, smelled of dust and smoke. The stone slab on which Dederic had apparently induced Jairen's communion stood in the center of the room, like some sacred altar to the spirits.

Sammaa sat on it.

"First, you must swear on your souls that you will never reveal this information to an outsider. It is part of our sacred and secret history." Somehow, she managed to look down at them, even though she sat several inches below even Lex's eye level.

They acquiesced and Sammaa began. "Zekker was one of our brightest, most talented stridaard. He could commune with fully half of the eight aarda. But he wanted more power. He disappeared from the village for months, and when he came back, he demonstrated a new power. From what our elders at the time could tell, he had figured out how to leash the aarda to his will. Rather than achieving and sharing in the aarda's power, he forced them to do his bidding, and took on none of the consequences—or I should say, none of the same—consequences that we who commune face."

"And that is what became the Will?" Jairen asked? It wasn't exactly antithetical to the Zekkites' teachings. They spoke of a time spent in solitude and philosophic contemplations wherein Zekker grew spiritually until he was able to harness the energy around him and bend it to his will—hence the magick's name.

"Aye, child. Zekker enslaved the aarda by forcing the eight into his aardi, but contained their essence rather than letting them permeate his body and soul." Sammaa hung her head before continuing. "Eventually, he lost the ability to separate the different aspects of the eight within him and their powers blended into what you now recognize as the Will."

"So where did "Au'Dovier's magic come from?" Lex asked.

"It stems fr—" footsteps from the stairway cut her off.

"Sammaa. Hunters return with news." Jairen recognized the youth as one of the archers from his ambush party—Uvard was it? The boy was perhaps fifteen, with a long

queue of hair not unlike Dederic's hanging in a braid almost to mid back. "Sammaa, please come quickly."

The matriarch stood and strode from the room with purpose, Jairen and Lex close on her heels.

Jairen could only describe the scene that greeted them as they emerged from the building as chaos. Villagers bustled around doing Zekk—Spirits—only knew what. A group of fur-clad Aadenan hunters clustered around the wounded body of a middle-aged woman who lay on her side with two arrows protruding from her back. One jammed into her shoulder blade, while the other had passed through and stuck out of her belly. Even from a distance, Jairen could tell that the arrow head was bronze.

"What happened?" The kindly matron's entire persona had changed, and Jairen understood why she was their leader. The fire in her voice, told of the fierce love she had for her people.

"Our hunting party came across a company of maybe two hundred soldiers camped about four miles away," One of the hunters who knelt at the dying woman's side spoke. "We turned to retreat home, but we ran into a scouting party on the way. They shot Mora," he nodded at the woman, "before we had any warning at all. We returned fire and killed two of their three, but the third escaped back toward their main force."

"And their sigils?" Jairen asked but was met with blank-faced silence. "What were they wearing? Did they have a design on their tunics?"

"Aye," another man said. "A silver crescent moon."

"La'Lune troops. The same ones that guarded the shipment we stole," Jairen said.

"Only three or four of them escaped though." Lex looked at Jairen. "Could they have had reserve forces nearby?"

"Doesn't matter now." He turned back toward the hunters. "Did they have cavalry? Or just infantry? How many horses did they have?"

"About twenty."

Jairen turned away and put his hand to his chin as he thought through their options. Twenty horses meant no true cavalry. Scouts and officers will be mounted but no one else. Being armed with bronze could mean that they were after the Aardenan, or it could just be a coincidence. But if they were headed toward the village and armed with bronze, even if they weren't after the Aardenan specifically, they would still pose a major problem for the village. The villagers barely numbered two hundred with their entire population—which included non-combatants. Their magic could prove a small advantage in combat, but if even half of the La'Lune forces was gifted, that would offset what small advantage they had.

"Pack your things, my people," Sammaa said, her voice carrying across the whole central area of the village, sure and calm in her instructions. "Pack only the necessities—travel and hunting gear, whatever food and water you can carry, any small items of importance. We must flee the village for a time." She raised her hands to silence the few who had begun to protest. "This departure is not permanent, my people. Trust in your Sammaa when I tell you that we will return. But even with the aarda to guide us, we have not the strength to fight this foe. We will flee for now, but our home is not lost for good. Go now, and make preparations. We leave in one hour."

"Where will we go?" one villager called.

Jairen saw the shadow of doubt cross Sammaa's, the first sign of worry. She didn't know. She was making it up as she went along, wasn't she?

"To Eastveil." Jairen stepped forward. "I have a friend there," he glanced over his right shoulder at Lex, but her face betrayed nothing. "They will take us in. It is only about two day's journey. If we press hard through the night, we may yet out pace these soldiers. Armies take time to mobilize." But so do villages. He wasn't sure that Cici's mother would take them in, not after all of his crimes. But risking Timberlan was out of the question, with a small army between them and the keep. The only hope of sanctuary that he could come up with lay behind Eastveil's walls.

Chapter 39

"You cannot honestly expect me to go along with this," Rico shot to his feet and started pacing the length of Malkai's command tent. "How can you be okay with this?"

"I do not like it any more than you," Malkai said, trying to keep his tone calm. "But I—"

"But nothing, Majesty," Rico threw his arms up in the air, "If you don't like it, then don't do it. It's as simple as that."

Malkai clenched his jaw and spoke slowly between his teeth, "I haven't even decided to do it, yet."

"The fact that you're even considering it means you are not the man that I lo—" he cleared his throat, "Not the king that I love serving."

Malkai's jumped at Rico's near admission. Did Rico love him? Did he love Rico? Friends for life, certainly. That inspired love, true. But was there more to it than that? He decided to gamble. "Rico, don't you see?" Malkai swallowed once. Twice. "I'd be doing this for us."

"There is no us," Rico veritably growled. "Not now, and not ever. Certainly not if you go through with Darkmont's plan. Poisoning an innocent girl just to ensure that her child doesn't one day pose a threat to your rule? For Zekker's sake, the man is nothing more than a well dressed criminal."

Not now, and not ever.

Malkai clenched his fist, "Rico—"

The captain stiffened and saluted, all crisp precision, "If that will be all, Majesty, I have troops to prepare for the morrow." He didn't wait to be dismissed. He turned on his heel and left the tent, left Malkai alone, mouth agape, searching for words that wouldn't come.

What Malkai had said was true. He hadn't decided to go through with Lucien's plan. He saw the value in it. Zekker knew, he saw the logic behind it—cold and heartless as it was. And he didn't even know half of the situation. This news—it would jeopardize everything: his rule, certainly; his life, possibly; his ability to have a relationship with Rico, undoubtedly. Yet, if he cut out the threat before it came to fruition? He might avert the first two, but what about Rico? Rico likely wouldn't forgive him. Damn the man, he had always been too noble for his own good. Even as kids. But this, to give Lucien the okay. If he couldn't have Rico either way, was saving his rule, was saving his own life—even at the expense of another—not a justifiable decision?

He flopped down on a couch and shook his head. Had he really fallen so far? He knew how his father would have handled this. Dalen had been a good king, but a bad man. Was it possible to be good in both regards? He wanted to be a good man, but needed to be a good king. He wanted to be the type of man that Rico could follow, could love.

Even if he couldn't be with Rico, could he stand to disappoint the man so thoroughly?
Malkai wasn't sure.

He called to an attendant stationed just outside his tent, "Send for Lucien Darkmont."

#

Malkai sat atop his horse on a hill overlooking the valley that would become their battlefield. The sky grew steadily lighter, the dark of night fading into the gray area before dawn, while the field below grew darker as the opposing armies filed troops in, assembling their ranks for the battle to come.

From the rise, Malkai could tell the reports appeared true. With barely over half of his troops assembled, his forces already matched those of Au'Dovier almost to the man. As the sheer magnitude of his advantage in manpower took shape, giving form to the numbers he had combed over on parchment, the sinking feeling that something was amiss returned. He had half a mind to sound the retreat now, to return to the capital and prepare for a siege, despite his councilor's wishes. Even Varlys, who had once believed as he did, now claimed that victory was all but assured. This, coming from the woman whose father had literally written books on military tactics, who had taught that victory was never assured and that one should always plan for victory but prepare for defeat.

Perhaps Malkai was just nervous. This was his first battle, after all. And though he would likely not see combat himself—no need to risk the king for such an easy victory, his advisers had claimed—the fact that he was in command, that win or lose, all the lives lost in today's altercation would be on his head, that was enough to give any man pause.

"Majesty," Varlys said as she trotted her horse up to Malkai's left. "We're all but assembled."

"And so we are."

"Majesty," she said again, "Victory will be ours."

"So everyone keeps assuring me."

"Shall we sound the call?"

Malkai's had split his forces into three units of infantry arrayed across the battlefield, rank after rank deep. From his vantage on the hill, they formed nearly perfect blocks—sixty-six rows of sixty-six men—with a fourth group in reserve spread out to reinforce wherever necessary. Nearly three thousand units of cavalry split evenly on each flank prepared to charge.

Au'Dovier's troops had arranged themselves similarly, though with approximately half the troops Malkai had at his disposal. *Disposal*. What an awful word.

He didn't want to waste a single soldier's life. Malkai swallowed, trying to force the uneasiness away. He turned and grabbed the horn from its spot secured to his saddle and brought it to his lips. Orders in the heat of battle would be relayed through a series of horn blasts by his various commanders and mirrored by a series of colored banners, but the initial command would necessarily come from him. If he blew this horn, there would be no going back. It seemed wrong to order so many to their deaths with a single blast of the horn.

There would be no grand speech like in the theater productions of past glories, no defiant charge against an invincible foe, no odds stacked against him. No, the odds were

in his favor, Au'Dovier faced those unassailable numbers. Did that make them the heroes and him the villain?

He set his shoulders, rising to his full height in the saddle, inhaled, and blasted one long, sonorous tone that seemed to carry through the air, float on the wind, and reverberate around the valley. At first, he saw no recognition from his troops. Then, all at once, a war-cry twenty thousand strong rose and the cavalry spurred their horses forward, accelerating from trot to gallop as they crossed the field. Halfway to the enemy lines, Au'Dovier's archers loosed their first volley. Renmarran cavalry, each in heavy armor, raised their shields overhead to meet the deadly missiles, but a great many fell, man and horse alike. The survivors lowered their lances as the Dovien infantry locked shields and braced their pikes for impact.

A tightness in Malkai's chest reminded him to breathe just as the first rider hit the front ranks. Then the rest of the mounted soldiers tore through the rows and rows of infantry cutting a deep gash from just right of center, pushing left. A second horn sounded from his generals in the field, sending the second cavalry charge into motion, this one aimed to the left of the now crumbling center.

Another volley of arrows loosed and Malkai cringed as yet more fell beneath fletched death. But still his cavalry pressed on, hitting the line just as the first charge extricated itself from the enemy formation and, job done, began their retreat.

A third horn sounded and his infantry advanced at a jog, leaving just a token force of rearguard soldiers to guard their camp and reinforce where necessary.

"It looks like a rout."

Malkai had to admit to the truth in Varlys's words. Her last minute idea to break the cavalry into two charges had worked perfectly. The timing of the first breaking away just as the second engaged was flawless. The fluidity of troop movements like poetry from his vantage on the hill. Any moment, the Au'Dovien army should call for a retreat. Their lines were broken, a quarter of their troops already dispatched.

As Malkai watched, the remaining archers launched another volley of arrows into his infantry's advance. More men fell than in the initial two charges. A second volley landed on the heels of the first, raining death on his men. The Will could easily deflect arrows. Why were the practitioners not shielding his troops? He had expected some losses, coverage wasn't perfect for most practitioners, but far more of his troops fell than should have. Fully a fifth of their numbers lay dead as the survivors turned their jog into a sprint to close the last fifty feet between them and the disoriented Au'Dovien ranks.

Malkai's breath caught in his chest, and his heart nearly stopped as he realized that there was a pattern to the Dovien disarray. The lines bowed and retreated, drawing his forces into semi-circular fields of fire. And indeed, just before contact, two out of every five men dropped to their knees, shields slamming into the ground, protecting low as goutts of flame shot from behind them, blasting over their heads and into Malkai's infantry. Screams erupted from his men as hundreds ignited. The burning men fell backwards, flailing away from the inferno and into their comrades, spreading the fire to countless others.

He had been right. He had known he lacked some vital piece of information. This is what he had been missing. He had read for days, weeks, scouring any scrap of

information about Au'Dovien magic. Yet he had failed to identify this advantage. And why had his practitioners failed to guard against the volleys shot at his infantry?

His troops were being burned to death, decimated as they advanced, fully a third now lay dead or dying.

"Sound the retreat."

He glanced sideways at Varlys who sat, mouth agape as wispy strands of her flame-red hair blew about in the wind. Tears streaked her cheeks as she watched their men die in droves.

He looked right and saw Rico in a similar state, eyes wide. Malkai could all but read the fear, the guilt, etched into his face. He hadn't picked up on the missing information either.

Malkai snatched the horn from Varlys's trembling hands and blew three short blasts followed by one long note, signalling their retreat. All about him, camp hands, squires, servants, even some nobles began breaking down what parts of camp they could. His men on the field below turned and ran only to be cut down by more goutts of fire and more arrows shot at their backs as they fled. Field commanders rode their horses around issuing orders to form up and retreat as a group. Few listened.

The Au'Dovien troops did not give chase, however. Instead, they cheered and jeered as the once superior force tucked tail.

Malkai clenched the reins hard in his hands, his knuckles turning white, and turned his horse to make for home. He could only hope that pockets of resistance would slow the invader's advance long enough for the remainder of his army to regroup, and perhaps receive reinforcements from the few noble houses that had not yet arrived by the

time he had marched to this debacle. His stomach turned sour, bile rose in his throat, his eyes burned with unshed tears, and an ache in his head pulsed in time with his heartbeat as he rode slump-shouldered through camp. He wanted to cry, to yell, to punch something or someone. He wanted to *be* punched for his lack of foresight. Thousands of deaths weighed on his conscience.

His army—or what was left of it—trickled in over the next two hours as they struck camp and headed for the safety of the capital. But something told him that the walls might not prove any more a boon than greater numbers had today.

Chapter 40

Lex rode with Sammaa and Jairen in the lead wagon on the way out of town. She knew that Jairen had set their pace taking the villagers on foot into account, but watching the trees crawl past set her teeth grinding.

Jairen believed it unlikely that they would force a march through the narrow pass at night. She knew her night vision was likely better than the average soldier's in the Lunean ranks. She had always seen well at night, but over the last couple of months, her vision seemed to have improved. Yet, it unnerved her to see exactly how slow their band of refugees moved. They didn't eat the distance, no, they merely sampled—tasted—at leisure, with no sense of urgency to speak of.

"No sign of pursuit yet," Dederic said, pulling his horse up alongside Sammaa who sat to Jairen's right. Even in the low light, Lex could tell he was tired. His drawn face looked haggard, with bags under each eye, and a general weariness about him. He had spent much of the last week on horseback, or at least traveling. And just as their trip was set to come to an end, the whole Spirits be damned village had to evacuate. To make

matters worse, he and Rika had been riding back and forth from the end of the refugee train to scout a mile or so back for the last couple of hours.

"It is too soon for them to be following in force, in any case," Jairen said as he slapped the reins to urge the tired horses on. "Even if they began mobilizing the moment the scout returned, everything I have ever read indicates that it takes almost as much time to break a camp of that size as it did to evacuate the village. They likely won't have even made it to the village yet."

How did he sound so sure? He had told Lex that the majority of his instruction had been theoretical, most of it not even relating to combat. But then, his ambush plan had worked. Maybe he knew more than he had let on? She hoped that was the case. But something seemed different about the Princeling. Was it just the worry of showing up unannounced on his former lover's gate that set him on edge?

She glanced sideways at Jairen who kept his slitted eyes on the road. She could see the tension in his jaw and she realized that he, too, had his teeth clenched. He probably didn't like the pace they'd set either.

She reached out with her right hand and touched his left leg, tentative. Initiating a kiss in the aftermath of a fight was one thing. And then again in the forest that night... But this was different, intimate. More intimate than she had ever been with anyone. Sad, she thought, that a simple touch was the most romantic gesture she had ever made.

He didn't flinch, not exactly. But he tensed for a moment. He glanced at her and their eyes met for the barest of seconds, making her stomach do flips in her belly, then he relaxed into her touch. She scooted closer on the bench seat, reveling in his warmth. She didn't quite lean into him, but their shoulders—or rather, her shoulder and his

bicep—bumped together every time the wagon hit a divot in the road. Each new contact sent goosebumps down the length of her arm until finally, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close.

#

Lex woke in the graying light of pre-dawn with Jairen's arm still wrapped around her. She didn't know how long it had been since she fell asleep—she had lost track of time with no sunlight to mark its passage.

"Good morning, Alexandra."

Jairen's half smile still made her want to slap him. Or kiss him. Or both. The two weren't mutually exclusive. She'd already proved that much.

"Why are we stopped?" Lex asked.

They had pulled off the road by several hundred feet and came to a stop in a clearing with a stream. Some of the villagers lay in heaps around the field. A number gathered at the edge of the water, drinking their fill and passing around rations. Several of the horses grazed, tethered together.

"Just a short break," Jairen said, removing his arm from her shoulders.

She felt the lack of comfort it provided like nudity in a crowd, like working a job without her knives.

"They're tired, and the horses need a rest," he explained.

"So do you, Princeling."

"I'll be fine." He shooed the issue away like a bug.

She stood to her full height. "The bags under your eyes have bags of their own, Jairen. Get some sleep. I'll keep an eye out for trouble and wake you in a couple of hours."

Lex made a circuit of the clearing, and eventually found Sammaa and Grans sitting together on the small stream's bank.

"I don't like this." Sammaa looked with sightless eyes on her younger sister's aged face and gave a humorless smile.

"I know," Grans said. "To leave your home after so long must be difficult. But perhaps, in a few months we will return."

"I have always envied you your optimism, you know."

Grans reached out and touched Sammaa's arm. "It is a decision, my sister. I have seen too much pain to wallow in grief. Don't let despair mire you."

"Aren't I supposed to be the wise elder sister?"

Grans smiled and said, "You must choose to believe everything will turn out well. You'll be happier for it."

"Until it doesn't turn out well and you end up more depressed than if you had expected the worst." Lex said. Spirits—but she was a ray of sunshine.

"That is true enough, my child," Grans said, smiling up at Lex with her gray-green eyes. "But one should not just blindly hope all will be well. One must plan for the worst, as well."

"And what if young Jairen's friend at Eastveil doesn't let us in?" Sammaa asked. "What if we arrive at all haste, soldiers nipping at our heels, only to find the castle closed to us?"

"I didn't say that *I* had made other plans." Grans chuckled. "You're the Sammaa," she nudged her older sister, "And Jairen's the one with the idea."

Oh spirits protect them. Lex laughed, all nerves and no humor. "That is not at all an inspiring thought."

"You seem to have taken to our wayward prince quite well, though, Sweetling."

Heat blossomed in Lex cheeks and she struggled to find the right words—any words, actually. How could Grans say that? Mind, it was true, but Spirits, Grans. What was she thinking? Lex spluttered for a few seconds until Sammaa saved her.

"Oh come, sister. She doesn't have to believe in his leadership abilities to enjoy his company."

It wasn't that she didn't believe in his abilities, it was just that—

"And besides," Sammaa continued, a wicked smile spreading across the blind woman's face, "Love is a fickle thing."

"Aye it is." Lex said, vindicated. "Love is compl—" Oh Spirits. "Wait, love? No that's not—This isn't—Spirits take you both." She walked away from the crones. Old age had addled their wits. Senile. Aye, they had grown senile.

She stalked back to the wagons. It was the farthest she could distance herself from the two laughing women, and had absolutely nothing to do with the fact that Jairen lay napping, sprawled across one of the bench seats. Nothing at all.

Yet, she had to admit that the Princeling did look peaceful, sprawled out as he was, one leg hanging off the bench, bracing him against rolling off the narrow shelf. She closed her eyes and recalled the warmth his arm had brought her during their march the previous night and wondered how it would feel to lay in his arms all night, just enjoying

his body heat, his company, the protection that his arms br—no. She didn't need the Princeling's protection. Not even his body heat. She was strong and warm and didn't need him or his company. But still, that arm had been ni—

Galloping hoof-beats shook her clear of that line of thought and she turned to see Dederic riding full tilt.

She turned back to the Princeling, sighed, and shook him awake, wishing that he'd had more than two hours to sleep.

"Hmm?" He opened bloodshot eyes. "Morning already? Where's my tea?"

"Shut up you pampered fool." Lex punched him in the arm. "Look. Dederic's riding hard for us."

Jairen shot up, coming fully awake. "Pack up and prepare to move," he shouted, his voice taking on an edge of confidence and purpose she had only glimpsed in the prince before. "We may have company soon."

All about him, the Aardenan people sprung to action. He wasn't their leader. Sammaa was. Yet, his presence, his baring, spirits, just his tone of voice made people want to listen to this boy who had scarcely seen eighteen years. For the first time, she truly understood the prince's displeasure with the lot he had been given—destined to be nothing more than an adviser for his brother's rule. He would've been wasted in such a role.

This boy, this man, this prince... he was a leader.

And she would follow him anywhere.

#

The clatter of wagon wheels and the stomp of horse hooves swallowed Lex's world once more, her vision narrowed to the trail ahead, barely noticing thinning evergreens that passed them by. She sat, again, at Jairen's left side, Sammaa on his right, as he drove the lead wagon onward at a harsh pace.

Dederic had seen a scouting party perhaps five miles back and, while he did not believe they had seen him, their proximity meant that the main body of the troops would not be far behind. Jairen had estimated that only ten miles separated the troops from the refugee train, meaning the troops had not waited until daybreak to give chase.

Despite taking nearly two hours to leave the village the night before—had it really only been one night?—the Aardenan refugees had the wagons back on the main road and moving within ten minutes of Jairen's command. Again, Lex had marveled at the Princeling's composure as he had organized the elderly according to their fitness for travel, and divided them between wagons, taking as many children with them as possible. Luckily, the Aardenan lived a simple, and active life, meaning most of the elderly were still in good enough condition to match the wagons' pace. Only the oldest adults and the youngest children were forced to ride.

Jairen had also organized the men and women with any sort of combat training—which essentially meant the hunters—to the back of the group.

"Jairen," Lex began, speaking for the first time since they resumed their trek nearly two hours before. "Why did you put the fighters in the back? You said it yourself, we don't have the manpower to fight off their troops."

"It gives reassurance to the others that we have a plan." He didn't look at her, but she saw his mouth tighten into a line as he set his jaw. "And besides, any sort of resistance is better than no resistance."

"We do have a plan," Lex said. "Right?"

Sammaa chuckled. "Oh child, yes. The plan is to make all haste to Eastveil and hope that they let us in before the Lunian troops catch us."

"I meant," Jairen glanced at the matriarch, and though Lex couldn't see his expression, she heard the glare clear enough, "that it gives the appearance of a backup plan, in case they do catch us before the Calley's let us in."

"And you're sure your Cici will let us in?" Lex immediately regretted that she had phrased it that way. It was a cheap shot, and she knew it. She saw him tense and his eyes dart in her direction, but he didn't challenge her on it.

"If Cici is there, she'll let us in. If it's just her mother, I'm less sure." He slapped the reins again.

The rest of that day passed with little conversation, only stopping twice to care for the horses and distribute rations from the wagons. Each rest only took about half an hour, but just as they finished their second break and resumed their journey, Rika rode up to the lead wagon.

"They're only a couple of miles back, now." She rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"They will catch us in a few hours."

"Our people are already moving as fast as they can." Sammaa said, her voice sounding distant. "Jairen, bring my people, bring *our* people to safety." She jumped from the moving wagon, more lithe than anyone her age ought.

"Wait, Sammaa," Jairen pulled on the reins, drawing the cart to a stop.

The whole wagon train slowed to a halt behind them as Lex and Jairen followed after the old woman, Lex's heart sinking with every step. She hoped Sammaa wasn't planning what Lex thought she was.

"Sammaa. What are you planning?" Jairen caught up and put a hand on her shoulder. He turned her to him, her face set in fierce determination: age lines deepened into canyons, her jaw clenched, her blind eyes shown with purpose, a sad smile turned the corners of her lips.

Eva helped lower Grans from the second wagon and the old woman joined her sister. "Don't you think I'm going to just let you go and do something like this, sister." Grans shook her head. "You aren't strong enough to make a difference anymore." She mirrored her sister's sad smile. "Not alone, at least."

Sammaa nodded at her sister, then looked at Jairen. "We will buy as much time as we can."

The last of Lex's heart sank into her stomach and her world spun as she realized her grandmother's intent. She grabbed Jairen's arm to steady herself as she struggled to find words.

Jairen beat her to it. "What do you think two old women can do? I mean no offense, of course, but we don't have the manpower to fight them off as a group. What will the two of you do?"

Lex finally found words. "Grans, no. You can't," she pleaded. "Don't leave me, don't leave me alone. You're—" her words died in her throat as a sob won its way out. Her vision blurred with hot tears. "You're all I have left."

"Oh my sweet girl, my sweet child, no." Grans's voice was soft, gentle, warm, reflecting perfectly the woman that became her world when her mother passed away.

"Child, I must do this. If I don't, every last one of these people will either die or be captured."

"But how? How will it help? How will your—" she swallowed another sob, "how will your suicide help anything?"

"Its not suicide, dear," Sammaa said. "Its sacrifice. And its not our deaths, but our lives that will help."

"But why both of you? Grans, are you even rinnaard?" Jairen asked.

Samma nodded again. "She is. Tsustaarda. Darkness."

"I'm the dark to her light."

"We won't need to fight them. But we can delay them," Sammaa said. "If they can't see, they can't follow."

"We'll blind them for as long as we can," Grans said. "Get our people to the castle."

"Grans." Lex could barely see through her tears as she pleaded. "Grans don't leave me alone." She tried again.

"You aren't alone, sweetling. I will join the spirits and be with you forever."

"Damn your spirits," she all but screamed. "Damn them. Don't you leave me."

"I love you, sweetling. Your mother would be proud of the woman you've become. Just as I am proud. Do not despair, my child. Cry if you must, but know that you are truly strong, no matter what you think to the contrary. I love you more than you may

ever know." She wiped tears away from her eyes and embraced Lex. "Jairen, take care of my granddaughter, please."

"See that our people make it to safety, Jairen."

"I," his voice came out a croak. "I will."

Grans released Lex from her embrace and turned to Sammaa. Together, they turned and walked down the road hand in hand to face their deaths so that their people might live.

No. Lex couldn't let this happen. Maybe if she went too, maybe she could save them. Maybe she could help. She took off after them, but two hands on her waist held her back. She didn't care who it was. She had to go with her Grans. She couldn't let someone else she loved die.

She drew a knife from her sleeve and turned, swiping wildly at Jairen's chest.

He released her and stepped back just out of reach. She turned back to run but mist flowed past her and she lashed out just as Jairen solidified, a strong hand around her wrist stopping the knife just inches from his throat. His blue-green eyes bore into hers, soft with welling tears. He knew what loss was, too. He was worried, she realized, about the people, about her. She dropped the knife.

He let her wrist go and she started to turn again, but his hands on her shoulders stopped her. She might not want to stab him anymore but spirits be damned if he was going to keep her from going after Grans.

She punched him in the chest, but he didn't let go.

She punched him in the stomach, but he didn't let go.

She jabbed at his head but he ducked aside and didn't let go.

She tried to push him away, putting both hands against his chest and heaving with all of her strength.

He pulled her close, wrapped his arms around her and didn't let go. Not as she cursed him, his family, the spirits, the La'Lune troops. He didn't let go as more tears flowed and sobs shook her body.

He held her tight and didn't let go.

Chapter 41

Jairen held Lex, his arms wrapped about her even as she oscillated between clinging to him and pushing him away. Her tears soaked through his tunic making his chest itch where her face pressed close. Yet still he held her tight, both offering comfort, and taking it from her presence, as his own eyes burned with unshed tears.

"Lex," he said, his voice as gentle as he could make it. "Lexi we need to get moving."

He hadn't known Grans for very long, but the kindly woman had shown him compassion in the days following his father's death, even as she mourned the death of her son. She hadn't argued with him, hadn't judged his innocence or guilt at all, but had merely accepted that Jairen had experienced a traumatic loss, and had been there for him when he needed to talk. She had proven the antithesis of everything he had previously believed about residents of the lower city, and peasants, in general. Had he really called people like Grans' the unwashed masses? That day in tutoring with his uncle seemed so far gone.

He hadn't seen a mirror in months, though the brief glimpses of his reflection he had caught in water showed a man that he scarcely recognized anymore. The changes weren't even primarily physical ones, but in the way he had come to see himself, carry himself. His whole demeanor had begun to change, and though he couldn't pick out the exact moment, he knew that Grans had proven instrumental in that.

And so had this slip of a girl he held in his arms.

Jairen had let both of them down, irrevocably so. If Grans was the antithesis of peasantry, he represented the antithesis of nobility. In all the stories, it was the noble knight, the daring prince, who sacrificed himself so that others could live. It should be he, not two elderly women, dying to protect the fleeing villagers. Yet, they had volunteered, while Jairen had never even given thought to that idea. Final Communion might not have killed him. But Sammaa had run her full race already. She had no sight left to offer the spirits, nothing but her life to balance the scales of power.

"Lex," he said. "We can't waste the time they bought us."

Ever so slowly, she extricated herself from his embrace. His tear soaked tunic clung to her face for a brief second as she pulled her head from his chest, and he smiled at the sight.

The two walked back to the lead wagon and climbed in, Eva followed and plopped down in Sammaa's vacant seat to Jairen's right. Jairen put his arm around Lex's shoulders and pulled her close. She fell asleep almost before he snapped the reins to resume their journey. A few more hours was all they needed. If they pushed hard, they might make it to Eastveil before midday.

"I thought I should be near," Eva said by way of explanation for her presence beside him. "I know I'm not Sammaa, and I'm definitely not Grans, but I thought she could maybe use a friend."

Jairen didn't know Eva very well. Over the course of their trek north from the capital, they had only interacted on the shallowest of levels in order to complete daily tasks. Jairen hadn't exactly been in a mood to talk, following what had happened with his father, and Eva had seemed reticent as well, given her husband's death. In fact, of their whole party, he likely knew her the least. Even despite his sour mood, he had talked with the kindly Grans and had butted heads with Lex. He and Bozarth had even bonded, in a way, as the only two men of their party. Yet he and Eva had barely spoken. And that hadn't changed when they reached the Aardenan village, as Jairen had thrown himself into learning about communion.

"You're the only family she has left," Jairen said at last. "I think she will appreciate the gesture."

"I dunno if that's quite true."

Jairen glanced over at the blond girl, inviting her to continue the thought.

"You too have grown close lately, that's all."

Jairen felt heat bloom in his cheeks and thanked the spirits for the low light. "I don't know about that. She did try to stab me at least twice tonight."

"For as long as I've known her, Lex has always been a *stab first* kind of girl." Eva laughed. "I'm not saying it's the right response in most situations, but at least you know what to expect from her."

Jairen grunted. He was confident about only one thing when it came to Alexandra: He never knew what to expect from her.

"All I'm saying is that I've never seen her take to someone as quickly as she has to you." She chuckled again. "And I dunno if anyone's ever stuck with her stabby personality long enough for her to take to them in the first place."

He looked down at the top of Lex's head resting on his shoulder and smiled in spite of himself, despite the tumult that brought them together, and the insanity had followed. Eva was right about one thing, at least. She had him, now, even if he wasn't always sure he had her.

#

Spirits, but Jairen was tired.

Eva and Jairen had spoken very little in the intervening hours, but the former had fallen asleep shortly before dawn, her head slumping to mirror Lex's position on his opposite shoulder. Jairen's eyes had grown heavy in the near silence—save for the rattle of bouncing wagon wheels and clomp of the horses' hooves. Jairen only kept his eyes open and the horses on the road through sheer force of will. Willpower, and the literal pain in his arse from the wagon's uncomfortable bench seat. He supposed a bruised backside was preferable to falling asleep and running the horses off the road, though.

How much had he slept in the last week? Maybe twelve hours total?

He glanced at the sky, estimating that the sun had perhaps finished only a quarter of its daily journey. Meaning that his band of refugees only had about two hours left in theirs, if he guessed at their pace correctly.

"Push harder. Faster, people, faster." Dederic repeated his cry twice more as he made his way to the lead wagon, Rika riding behind him. "They're less than an hour behind us."

"Spirits damn them." Jairen snapped at the reins, pushing the horses as fast as he could risk. If they could just maintain their lead a while longer, they would be safe.

Unless, of course, Lady Calley shuts the gates. But surely, within sight of Eastveil, the Lunian soldiers would turn back. They didn't have the troops to lay siege, much less meet Eastveil's garrison in force.

Too little too late to change his plan now. These people had gambled their lives, their homes—everything—on his word that he would bring them safely to Eastveil. He had failed first when Sammaa and Grans had stayed behind to hold off the pursuers. He would not fail again.

Lex woke up, rubbed her eyes and looked around.

Jairen shoved the reins into her hands. "Keep us going." He stood up on the bench seat and faced the rest of the column of refugees. "Fighters, anyone that can shoot a bow or use a sword, to the rear. Prepare for contact. We are only a couple of hours from safety. Don't stumble before the final sprint." He turned to Dederic and said, "Find me a horse."

As Dederic rode off, Jairen grabbed his sword and belt from the wagon's bed and buckled them on.

"Eva, you heard him," Lex said. "Keep us going."

Jairen turned and knew Lex's intent at once. "No, Lex," he said. "You are not coming on this one."

"Try and stop me." She had set her jaw, the tears from the night before nothing but a memory.

"They will hit us with cavalry first," Jairen tried to explain. "That's the only way they will catch us. We can't fight off even their twenty odd mounted soldiers with our ragtag group on foot. We only have a handful of horses, as it is."

"I can ride."

"Barely, and besides, fighting on horseback is different from riding."

"Then I'll ride with you," she said, steel in her voice. "Grans and Sammaa—" she swallowed. "They're gone because I couldn't stop them. I'm not staying behind this time."

Jairen sighed. He didn't have time to argue. "Fine."

Dederic brought a spare horse up alongside the wagon and Jairen swung down and into the stirrups before offering a hand to Lex. She ignored the hand and slid in behind him, one hand around his waist, the other flashed in his periphery, knife already in hand.

"Hold on tight," he said as he hauled on the reins, turning the horse and drawing his own sword. "With me," he called to Dederic and Rika who had a small contingent of mounted fighters—all those from the ambush party, he realized—already formed up. Eight on twenty, he mused. They had faced worse odds with the ambush, he supposed. He drew up alongside the riders and waited until most of the column had passed them by.

"Archers," he called. "Turn and fire a couple of volleys on my mark. Keep pace with the rest of our people until then. After they fire, we will ride in. You keep moving and pick off any of their soldiers that get too close. Lex, be my eyes behind me."

The sound of approaching horses reached his ears perhaps ten minutes after he gave his instructions.

"Lex?"

"Can't see them yet. Around the bend still"

"Aye, tell me when they clear it." Then louder, he said, "Archers, prepare to turn on my mark. Riders keep going until I say.

"They're clear."

Jairen turned in the saddle to see for himself. About two hundred yards separated the pursuing horsemen and the back of the column. He judged the distance of a bow shot and the speed of the horses. Waited three heartbeats. "Turn," he called.

Almost as one, the eleven archers turned.

"Draw."

They drew.

"Loose."

Four of the lead riders tumbled from their horses, arrows protruding from gaps in their armor. A fifth had been hit in the leg. And one horse screamed in pain as an arrow caught it in the flank. It reared and spun sideways, crashing into another horse. Knocking nearly a third of the pursuers out of the chase in the initial volley.

"Draw and loose," he called. "Riders, with me."

He didn't wait to see if they followed. He kicked his horse into a gallop to meet the approaching horsemen, realizing belatedly that he didn't have a shield. He raised his sword to block the first man's swing, but found no resistance as the man toppled from his horse, a knife sticking out of his shoulder.

He turned his blade from the useless parry to hack at the next rider, who had obviously not expected Jairen to be his opponent, and fell to Jairen's first slash.

Around him, the pursuers' progress slowed as they engaged Jairen's few mounted troops. Yet, the volley's had done their job well, and the two groups were nearly even in terms of numbers. But, his fighters lacked the experience the trained soldier did. Jairen watched in horror as two of the Aardenan fell.

He opened his mouth to warn a third, but a knife flashed through the air and buried itself in the Lunian soldier's chest.

Still, he had to do something. "You have the reins," he called to Lex before communing.

His world took on the hazy look he had grown accustomed to seeing through over the past six months as his weightless form flickered into solidity on the saddle behind a soldier. He drew a bronze knife across the man's throat and moved to the next target. Flickering in and out of communion faster than he had ever done before, felling four more soldiers in the process. He began to commune again, but Dederic solidified behind the man, dispatching him as well.

The remaining two horsemen hauled on their reins and turned tail for the main body of their troops. Before Jairen could call out, one of the younger riders kicked his horse after the fleeing soldiers, only to die in a gout of flame, leaving just four of their original eight.

Jairen looked at the surviving members of their party from atop a pilfered Lunian destrier, taking in the grim looks on his companions' faces. Lex had one shallow wound

across her bicep, Rika appeared unharmed, and Dederic, likewise—though the latter had likely communed any wound he'd received away.

They had lost fully half of his original ambush party, now. And though he was proud they had done so well against mounted and trained soldiers, despite being outnumbered, he felt each loss like an anvil on his heart and a mountain on his shoulders.

Yet, four deaths—no, six, he corrected, adding Sammaa and Grans to the count—to save an entire village. Should he not be proud of that fact? Despite the cold logic, he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

Wordless, he spurred his horse to catch up with the Aardenan refugees. His heart hurt as he rode past his fallen companions, unable to spare the time to lay them to rest for fear of being overtaken. Jairen and the three survivors caught up to the column which greeted them with cheers.

Jairen swung off his stolen horse and into the lead wagon, Dederic leading his horse away, then he turned and helped Lex in as well.

"If you ever leave me on a horse in battle again to go misting away without a care in the world," Lex said, glaring up at him. "I swear to all the spirits that, if you survive, I will kill you myself."

Jairen pulled her in close, smiling as he held her tight.

"Let go of me," she said, but the steel had left her voice, and, though she hadn't quite relaxed into his embrace, she certainly didn't fight him.

"It's harder for you to stab me like this," he said.

The wagon hit a particularly large bump, knocking them off balance and into the seat, landing awkwardly next to Eva.

"Oops," the blond woman said, a picture of innocence. "I didn't see that enormous rut in the road."

Jairen took the reins back and slapped them, urging the horses ever so slightly faster. They had stopped the cavalry, but the infantry wouldn't be too far behind.

They cleared the last bend before the final bit of their journey, a nearly two mile stretch of flat, treeless land between them and the hill that Castle Calley sat atop.

Jairen heard Lex's intake of breath as the castle loomed ahead, and though he had been there once before, he had to admit, it was impressive. Unlike the palace in Renhold, whose strength lay in the city's layered walls, Castle Calley lacked elegance, yet it boasted thick walls and high ramparts. Taking up nearly the entirety of the hilltop, any invading army would already be disadvantaged with no even ground on which to stage their forces. Approaching from the west, Jairen could only barely make out the start of the city that had sprung up on the eastern side of the hill.

They had crossed barely a quarter of the distance when shouting rose from the back of their column. Jairen's heart sank as he turned and saw the head of the Lunian forces break into the clearing as well. They jogged at a ground eating pace, moving at least twice the speed of his own people. They would barely reach the halfway point by the time the soldiers overtook them.

"Push faster," he cried, though he knew it was hopeless. All was lost, and so close to safety, too. They had come so far, yet in the end, all of their struggle, the sacrifices along the way, all of it would come to naught. It had merely delayed the inevitable. He felt the reins slipping from his hands but he didn't try to grab them. What was the point?

Death would find them whether he pushed for another half mile or not. Why should he struggle till the end?

He felt tears rise to his eyes and didn't bother trying to blink them away.

His head snapped to the right as something, no, someone, slapped him from his left. He looked back left to see Lex, eyes ablaze.

"You do not get to give up." She jabbed him in the chest. "You promised Grans, you promised Sammaa." She jabbed him again.

"It can't be helped," Jairen said in weak protest. "I can't do anything about it. I failed again."

"I don't rutting accept that." She jabbed him a third time. "Grans always said, if you ever have nothing to cry about, you lose your ability to fight. Well, I see those tears, so fight, damn you. Fight."

Where had he heard those words before? He racked his brain, but fatigue, panic, and a scant two hours of sleep made it hard to focus. But one of his uncle's lessons came to mind. A history lesson specific to the northern folk, to Eastveil? Something about battlefield flags communication.

He bolted to his feet. Red flags in tatters with returning riders signified pursuit and a request for aid. It was a desperate hope, but any chance was better than none. He called for any and all red fabrics—of which they had very little—to be tied together onto a tent pole.

Dederic and Rika soon rode back and forth along the column passing as many pieces of red as they could to the front wagon where Eva oversaw the elderly who rode there as they tied the pieces together.

The Lunian soldiers had closed almost half the distance before Eva told Jairen it was ready.

"A horse, Dederic."

Dederic didn't hesitate. He brought his mount alongside the wagon and Jairen understood his intent. The man offered the reins. Jairen held the horse steady as Dederic leapt from the saddle into the wagon, then swung into the saddle. Dederic grabbed the makeshift flag from Eva and handed it to Jairen who spurred his horse into a gallop. He couched the banner in his right hand, running it up the length of his arm, resting the shaft against his shoulder as the fabric billowed out behind him. The drag from the flag flapping in the wind as he rode nearly unseated him. He adjusted his weight, tightened his grip on the reins, stood ever so slightly in the stirrups and kept his place in the saddle. He galloped forward several hundred yards and then rode back and forth in front of the column and in full view of the castle so that no one on the walls could mistake the signal, whether they knew its significance or not.

After several laps back and forth with no discernible sign of recognition from the castle, Jairen slumped in his saddle, turned back, and watched as the column approached at a crawl, the Lunian troops almost upon them. Lex stood in the lead wagon's driver's seat slapping at the reins and shouting something that Jairen couldn't discern for the sound of hoof beats reverberating throughout the valley. Hoof beats? He turned and looked over his shoulder. Castle Calley's postern gates gaped wide, spilling forth a torrent of half armored soldiers on horseback galloping straight for him. Even partially armored, he noted the castle on a hill insignia that marked them as part of Eastveil's standing military.

Fear seized him as they drew within fifty yards of his mount, but they passed him by with barely a second glance, passed the fleeing Aardenan, couched their lances, cut through the Lunian troops who had turned and run—not fast enough—from the approaching horsemen.

The engagement lasted no more than a couple of minutes, and not a single one of their former pursuers escaped.

Lex slowed the lead wagon to a halt just short of Jairen's horse and leapt to the ground almost before it had rocked to a stop. He dismounted and they met, embraced, kissed, and embraced again, holding one another tight.

"I can't believe you actually cried." Her voice held an edge of emotion to it he couldn't quite place.

He laughed and squeezed her tighter.

The plod of approaching horses—not galloping this time—imposed on their embrace, and together, they turned to see a small contingent of guards dressed in green and gray bearing the silver flower on a field of green device that marked them as members of House Calley. The guards flanked two blond women on horseback, one older, one younger.

Two guards dismounted and helped the ladies from their horses. The younger stepped out from behind her guard escort, peering at Jairen from across the ten foot divide. She had familiar blue eyes, blond hair, and a sweet smile. But gone was her slim figure, replaced by a belly swollen with child.

"Jairen?" the pregnant girl asked.

His stomach dropped, his heart skipped a beat, all the blood rushed from his face. He had to lean on Lex to keep his feet as dizziness took over. "Cici?"

The second woman, Lady Calley—Cici's mother—stepped forward. "Guards," she said. "Seize him."

END ACT 2

Chapter 42

Lex paced the length of the enormous suite of rooms the ladies had placed her in following Jairen's arrest. The rooms took up one whole floor of one of the keep's towers. She reckoned her old flat in Renhold could fit inside these rooms five times over. Even the room devoted entirely to the large feather bed dwarfed her old home. Lex had been inside noble manors in the city during various break-ins, yet, this one set of chambers made most of those noble homes seem paltry and garish. Not that this room lacked for decorations, mind. No they were just tasteful, so far as Lex could tell.

Floral paintings hung at intervals around the room. Four woven tapestries depicted each season. Two plush couches, whose material Lex didn't recognize, faced one another across a low table that barely rose past her knees. A wooden cupboard sat against a counter, and a large hearth abutted the wall that separated the main room from the bedchamber. Elegant silver wall-sconced candelabras lit the room.

Lex threw herself onto one of the couches and sighed. Her mind hadn't stopped spinning since Jairen had named that pregnant noble girl as Cici. *The Cici*. The Cici that Jairen had had that one night with. Lex wasn't stupid. She could count. It had been the

better part of seven months since Jairen left the capital. There was a better than good chance the baby was his. Judging by his reaction, she reckoned Jairen had much the same thought process.

He had barely even protested when they arrested him, only asking that the Calley's shelter the fleeing refugees before submitting to his imprisonment. Cici had arranged for Lex to be placed in these rooms, and the castle steward had begun directing the Aardenan people about the castle grounds.

Plush as her rooms were, Lex knew a prison when she saw one. A guard had confiscated *almost* all of her knives, and though the door wasn't locked, two more guards stood watch just on the other side. She didn't know why Cici had separated her from the other refugees. Perhaps because she and Jairen had embraced? Was Cici jealous that the father of her child held another woman? Lex knew *she* would be jealous if the situation was reversed. Spirits alive, but she was jealous that Cici likely carried Jairen's child. Not because she wanted Jairen's child, mind. But because this, whatever she had with Jairen, seemed so fragile, but what could bind two people together like a child?

Lex shook her head and rose from the couch, striding to the east-facing window that overlooked the town spreading out beyond Castle Calley's walls. She had climbed numerous buildings, trees, and walls, but she'd never seen this kind of view. Not only was she perhaps ten stories up, but the castle lay perched atop a hill, offering even greater height to view the landscape. Despite its size, Lex found the town quaint. The red roofed buildings spread out from the top of the gradual rise leading up to the castle. A wooden wall lined the steep parts of the slope while it transitioned into stone battlements at the

lower portion of the town. She wondered what the capital would look like from such a vantage point. Did Jairen have a similar view from his room in the palace?

A knock sounded at the door and Lex turned from the window to see Cici slip inside. The pregnant girl curtsied and said, "My name is Claudia Calley, but you may call me—"

"Cici," Lex finished. "I know who you are."

"Then it seems I am at a disadvantage, as I do not know your name."

Lex paused for a breath before replying. "Lex."

"Lex what?"

"What do you mean, what?"

"What is your surname?"

Lex laughed, but felt her cheeks flush. Why did it matter that she didn't have a surname? That didn't make her any worse than this noble girl. "I have none," she said at last, voice weaker than she would have liked.

"Oh, I see. The way you and Jair embraced, I just assumed—" Cici trailed off.

"Assumed what?" Lex straightened her back, standing to her full—and entirely unimpressive—height.

The girl stammered for a moment. "That you were, you know, together."

Yet more heat bloomed in Lex's cheeks. "We a—wait—why couldn't we be together if I have no surname?"

The blond girl blinked a couple of times, her mouth opening and shutting twice before she finally found words. "I just meant that you're not a noble, are you? No now that I look, I don't believe you are. A peasant, even a merchant, would be hard pressed to

marry anyone in the upper nobility, much less a prince." She made an O with her mouth. "You do know he's a prince, right, dear?"

"Of course I rutting-well know he's a prince." Lex was suddenly aware that the leathers she wore likely appeared as nothing more than rags to this pampered little blond b—

"Oh so then why are you confused as to why you can't be with him?" She made that O with her again, but brought her hand to her lips to cover it. "Are you smitten with him? He is quite handsome, I'll admit. Dear me, *I* should know." She patted her belly. "Did you lay with him? Of course you did, didn't you? Oh you poor thing. Criminal or not, a prince can't marry a peasant, no matter how pretty she is. You are quite pretty, though, do you know? In a strange, dark and dangerous way, mind. But pretty nonetheless."

Lex knew her mouth hung agape. She knew but couldn't find it in her to care. Cici spoke so much. She was nice enough, Lex supposed, if patronizing. "Wait, no." She finally caught up to Cici's words. "I did not rutting lay with him."

"Oh well that's good news for you, dear. I'd hate to have broken that news to you. Unless," she narrowed her eyes, "are you smitten with him without having slept with him? Oh my. I'm so sorry dear. You won't be able to have him. Your stations are just too different."

"Why are you here?" Lex demanded, trying to change the subject. Of course she had known her—whatever it was—with Jairen couldn't last, and yet, this girl, this patronizing little noble had the gall to tell her whom she could and couldn't be with?

"Oh why yes. Quite right, my apologies. I tend to be easily distracted sometimes. I never explained my reason for meeting with you, did I?" She shook her head. "No matter, though. I wanted to hear from someone *other* than Jair about the events that brought you and him together, and how that path brought you and a band of refugees to my home."

Lex turned toward the window as she considered. Finally, she decided to tell only the bare minimum, leaving out all mentions of communing and their ambush on the Lunian troops, and anything of a budding romance with the Princeling, entirely.

When she had finished, Cici just nodded twice and said, "I see, I see. You have had quite the exciting few months. I'll go speak with Jair and see how his story matches up. Thank you for your time Miss Lex. You must be terribly tired. I'll send for a bath to be brought up and some food as well. Oh, and clothes. We simply must get you out of those rags. Terribly unbecoming of a woman to wear such things. Trousers? Oh Zekker no. That simply will not do."

Cici turned in a flutter of floral patterned skirts, leaving Lex alone with her thoughts.

#

Some five minutes later, a knock sounded at Lex's door.

"Who's there?"

The door swung open, admitting two serving girls dressed in drab brown-hued dresses. Both wore their blond hair tied up and spun into buns. They carried a large metal tub between them and had to shuffle sideways to get through the doorway. As they entered, the lead girl nodded briefly at Lex, but paid her little more attention as she and

her partner placed the tub on the tiled floor near the empty hearth. They left, eyes down turned, neither speaking a word, but returned several minutes later with two more girls in tow. One girl started a fire in the hearth, striking flint onto kindling and coaxing the flame to life with practiced motions. The other three girls set to filling the tub with the buckets they carried. They fetched steaming water from somewhere on a lower floor and carried it up the tower stairs one bucket at a time until the tub was full. One of the servants removed a collection of glass vials from the cupboard and dripped a few drops of each into the water so that it gave off a pleasant floral scent, and then turned to Lex, finally acknowledging her presence.

"Mistress, your bath is ready." The girl curtsied and approached. "Let me help you with those clothes, mistress."

"My clothes? What are you going to help me with?"

"Mistress, I will help you undress for the bath."

"No you rutting well won't." Lex put her hands on her hips. Why would she need help undressing? Were noble women so lazy that they couldn't even undress themselves? "I can do it myself, thanks."

And so she did. She stripped off her leathers, her tunic and trousers. She stared at the serving girl as she pulled her slip over her head and smiled at the girl's reaction to the numerous scars that marked her body. She hadn't lived an easy castle life like the women these girls likely helped on a daily basis. She took a sort of grim pride in knowing each mark represented a challenge she'd overcome.

She stepped free of her underthings and into the bathwater, savoring the heat on her legs and buttocks that had grown so sore from days spent in the saddle and bouncing

on the uncomfortable wagon seat. She couldn't remember the last time she had sat in warm bathwater. But oh how she had missed it. She sank into the tub, lowering herself down so that the water reached her neck, her dark hair floating around her as the heat loosened the tension in her neck.

She tensed as she felt hands on her shoulders, but relaxed again as they began kneading her sore muscles. Some part of her wanted to dismiss the serving girl. But another part, the one relishing the sweet pain of six months worth of knots being worked out, wanted the girl to stay. The latter part won out, in the end, as the memory of her bath so many months ago came flooding to the front of her conscious. Eva and Grans cleaning the mugger's blood and dried mud from her skin with too-small scraps of fabric, slowly working the stiffness out of her injured arm.

Tears came, unbidden, at the memory. Such gentle compassion from ones she loved so dearly. Compassion she would never know from Grans again. She choked back a sob as she remembered Grans and Sammaa walking to their deaths hand in hand, sacrificing themselves so that she and the other refugees might live.

"Mistress?"

"Lex." She sniffed. "Call me Lex."

"Yes, Mistress Lex." She shuffled around into Lex's periphery to the left side of the tub. "What is the matter? Is my pressure too much?"

Lex laughed at that, genuine laughter despite the ache she still felt. "No. No that isn't it." She paused a moment. "What is your name?"

"Mistress Lex, my name is Elle, if it please Your Ladyship."

"I'm no lady, Elle."

"But Mistress, the guards all say you are with the Prince."

Heat bloomed in her already flushed cheeks. "I—" she stumbled for words. "We aren't—It's complicated."

"I see." Then after a moment, "Mistress Lex, your water is cooling down. Shall I fetch more?"

"No, thank you, Elle." She stood, dripping from the tub, already missing the water's comforting heat as the air—despite the fire's proximity—felt cool on her wet skin. Elle wrapped a towel around Lex's shoulders, staving off some of the chilling air and stepped fully out of the water, onto yet another towel the girl had laid out. Spirits, how many towels did one room have? She had only ever owned one at a time, and none of them nearly as soft as these. When Elle offered a third towel, Lex had absolutely no idea what to do with it. She just stood there, towel in hand until Elle offered explanation.

"For your hair, Mistress Lex."

"What?"

Elle instructed Lex on how to wrap her hair up in the proffered towel and scurried off saying something about clothes and a meal, leaving Lex alone, again, naked save for the towel.

Lex sighed and walked back to the eastern window, taking in the shadows cast by the sun setting on the other side of the castle. She heard the door creak open and turned to see a slim man in Calley guard regalia standing in the entryway. He wore a wolfish, crooked smile and had a familiar glint in his eye.

"Well, well, Lex. Enjoy your bath? Seems you've taken to traveling with the prince quite well."

Lex gasped. She knew that voice. "Dorran? How are you here?" Then suddenly aware of her near nudity. "Why are you here?" She pulled her towel tighter.

"Oh relax, nothing like that." He smiled, but she knew the man well enough to know he was hiding something. "I got back to your flat a bit after midday but you'd already left. Thanks for waiting, by the by. Anyhow, later that day I heard about the king and the prince running away. Tailed a guard patrol and heard that shite Rollo talking to a royal looking fellow. Pieced together what happened and that you'd left the city with the prince." He adjusted his sword belt. "I uhhh figured he'd head here after I heard about the little lady Calley leaving the capital too. So I came and joined her guard. Guess my guess was right, huh?"

Lex was saved from making a reply by Elle clearing her throat from the hallway. "Pardon Dorran but it ain't right for you to be seeing Mistress Lex in nothing but a towel."

"Sure, sure, I'll leave." He waved a hand. "I have patrol duty soon. I do hope you enjoyed that bath, *Mistress* Lex," he added as he left the room.

"My but ain't you brave, Mistress Lex, if you don't mind me saying." Elle came through the doors holding a long simple, but expensive, dress of—

"Is that silk?" Lex asked.

"Ay, of course, Mistress Lex." She held the fabric up for Lex to run her hand over its smooth, soft surface. She had seen silk, of course, during jobs in the Highland. But had never worn it. "A lady should always sleep in silks. Good for keeping your skin silky smoo—Oh. My apologies, Mistress." She took a step back and bowed low, keeping her eyes downcast. "It was a slip. I didn't mean to call attention to them."

"Call attention to what?"

Elle's gaze darted down to Lex's exposed legs and up to her arms before returning to the floor. "Your scars," she said, voice weak.

"Oh these? Never mind that. I'm used to them." She didn't mind them. But the girl's embarrassment at having mentioned them stuck with her as she took the gown from Elle's hands. She had never understood why girls cared about how their skin looked, before. Had never cared about it herself. But now? Her mind drifted to Cici's flawlessly smooth arms and wondered if the rest of her body was equally unmarred. Is that what Jairen preferred? Smooth, unscarred skin? She shook her head. Why did she care? If what Cici had said was true, it wouldn't matter. She couldn't be with him anyway. He would never be able to marry some—Marriage? Spirits alive, they had barely even kissed a few times and she was worried about not being able to marry him?

"Would you like my help, Mistress Lex?" Elle asked, staring pointedly at the dress clutched in Lex's clenched fists.

"What? Oh no. I think I can manage this."

"Right, then I'll check on your supper."

Chapter 43

Jairen's guard escort had brought him directly from the field to the castle, guiding him through winding hallways moving ever lower, the air growing steadily staler. On his previous visit to the castle, he hadn't had occasion to tour the underkeep, but he had heard rumors that it existed—a second castle hidden underneath the first, dug deep into the hill. He had asked Cici about it once, but her answers had been coy and noncommittal. He reckoned he had his answer now, though.

One guard had pulled back a nondescript tapestry revealing a small door—Jairen and the guards all had to duck to get through. It led to a staircase bringing them into a cavernous room which likely served as the underkeep's great hall or throne room, though why the Calley's had built a second castle underneath the first one, Jairen had no idea. Secret fortifications for a fall back area if the castle fell was one thing. But an entire second castle?

Jairen sat in a damp gray stone cell in Castle Calley's dungeon, back propped up against the least damp looking portion of wall. Steel manacles locked around his wrists

kept him tethered to the floor with long chains attached to the cell's center point. The pungent odors of mildew, must, and mold hung heavy in the cool air.

The refugees' arrival had gone better than he had expected. The Calley's had a reputation for generosity to those in need, to be sure, but he had worried that Lady Calley would react poorly to Jairen leading said refugees. And, to be fair, she had arrested him.

But that couldn't be helped. She had at least agreed to provide temporary lodging for the Aardenan people. And though guards had escorted Lex into the castle as well, he had heard Cici ordering a castellan to give the girl a suite in one of the castle's towers.

A tower room meant that she would be contained, if not truly imprisoned, but would also receive comfortable accommodations befitting a noble lady. Jairen smiled at the thought of Lex dressed in a noble's gown, flopping down in as unladylike a manner as she possibly could. Hopefully she did so in front of prim and proper Cici.

Cici. That was an issue he had *no* desire to contend with. She was pregnant, that much was clear. He couldn't tell how far along she was into the pregnancy, but given how much she showed, he reckoned it was possible—No. No it couldn't be. He had heard tell of couples trying for months to get pregnant, and he had only had one night with Cici. Surely not.

He forced thoughts of the brazen blond girl from his mind and turned to a problem he could solve: his chains. Steel, instead of iron, for some reason. But that fact bode well for him. Hinges screeched from farther up the hallway and three pairs of boots and rattling chain mail heralded the guards' approach, but it was Cici who walked into view just beyond the bars to his cell.

Jairen scrambled to his feet, but had to hunch over a bit, as the chain connecting his manacles to the floor wasn't quite long enough for him to stand fully upright. He nodded his head in a bow, "My lady, pregnancy becomes you well."

"Chains have much the same effect on you."

He briefly considered communing to remove the cuffs, just to see the look on her face. Better to not play that card quite yet. "For what purpose do you grace me with your radiant presence, my lady?"

"I want the story. The full story. From your lips." She crossed her arms. "And you should know, I already spoke with your little peasant lover. She told me everything."

"Peasant lover, eh? Is that jealousy I hear, Cici?" Jairen clicked his tongue. "That is certainly not becoming."

"Oh she's quite pretty, I'll give you that." Cici waved an airy hand. "But a pretty pony is still a pony in the end. Good to ride about in the short term, but not sustainable for the long haul."

Jairen chuckled and muttered just loud enough for Cici to hear, "Aye, definitely jealousy." It amazed him how quickly he could fall back into the role of arrogant prince. He wasn't sure he liked that fact. But Cici was a peeress of the royal court, so he played his part as well.

"How dare y-"

"If you already got the full story from Lex, why have you come to me?"

"She's a peasant," Cici said again. "They lie, cheat, steal. Can't be trusted."

Jairen smiled. "And a courtier does all those things. The only difference is that they don't pretend to be something they aren't."

"Zekker damn you, speak, or I'll let my mother question you."

He bit back a retort. Lady Calley had never borne him any love. "Where should I start?"

"What happened after I—" she sniffed, "after I left your chambers that morning?"

Jairen sighed and spoke of his interaction with his brother and Dalen's summons to meet him in the throne room. "We argued. He threatened you. I reacted, shall we say, poorly. Things," he swallowed, "escalated to violence. He beat me, flung me into a pillar. I pushed him, he—" Jairen swallowed twice. "He hit his head on the dais stairs."

"Oh Jairen," Cici said, animosity suddenly gone from her voice. "It was an accident, then? Why didn't you tell Malkai?"

"Don't you think I tried?" Jairen all but yelled at her, clenching his fists. "He wouldn't listen. Couldn't see past the blood, past father's body."

"But you two were so close, surely if you had just explained."

"He tried to kill me, Cici. He choked me with the Will. It wasn't a logical conversation. I kicked him. He released me. I ran."

"Jairen, I'm so sorry." Cici took a step forward to the cell door but didn't move to unlock it, instead pressing her forehead to a gap in the bars. "Even I thought you had murdered His Majesty. I should have known. I knew you. I know you."

"It amazes me how quick you are to trust, Cici. That's one of the things I always liked about you."

"Liked? You don't anymore?"

"It doesn't matter, does it? Your mother is either going to execute me or give me to Malkai to do the same."

Cici smiled. "We'll see. But tell me the rest of the story. What happened after fleeing the palace?"

So he did. He told everything that had occurred, from the mugging in the Fringe, right up until Lady Calley had him arrested. He spared no detail of the story, other than his ability to commune.

When he had finished, Cici's eyes had all but glazed over.

At last she spoke, "Well," she said. "Your story matches that of Lex's. But what of her? She is quite smitten with you, you know. What is your relationship with her?"

Heat flooded his cheeks and he was glad of the dungeon's low lighting. "I—" He didn't know. They hadn't exactly had time to discuss it between running for their lives and him getting arrested. How could he answer? He shored up his arrogant prince mask, playing the part Cici would expect. "We have kissed a couple of times. I wouldn't call it a relationship."

"Do you love her?" Cici's quiet voice held an edge that made him wary.

"Do I wh—"

"Do you love me?" She asked, her voice, barely a whisper.

"Cici, I—"

"Never you mind. I'll talk to my mother." She turned on her heel and walked back toward the dungeon entrance, passing out of sight before speaking again. "It's yours, you know."

#

Jairen leaned against that not-so-damp patch on the stone wall of his cell for Spirits knew how long after Cici left.

It's yours, you know.

How could it be his? One night. Only one night. Not possible. Right?

He shook his head. He wasn't looking at the issue from the proper angle. He had missed something. What possible end game could she have? A courtier steeped every action in scheming. The Calley's would know that tying themselves to him through a child would benefit them little if he stayed on the run—or if he was found guilty.

He pulled his knees to his chest and held his head between his legs. He tried to look at the issue from Cici's viewpoint, assuming she told the truth about the child's parentage: A bastard child born of a prince—even a criminal one—would have a claim on the throne, one day. It could threaten Malkai's reign, especially if his brother had trouble producing an heir. But surely the Calley's wouldn't—

Metal doors at the head of the hallway screeched open, and Jairen raised his head from thought. Guard boots tromped down the hallway before stopping in front of Jairen's cell. A slender man clad in Calley regalia held a tray of steaming food in his hands.

"Aye so you're the Princeling, eh?"

Jairen jerked his head up staring the man in the eyes. Had using the term been mere coincidence, or had Lex spoken with this guard?

"Lady Calley said we wasn't to feed you till morning, but I think our mutual friend would be upset with me if I hadn't tried." He shrugged. "I may have taught her how to knife fight, but I tell ya, she's right scary when she's mad."

Jairen all but gasped. "You know Lex?"

"Of course I know her. Known her longer than you've done." He nodded. "Name's Dorran."

"Dorran? She's spoken of you." He furrowed his brow. "We waited for you as long as we dared before leaving the city."

"Ay, she said as much." His smile held little in the way of mirth. "No harm done in the end though."

"So about that food?" Jairen hated to ask, but the stew's scent overpowered even the mildew's pungent odor.

"Oh aye, I said I'd try. Didn't say I'd give it to ya." Dorran smiled and turned to walk away.

He could deal with being ridiculed. He could stand to be starved. But some combination of hunger, lack of sleep, and utter disbelief at the cruel joke this so-called friend had just played—Jairen shot to his feet, about to commune when Dorran turned back to him and smiled.

"Peace, Princeling. A jest. It were just a jest. Bad timing, I guess. Never could read a room." He slid the tray of food through the opening at the bottom of the cell door. Jairen pulled it close and had the first bite halfway to his lips before realizing that Dorran still stood there, watching.

"My thanks, Dorran. And my sincerest apologies for reacting so poorly to your joke, ill timed or not, that wasn't becoming."

Dorran waved off the apology and left.

Jairen wanted nothing more than anything to inhale his food. He had gone so long without a true castle-cooked meal. Not that he disliked the meals prepared by the Aardenan people. Those had their own sort of charm. But a rich beef stew made by a castle chef? He sniffed, trying to separate the aromas as much as to keep his mind off

Cici's claim. Aye, beef, with onions, garlic, potatoes, and carrots in a sort of red wine gravy. He took a bite and was unsurprised to find it utterly delicious.

Had he known that he'd not have a true meal from castle kitchens for over half a year, he might have savored the feast that last night he spent in the castle. Would anything have changed if he had? Perhaps Cici wouldn't have come to his rooms that night. She had, after all, said she only came to check on him when he left early. Could the decision to stay have changed everything?

So many people had died on this journey of his. His mother and father, the Aardenan who had fallen against the Lunian soldiers—first in the ambush and then to hold off the Lunian outriders. He called to mind the image of Sammaa and Grans walking hand in hand to face their end so that their people might survive. *They* had made a choice that had affected their entire people. Their decision saved so many lives.

How many lives would he have saved if he'd chosen differently, even once.

Strange how one decision affects so much. He'd chosen not to object to Cici's presence, to welcome her into his bed. True, Cici had offered, but he could have said no. So too, he could have taken the beating from his father like a meek, battered, yes-man. He could have stayed in the castle and faced his punishment or not fled the city with Lex and the others. He could have chosen to abandon the kingdom and let Au'Dovier get the shipment of weapons. He could've left the Aardenan people to whatever fate awaited them at the hands of the Lunian soldiers.

But he'd made those decisions, both good and bad, even sometimes not realizing another path existed. He'd chosen in the heat of the moment every single time, and while he didn't think he'd chosen wrong at every turn, he couldn't help remembering his uncle's

words: *Your blatant overconfidence in nearly everything you do is really quite astounding.* He had acted with too much confidence on too many occasions. Had he just stopped to think about his actions in any number of situations, could he not have taken charge of his own life, rather than reacting and taking the obvious, or easiest path?

He took the last bite of stew, scraping the bowl with the wooden spoon to get every last bit of savory sauce that he could, and then slid the dish away, back toward the cell door.

Meal finished and mind set, Jairen stood and communed out of his cell, and strode toward the dungeon exit. He had to speak with Lady Calley. He couldn't stand by and let others—like Sammaa and Grans—take the fall for his choices. He couldn't wait to see what Lady Calley decided to do with him and his new people. For they were his people now, they had taken him in, given him a home and hope at life. He had let them down when he hadn't tried to stop Sammaa and Grans, but he would ensure that they weren't forced into a half life as refugees with no home.

But even if Lady Calley gave them more permanent refuge, what would happen when someone discovered the blasphemous magic they practiced?

Nor could he stand by when he suspected Au'Dovier had major invasion plans. He still had no idea what the bronze weapons meant against the Renmarran magicks, but if the Will stemmed from spiritual communion, then those swords bode ill, indeed.

He communed, seeping between door and door-frame, startling the guards on the other side. One recovered quicker than the other and drew his sword halfway from his scabbard before Jairen had put him in a choke hold, partially communing with one arm to suck the air from the guard's lungs. He fell limp, unconscious from Jairen's grip. The

other guard swung his sword, but Jairen drew the first guard's sword and parried the overhead blow. They exchanged a flurry of blows, but Jairen disarmed the man after he over extended on a thrust. The prince dropped his sword and forced the guard unconscious in the same way as the first, then continued up, out of the underkeep and into the castle proper.

He made his way through the maze of hallways, relying on the memories of his last visit to the Castle Calley to guide him to Lady Calley's chambers. Two guards stood watch at the entrance to the hallway leading to the Lady's rooms. This close to her chambers, he didn't want to risk alerting any other castle residents by attempting to incapacitate the soldiers. So, remembering how he and Dederic snuck into the warehouse, he communed, moving up the wall and flattening his incorporeal form to the ceiling before turning down the final corridor and slinking past, high above the guards' heads.

He solidified and landed, light and near to soundless just before her doors. He knocked out of habit, but waited for no reply as he pushed through the double oak doors and into Lady Calley's sitting room. The chamber appeared almost exactly as he remembered it from his childhood: silver and green dominated the room's color scheme, from carpet to drapes and even the banners hanging from the northern wall. The Calley family crest—silver flower on a green field—had been carved and painted into a the stained oak coffee table that sat between two leather couches.

The lady of the castle stood from one such couch as Jairen drew fully into the room.

He bowed with a touch more deference than was befitting his station—criminal or not—and said, "My lady, we've urgent business to discuss, and I simply could not wait until morning. Please forgive my intrusion."

Chapter 44

Lex woke from her not-so-deep sleep to a distant knocking sound. She half-rolled, half-flailed her way out of the tangle of blankets on the absurdly large—and excessively pillowed—bed. Rubbing sleep from her eyes, she tripped on no fewer than three things before opening the door to reveal the empty sitting room beyond.

Yet, she heard the knocking again.

"Wrong one. Too many damned doors, too many rooms."

She made her way to the hallway's door.

"Damn you Alexandra if you don't open—"

She opened the door, cutting off whatever threat Jairen had planned to spew.

"Jairen?" She rubbed her eyes. Was she dreaming?

"Sleep well?"

She blinked several times, trying to clear the last of sleep's haze and took in the figure standing before her. He wore a blue doublet with silver stitching atop a white tunic, a tight pair of black breeches tucked into almost-knee high riding boots, and sported a

silver and blue half cloak that hung over his right shoulder. His blue-green eyes looked almost teal beneath his newly cut and quaffed brown hair.

In the months she had known him, she had seen glimpses of Jairen's leadership and education that proved his noble birth as clearly as his speech did, but never had she seen him truly look the part. She blinked again for good measure, expecting her dream to fade, but no. No, that infuriating grin was definitely real. Not even her sleeping mind could quite conjure the right effect that smile had on her.

She started to reach out for him, extending an arm toward his hair—she had never seen it short before—but stopped midway, remembering Cici's claim that they could never be together. She hadn't understood it before, hadn't seen their different stations so apparent as in that moment. His presence, though comforting, made her feel small, unworthy. She dropped her hand, and her eyes, looking down rather than into his.

Gentle fingers lifted her chin so that their eyes met once more. "Lex," he said, his softening smile brought tears to her eyes. "Lex," he said again, "is something amiss?"

She pulled her chin from his hand and turned around to blink her tears away. Spirits damn her—damn him—why did he always have this effect on her? She had never felt these insecurities before. In the past, she had confronted every issue with her knives, daring someone to underestimate her, to call her short, to think she couldn't do something a man could just because she was a girl. She had thrived on her knives.

Yet, with Jairen? She had no idea how to approach these problems. Knives couldn't change that she was born a peasant and he, a prince. She couldn't cut the scars from her body to have the perfect skin of a noble girl. Hell, her knives couldn't even teach

her the manners to pass as noble. She couldn't threaten and flail her way to Jairen's side even if she wanted to.

He had a child on the way, anyhow, didn't he? She wouldn't stand in the way of him being a father to Cici's child. How could she? She didn't know the first thing about being a wife—especially not to a noble, much less a prince—and didn't even know if she wanted children of her own, one day. "How could I stop him from marrying Cici?"

"Huh?" Jairen asked. "Who is marrying Cici?"

She felt the blood drain from her face, a sinking sensation told her that her stomach was somewhere near the floor.

"You," she said at last. "The baby is yours, right?"

Several heartbeats passed before he spoke, "So she says."

"The timeline fits, doesn't it?"

"Aye," he said. "It does."

Lex walked to the window to stare out at the morning light. "So you'll marry her, then. You have to, don't you?"

"I don't have to do anything, Lex." She could picture his furrowed brow from the tightness in his voice.

"You should, though," she said, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

"You want me to?" He asked, his voice coming from just a few feet behind her.

She resisted the urge to turn. She didn't think she could say what she needed to if she looked at him while doing so. "It," she swallowed, "it's the right thing. I won't stand in the way of you raising your child."

"Lex." Arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her to him. She could feel his breath on the right side of her face, tickling her ear, could feel the warmth of his embrace on her back, even through his doublet and her nightgown.

"Lex," he said again. "I don't have to marry her to raise the child. I can provide for them both. It's not as if I'm going to be king and have to produce one legitimate heir. Even if I clear my name, my brother sits on the Alabaster Throne. I'm but a Second Son. I don't get to choose my position, but I do get to choose my wife."

Was he implying that she would be his wife? She hadn't agreed to that. Did she even want that? Sure, she liked him. He was smart, and dashing, and noble. Aye, he was a noble—a rutting noble. She was a spirits damned commoner. Even if she wanted to, she couldn't. That fact remained true, regardless of whether he married Cici or not. She stiffened, but Jairen didn't release her.

"It will all work out," he whispered into her ear, his breath raising gooseflesh on the back of her neck, squeezing her ever so slightly tighter.

"I thought I'd find you here, Jairen." Cici's voice sounded from the doorway. "Morning to you both. Oh am I interrupting? My apologies. But I simply had to speak with the prince."

Lex didn't miss the emphasis Cici put on Jairen's title.

Jairen released his grip and she felt him turn to face Cici, but Lex kept her eyes fixed on the morning beyond the window.

"Good morning, Cici. What did you need to speak with me about?"

"Mother told me you met with her last night, quite unexpectedly, too, I might add. But she was vague on the details." Cici's voice sounded almost accusatory. "How did you get out of your cell?"

"You want to know how I got out, rather than what we discussed? Interesting priorities."

Lex finally turned from the window. "Actually, I want to know, too. How did you get out?"

"Oh Lex, I think you can figure that out. Remember how we met?"

Oh. Aye that made sense.

"And how did you meet, I might ask?" Cici said, taking two steps into the room. "You told me you broke into her flat while running from the city watch.

"Which is all you need to know for right now, Cici." Jairen's voice wasn't cold, not exactly, but it held a finality that told Lex the topic was over.

"I will have an answer." Cici apparently hadn't caught the hint.

"You will not, actually. Especially not if you insist on demanding."

Cici huffed. "Fine." She sighed. "Then what did you and mother speak about? I hear you're to attend our ball three nights from now. Awfully bold, don't you think?"

"I hear your mother needs help whipping her bannermen into line. Said she was throwing the ball to garner support. Well," Jairen smiled at Lex, "I need support, too."

#

Cici flung the door to Lex chambers open. "Black or Purple?" She leaned ever so slightly backwards, with her left hand pressed to the small of her own back and wore a

simple, pale yellow dress that hung off her growing belly like drapes. Elle scurried in on Cici's heels, holding two dresses in her hands.

"Huh?" was the best Lex could manage.

"Oh you're quite the eloquent one aren't you?" Cici chuckled. "Which color dress do you prefer?" She gestured to Elle who stood, arms elevated to about her head level as she held the two dresses aloft for Lex's, or more accurately, for Cici's inspection.

The blond girl came to stand beside Lex, resting an arm on Lex's shoulder as she spoke. "Given that the ball is just a few days away, it is just simply impractical to expect dear sweet Marcy to finish a new dress for you in time. So, given your size, I think, with a few alterations, she might be able to fix one of these dresses to fit you. They're my old dresses, from oh, probably three years ago or so?" She put one finger to her lips and pulled away from Lex's shoulder to look Lex up and down. "Aye, thought so. I haven't been your size for years. But any of my older dresses will make you look more doll than person. Or a child perhaps. That's hardly fitting, you know, besides the dress *actually* fitting of course." Cici laughed at her own joke, a high, almost melodic sound, like something Lex would have expected from a bird rather than a person.

She had never worn much in the way of a dress. Most of the disguises she had used on jobs in the Highland back home had been skirts that she could pull off at a moment's notice. She couldn't fight or climb nearly as well with skirts or dresses flapping around, so she'd always worn her leather's underneath.

Lex stared at the taller blond girl. Her eyes barely reached Cici's jaw, putting the noble girl almost half a head taller than Lex. "How big of a difference does our height make?"

"Oh you sweet thing. Are you sure we're the same age?" Cici tilted her head.

"Come to think about it, how old are you?"

Lex blinked. "Almost winter now, yeah? I guess I'd be eighteen, then. Or near enough."

"Oh, that is adorable then. I'm actually a few months older. Turned eighteen in the spring."

"What about that is adorable?"

"Oh nothing. Never you mind. Anyhow, which dress do you fancy?" She gestured back to Elle who still held the dresses extended, though from the look on the girl's face—and her quivering arms—not for much longer.

Lex examined the dresses. Both were long—floor length—and elegant. The purple, though, was not her style. It had lacy frills around the collar and sleeves. Besides—

"Black has always been my color."

"Bold choice. I can see why Jairen likes you." Cici smiled. "Elle dear, be a doll and hang the black one over there, then fetch Marcy to take her measurements. Oh, and do return the purple one to my old closet. You remember where it goes, right?"

"Yes, my lady. Right away." She curtsied—an awkward gesture with a dress in each hand—and scurried off to comply."

Elle returned with Marcy in tow a few minutes later. The latter was an aging woman with kindly eyes and curly hair—not quite fully gray, but certainly more gray than red.

Marcy steered Lex to stand in front of a looking glass and set about taking her measurements without much in the way of conversation—just curt commands to raise or lower her arms or to stand up straight. After taking all the measurements, Marcy stood back and held the dress up with one hand while studying Lex with such scrutiny that she couldn't help but blush.

"Turn in a slow circle," the woman ordered. "No, back straight," she said. "Arms at your side. Good, good. Feet next."

"What?"

"Lex dear, you have to have shoes to go with the dress. Sit on the couch and let Marcy see your feet," Cici said.

What was wrong with her shoes? Sammaa had given them to her just before they had left for Winniver Mill. Fur-lined insides atop a boiled leather sole, they were lightweight, made very little noise, and fit quite comfortably.

She sat on the indicated couch. "I like my shoes, though."

Cici chuckled. "That's all well and good, dear, but you simply cannot wear them with a dress."

"Why not? The dress looks long enough to cover my feet."

"Oh hun, but they will be visible when you sit, and definitely when you dance."

Lex's heart nearly stopped. "I have to dance?"

Cici blinked. "Lex, hun, that's what you do at a ball."

"I don't dance."

"Ever?"

"I don't know how."

"Oh, that's not good at all." Cici looked to Elle. "Elle dear, go fetch a musician, harpist, probably, and Norine, will you?" She looked back to Lex, a smile spreading across her face, "I hope you're a fast learner."

#

Norine was not what Lex expected. Rather than an aging and demanding woman like Marcy, Norine had almost a shy smile and a face free of age lines so that Lex guessed she couldn't be more than 24 or 25 years old. Her crystalline blue eyes almost sparkled beneath her pale blond hair as she taught Lex the basics of court dance.

As it turned out, Lex actually did learn quickly. She'd always had good balance—she was a climber, after all—but Cici had described her movements as graceful during one of Lex's early breaks. They'd felt foreign to her, some few reminded her of fighting—but slower, as if she fought submerged in mud. These, Lex picked up slower than the others, as she wanted to rush through them, rather than *glide gracefully from one movement into another*, as Norine had put it.

Cici stayed in the room the majority of the day, watching with a bemused smile on her face, only leaving for small intervals, but to Lex's dismay, always seemed to return in time to send Jairen away when he came calling.

Lex had never known dancing could be so difficult, so demanding. When, at last, Norine had called an end to the day's lessons, Lex had slunk into her bed and climbed in, still fully dressed. Much needed sleep found her in moments of laying down.

The next day passed in a similar fashion to the previous, but without Jairen's morning visit. She didn't even have time to decide if it was better he hadn't come by, as

Norine kept her busy. When the woman finally relented and Lex climbed in bed, exhaustion claimed her almost as quickly as the previous day.

Yet, sleep abandoned her again when, with the morning light just barely creeping through her window, a knock sounded at the door.

Her heart raced as she climbed from her bed and made her way through the sitting room. Was it Jairen paying her another early morning visit? She opened the door, ready to see the Princeling—but equally ready to threaten him if he ever disrupted her sleep again—only to be greeted with Cici and Elle, instead. Elle carried a large tray in her arms with two covered dishes and a pot of tea on it.

"Good morning, Lex." Cici barged through the doorway, forcing Lex to step aside. "We've got a big day ahead of us. Well, you do, I suppose. I already know how to dance."

Lex rubbed her eyes as Elle bobbed her head in greeting and scurried in to set the tray down on the short table between the couches. "Haven't I learned enough, yet?"

"Oh, hun, no. You only learned a couple of the dances. There are so many more to learn. And those are just the group dances. You haven't even learned your first partner dance yet."

"Partner dance?" Lex asked dumbly, still mostly asleep.

"Oh Zekker, yes. You'll pair off with some noble gentleman and dance several songs, each of which has their own dance." Cici waved a hand, gesturing to the couch across from her. "But first, let us break our fast, shall we? I do hope you like your eggs a bit on the runny side. That's how I prefer mine, and I just told the cooks to prepare my normal breakfast twice."

Lex sat in front of the indicated dish and Elle removed the cover. The delicious aroma of sizzled ham and the salty fried eggs warred with the crisp, buttery biscuit leaving Lex entirely unsure which to eat first. But when Elle had poured her cup of tea, the decision was taken out of Lex's hand's entirely. She sipped the rich drink and didn't even care that it burnt her tongue in the doing. She felt her shoulders relax and her eyes grow more focused as the substance that Jairen spoke of with such longing purged her body of the morning chill.

"My lady?" Elle said. "Most people, they ummm, usually take their tea with cream and sugar."

"Hmm?"

"Oh dear is this your first cup of tea?" Cici asked. "That must have been terribly bitter."

"Not nearly as bitter as the coffee I've been drinking for the last few months."

"Trust me, dear." Cici gestured to Elle who dropped two sugar cubes and splashed some milk into the cup. "Try now."

Elle finished stirring in the sugar and handed it back.

Lex took a tentative sip and found the once bitter drink had turned almost overpoweringly sweet. Did people actually drink this in the morning? She had relished that the bitterness of coffee tended to shock her mind into consciousness. And the tea—pre-sugar and cream—had had a similar effect. This, in contrast, gave no shock to her system save for the almost too-sweet film it left on her tongue. It just wasn't the same.

"You don't like it, do you?" Cici asked. "To each their own, I suppose."

Was this how all nobles drank it? "Cici, how do you take your tea?"

Cici blinked once, twice. She broke out into nearly hysterical laughter, throwing her head back and convulsing as she did. Lex looked questioningly at Elle who met her gaze and shrugged. When at last, Cici's laughter subsided, she wiped tears from her eyes and straightened her posture. "Oh my. Oh, hun, did Jairen put you up to that? Did he tell you that story? Of course he mentioned that night, no doubt, but he told you to say that, didn't he?"

"Say what?"

Cici furrowed her brow. "You mean to tell me he didn't tell you to say that?"

"How would he have known you'd eat breakfast with me? And besides, what story?"

"Oh, hun. The morning after, uhh," Cici patted her swollen belly and cleared her throat, "Malkai barged into Jairen's room to wake him up for breakfast. Upon finding me in Jairen's bed," she chuckled again, "he asked me 'Cici, how do you take your tea?' with almost the same inflection you just used. So you see, I thought Jairen had told you to say that. It was just too perfect."

Lex clenched her hands around her teacup. Jairen had not told her that story. But that was fine, right? He had told her about his history with Cici, and the evidence was plain enough to see. So why did this story upset her? Of course there would have been a morning after. And Jairen couldn't control his brother walking in on them together. But then why did Lex's fingers itch to grab for the one knife she still had?

"Oh have I said something I shouldn't have? I'm sorry dear. I can't help that I have history with him. You really should get used to the idea that you cannot have him,

though. I like you, don't get me wrong. But he is the father of my child, and he is a prince, besides."

"I rutting know, alright?" Lex shot up from the couch and strode to the window. "I know I can't have him. I don't want him anyway."

"Oh hun, I know it's tough. But it will be better for both of you if you—"

A knock sounded at the door, cutting Cici off, and Norine's voice sounded from the other side, "Time for more lesson's my dear."

Chapter 45

Jairen knocked on Lex's door for the third time that day, hoping to speak to her about his plans, only to have Cici turn him away.

"She's busy, Jair," Cici said. "And will be the rest of the day. And probably tomorrow, and the next day, too, up until the ball, of course."

Jairen cursed as he turned away. He had to talk to Lex. There were certain things he had, or at the very least, would have to agree to in order to secure the support to march on the capital, to liberate the besieged city, and to gain the political clout he would need for reform.

In his meeting with Lady Eloise Calley the previous evening, he had intimated ambition for the throne, subtly of course, but the lady had picked up on it—and indeed, seemed interested—nonetheless. He couldn't blame her for seizing this opportunity to advance her house. And though Jairen had never desired the throne for himself, he certainly sought the ability to live the way he wanted.

He had suspected that Eloise would take his bait. After all, she had attempted much the same thing through Cici, so many months ago. Even if Cici said her feelings for

him were true, the fact that her mother had put the idea into her head remained. As much as he hated to admit it, his father had been right about Cici in that she would attempt to ensnare him in the exact manner that Cici had. Again, he couldn't fault the girl. Spirits knew, he actually admired that she had acted on her plans—whereas Jairen had never even *made* plans before these.

If he couldn't speak with Lex, he would make his other preparations, and trust that Lex would understand his intent. They had been together, more or less, day and night for the past seven months. She had seen him at his lowest, had gotten to know Jairen the person, *not* Jairen the prince. Surely she would recognize any of his subterfuge for what it was.

He shook his head and made his way to the castle steward's office, where he asked about procuring the services of a tailor and sending a message. Lastly, he inquired after an armorer to prepare a special piece. Jairen had found the man more than happy to help fulfill all three requests.

The steward led Jairen through the castle and out to the training yard. Various men and women in Calley house guard uniforms drilled and sparred in the early winter air. They circumvented the guards and made their way to a stone structure jutting out from the castle. As they grew nearer, the sound of hammer striking metal separated itself from the cacophony of the guards' drills.

"Meister Trine, you'll find, is a truly remarkable woman," the steward said. "After her father's accident some four years back, she has certainly filled his boots and more. Her arms and armor are second to none, I can assure you."

"I look forward to making her acquaintance, then."

Jairen followed as the man led him through a tidy little shop lined with everything from swords and halberds to greaves and hauberks, down a short flight of stairs before emerging into the forge room. The room itself was open to the elements on the keep side, missing the upper portion of its wall, so that someone tall enough could look over the ledge and onto the work happening below. The roof hung just past the opening for the missing wall, thus shielding the forge from all but the fiercest blowing rain, while still providing excellent ventilation.

A stout woman with dark skin and darker hair stood over an anvil, hammer poised to strike at her latest piece. She glanced up, sighed, and slammed the mallet into what looked to Jairen like the makings of a sword. She used large metal tongs to dip the piece in a nearby trough, causing it to steam as the glowing metal cooled.

"Why're you interrupting mine work this time, Otway?" She glared at the steward, and Jairen realized he had never gotten the man's name. "I'm making swords for that army camped over there."

"We have other smiths working on that as well, Meister Trine. This gentleman has a more pressing concern, however." Otway gestured to Jairen. "I thought his request ought to have more practiced hands tending to it than the average smith from town."

Trine's back straightened noticeably at the clear flattery, standing just ever so slightly taller.

Jairen stepped forward and bowed a touch lower than was necessary, taking his cue from Otway's flattery. "My name is Jairen Mir-"

"Begging your pardon, my prince, but I know who you are. I mean no disrespect of course, but I got a lot of work to do. So skip the chit chat if you please and get to the gritty bits."

Jairen blinked. Seven months ago, he would have been furious to have a mere craftswoman talk to him that way. He laughed and held up a hand to stifle the steward's rebuke and took another step forward. "Very well. I seek some very specific pieces of armor."

"I've a shop back through where ya came."

"Aye you do. But I don't need steel or iron. I need bronze, you see."

"Gold and silver aint do you no goo—" she narrowed her eyes. "Did you say bronze?"

Jairen narrowed his eyes in return, the sliver of an idea forming. He nodded and Trine shooed Otway out saying that they didn't need his *nosy know-nothing nose poking where it don't belong*.

After closing the door tight behind the retreating steward, she turned back to Jairen. "Why do you need bronze?"

"Interesting forge set up, you have here." Jairen gestured to the open segment of wall.

"Ay," she said. "What about it? My Pa used to say open air makes our spirits happy and happy spirits means good work. What's it to yeh?"

"Why'd you send Otway away when I mentioned bronze?"

She shrugged and wiped her hands on her already dirty apron. "It's a strange request is all."

"I need to be able to move with my armor. Steel just slows me down. I already have one sword, but it's balanced poorly."

"Bronze's heavier than steel and iron, Princey." She cocked her head. "Perhaps you oughta leave the metal to me, eh?"

"I know it's heavier. I said *with*, not *in*." He held her gaze, unblinking, for several moments.

"When you say *with*, what do you mean?"

Jairen smiled, trying to hide his nervousness. But she was a craftswoman, not a noble. Even if it went poorly, even if she tried to expose him as blasphemous, would anyone believe her?

He took a breath, communed, solidified behind the smith, tapped her on the shoulder. She shrieked and spun to face him, eyes wild, one hand pressed to her lips as if to silence herself.

"Y-" she stuttered, "you're a walker. A real one. My Pa told me about folk like you." She shook her head. "I mean, I can, but not like that."

Jairen relaxed, heaved a sigh of relief. "You can commune, as well?"

"Nah I ain't never seen something like that. The metals just work a bit better for me, that's all."

"So then you understand why I need bronze?"

"Ay, of course." She nodded. "What'd you need?"

Jairen explained what he wanted and Trine called for her apprentices to take his measurements. He thanked her and left, but she had already started directing her team to various tasks.

"Come by in a few days, Your Highness. Gotta make sure it's fitting right before it's done."

Jairen left the armorer's shop and made his way back inside the castle's main keep, winding his way toward the aerie.

Writing to his brother was a risk he had to take. Malkai had to know what Jairen suspected of Au'Dovier and of Lucien Darkmont. If Darkmont was truly smuggling arms to Au'Dovier, what else could he be involved in? At the very least, Jairen would recommend raiding Lucien's warehouses within the city. Perhaps even more importantly, though, he needed to inform Malkai of his aims on taking control of Eastveil's army. News would reach Malkai quickly, if all went well at the ball. He had to be sure that his missive found the king first if he had any hope of convincing Malkai of his veracity.

He penned the message and watched as the aerie attendant selected the proper bird. There could be no mishaps.

The stakes were too high.

Chapter 46

After another—albeit shorter—day of dancing, wherein she'd learned a fourth group dance and even a few partner dances, Lex couldn't even bring herself to care about how strange getting waited on felt. She sat on the couch—velvet, she'd learned—and watched while Elle and a gaggle of other servants prepared her second bath in three days—this to precede the ball.

"I'll fetch the dress from Marcy, please Mistress Lex, enjoy the bath." Elle bowed

Lex undressed, sank into the tub and sighed, relishing the brief respite from activity, going over Cici's words: *You really should get used to the idea that you cannot have him, though.* She submerged her head, letting the water wash her tears away. She surfaced and looked at her scarred arms and thought again of Cici's flawless skin. Lex gritted her teeth and grabbed for the soap. She lathered her arms and chest, scrubbing until her arms grew red and raw, but the scars remained. A symbol of her life, of her upbringing, of her class, her unworthiness and her inability to be with Jairen.

"My lady," Elle gasped on re-entering the room, dress in hand. "You mustn't scrub so hard. The dress will cover that much but, my lady, what's wrong?"

Lex merely dropped the scrub brush and sunk deeper into the water, submerging her face, washing away yet more tears. Lungs burning for air, she finally resurfaced to see Elle's kind face staring worried down at her.

"Come now, my lady. Climb from the tub and let me help you dress."

Numb to all but the chill air on her wet skin, she complied and submitted to Elle's ministrations, letting the girl first dry, then dress her.

"Now sit here, I'll be back with someone to do your cosmetics and hair."

#

Jairen lay, dozing, on a leather couch in his suite of rooms in the main keep. He would have preferred a tower room like his old quarters in the palace, quiet in their seclusion from the rest of the castle, but Lady Calley had insisted on him taking the nicest guest chambers available within the castle. These rooms rivaled his brother's from back home, though, with three couches around a small table in front of a hearth, a study—complete with desk, and full bookshelves—and even a separate dining room. After so long sleeping in the communal Aardenan longhouse, these chambers felt cold and uninviting—despite the warm hearth and comfortable couches.

A knock sounded at the door and Jairen bade the blond serving girl enter. She offered him his clothes for the evening's ball but didn't meet his eyes as she left, mumbling something about preparing a bath.

Some minutes later, she returned with a small team of other servants prepared a bath for him in his chambers and helped him to wash. After so long doing things on his own, it felt foreign to allow others to draw his bath and wash his back. But he had to admit, being tended to was far more relaxing. He climbed dripping from the tub and one

of the servants handed him a towel. In the looking glass, he saw her eyes keep darting to and away from his bare form as he wrapped his waist. He had to admit, the time spent away from the castle's luxuries had done wonders for his physique. He would never be one of those mountains of muscle. No, that wasn't his body type. But he had grown lean, almost sinewy muscle from his time learning with Dederic, from countless hours in the saddle—or drivers seat—only eating what he needed to stay alert. Aye, he could certainly appreciate that the last few months had carved away the remainder of his baby fat, thinning his face and neck.

A thought struck him. He turned to the still not-quite gawking serving girl and asked, "How old do I look?"

"My l-" her eyes went wide. "My prince?"

"I'm just curious, answer please, if you would."

"Perhaps twenty and four, my prince?"

He almost laughed, but he stopped himself for fear of mortifying the poor girl. Twenty and four? Nay, he'd barely seen ten and eight. Perhaps the older visage would help him in the days to come. Perhaps he would garner more respect as he rode into the capital and faced the charges against him. Surely a more dignified appearance would help him bring the change he sought.

"My prince?" The girl's face had gone pale and her eyes had opened even wider than before.

He did chuckle, then. "All is well. Thank you, you may go."

The girl curtsied and left, the other two following suit.

Jairen dressed in silence, quaffed his hair just so, and left his chambers, butterflies dancing in his gut as he anticipated the fine line he would have to dance that night. He had rehearsed in his head for the duration of his bath, ensuring that he had the words exactly right. He couldn't make a mistake. He would not prove himself a liar. He would put the proper emphasis needed to obscure his meaning, but would not lie outright. That would cause even more trouble in the long term.

Chapter 47

Lex didn't recognize the girl staring back at her in the looking glass, cosmetics caked on her face, hair done up in some sort of fancy twist, a sleek black gown and long gloves to match. She had thought, while getting her hair and face made up, that all these ministrations might prove she could fit into Jairen's life. And maybe she could like this. But this wasn't her.

Elle came back and escorted Lex from her tower rooms, through a maze work of hallways that some part of Lex's mind made only the vaguest note of, and finally, to a grand set of double oak doors. Cici waited off to one side and smiled when she noticed Lex's approach.

"Ah but you do look lovely, don't you?" She stepped forward and linked arms with Lex. "Marcy did a brilliant job on that dress, and oh your hair is quite fetching. The boys will absolutely love you tonight. Come now, it's time to make our entrance."

They approached the doors arm in arm and Cici informed a man at the door of Lex's name before he gestured to the guards who admitted them to the room. Lex's steps faltered for an instant at seeing the scene beyond. Eight crystal chandeliers hung from the

high ceiling, illuminating the guests below who congregated about round tables draped in white cloths. A large group of musicians sat off to one corner, each wielding different instruments. A raised wooden platform dominated the hall, but only a few couples had begun dancing.

The room itself seemed to glow, or glitter. She had never seen such splendor, so many colors. And the food. Oh the food. Platters of meats and other dishes she couldn't identify sat at intervals on long tables that also abounded with piles of fruits and cheeses, desserts and some sort of sparkling drink in glass chalices. She reckoned there was enough food there to feed all the Aardenan refugees for a week.

As she and Cici approached the massive cascade of stairs leading into the ballroom, the man from beside the door stepped forward and announced, "The lady Claudia Calley and her companion, Mistress Lex of Renmarr."

Polite applause broke out across the room as the two walked down the stairs arm in arm. All eyes focused on them and Lex prayed to the spirits that the cosmetics hid the blush that she felt burn her cheeks.

Cici waved with her free hand as they neared the bottom of the stairs and spoke softly into Lex's ear. "Smile, dear. Enjoy this occasion. Walking in with me—and looking the way you do—will bring you more attention than I daresay you'll know what to do with."

Lex nodded and attempted to smile as Cici introduced her to a small group of noble boys whose names Lex quickly forgot. The next quarter hour proceeded in much the same way, and Lex slowly warmed to the smalltalk and pleasantries. More noble boys

than she could—or cared to—count introduced themselves, bowed, kissed her fingers, and asked about her ride from the capital.

Cici interrupted before their questions got too astute, and Lex couldn't help the feeling of gratitude growing for the blond girl. Just after leaving a group of particularly inquisitive gentlemen, a hush spread over the crowd and Lex turned her eyes to the stairs.

The lady Eloise Calley wore a vibrant green dress, and stood arm in arm with the most regal looking man Lex had ever seen. Wearing a sapphire doublet trimmed in silver embroidery with the royal Miraxes crest emblazoned over his heart, and a silver circlet resting on his brow, Jairen looked every bit the prince Lex knew him to be.

The crier announced, "The lady of this castle, Eloise Calley, accompanied this evening by His Royal Highness, Second Prince Jairen Miraxes."

Applause, tentative at first, grew into a roar as the lady and prince made their way down the stairs, both waving with their free hands, both smiling gracious, practiced smiles that Lex guessed were fake. At the least, she had never seen that particular smile on Jairen's lips before. Gone was his infuriating grin, replaced a smile that hid his entire personality behind it. She realized in that moment, in that single expression, that he wore a mask, just as surely as the cosmetics hid her own face. Or maybe, this *was* Jairen's normal, and their whole time together had been merely an act to get back into noble society. Sweat slicked her palms as she weighed the likelihood of the two possibilities. She feared that she didn't actually know which felt more likely.

All too soon, Lady Calley and Jairen stood before Cici and Lex. The prince removed his arm from Lady Calley's grip to sweep into a bow, planting a kiss first on Cici's outstretched fingers, and then, to Lex's surprise, she felt his gentle grip guiding her

own hand from her side to his lips. Even through the gloves she wore, the sensation of his lips on her knuckles sent thrills up her arms. "My ladies," he said, releasing his grip and standing back to his full height—but never removing his eyes from Lex's own, "you both," he paused, "look positively radiant tonight."

#

"Don't they just?" Eloise said from Jairen's left. "Pregnancy becomes my daughter quite well, wouldn't you agree? And Miss Lex, you do clean up surprisingly well, given the state you were in when we first met. You simply must forgive me for the brusque handling we gave you upon arrival. So many things to contend with given Jairen's return to court life, I'm sure you understand."

Thank the spirits he had seen to warn Lex about the tendencies of courtiers to only halfway compliment and apologize to one another, and then smiled as she pronounced my to its full extent. Despite Cici's apparent fondness for Lex, both she and her mother thrived in the courtly political arena and wouldn't hesitate to exploit any perceived weakness or flaw in Lex's admittedly rough manners.

The music changed and people moved toward the dance floor, preparing for the first group dance of the night.

Jairen offered his hand and asked the ladies for a dance, but both noble women declined.

Embarrassed, he began to retract his hand, muttering an apology, when Lex grabbed it instead.

"I'll dance."

He blinked, equal parts delighted, surprised, and worried for her. "You know how to dance?"

"She's a quick study," Cici said, as a tight lipped smirk spread across her face.

He glanced sidelong at Eloise who bore a similar grin. What did they have planned?

"Well alright then, my lady. Might I have this dance?" He spotted a hint of tightness in Lex's jaw, despite the cosmetics, and flashed her a real smile before replacing his court face.

They walked hand in hand to the dance floor and took their places across from one another, men lined up on one side, women facing them from a foot or two away.

He saw her nerves, plain as day in her wide—but focused—gaze and felt the need to say something. "You really do look quite beautiful tonight." Spirits damn him. He said tonight. What if she took that to mean she didn't look good on other nights? He scrambled to explain. "Different than normal, but beautiful nonetheless. That dress is—"

The music started and they were forced into motion by the surging lines. To his surprise, Lex actually had learned the dance well. He could tell it was her first time, as she sometimes reacted just a breath late, but she followed his lead well until they switched partners. He lost track of her in the swirling chaos of the dance, but as the final partner switch occurred, she reappeared in front of him just as suddenly as he had appeared in her life so many months before.

When the dance ended and they spun to a breathless stop, heart pounding, flush in his cheeks, he didn't care that his court smile had slipped away, leaving a dumb grin

plastered across his face. He saw a flush of color on her cheeks, not totally obscured by the cosmetics, though he couldn't tell if it was from exertion or something else.

A slower song began to play and he stepped forward to offer his hand for the next dance. His heart fluttered as she took it, and stepped into his arms. He placed his right hand on the gentle curve of her waist, acutely aware of their nearness. He noticed her blush deepen and his smile widened in return. This felt right. She felt right.

"Jairen, I don't know—"

"It's fine, just follow my lead." He pulled her in close, admittedly, probably a touch too close for propriety. But he didn't care, as he moved his hand from her waist to the small of her back, realizing with a thrill that the back of her gown dipped so low that his hand on her back touched not silk, but skin. The contact felt like lightning sending tingles up his arm. She bristled too, but didn't pull away.

The dance began and he led her through a series of spins and dips, and though the dance was slower paced than the first, he felt just as breathless as before. When, at last—and far too soon—the song came to an end, he pulled her close and she leaned her head on his chest.

This, too, felt right. He had to tell her. Had to let her know what she meant to him. He took a breath, "I—"

#

"Pardons, my prince, my lady, but might I cut in?" One of the first young men Lex had met upon entering the ball stood a few feet away.

She stepped back and looked between the two men. Jairen's smile was gone, replaced by the mask. "Of course, I would be selfish to monopolize such a beautiful

lady's company all evening." He bowed and said, "Provided Alexandra, here agrees, of course."

She glared at him for using her full name. But at his wink, she took the boy's proffered hand.

"Tis another partner song, my lord." Cici's voice came from behind her, putting a strange emphasis on the title. "Perhaps you would share this song with me? I believe I can manage a slow song at the least."

"Of course, my lady," Jairen bowed again, fake smile still in place. "You honor me with your presence." He offered his hand and she stepped in to him—or as close as she could with her belly in the way—as Jairen placed his hand on her waist.

Lex managed not to flinch as her partner mirrored Jairen's gesture and she assumed her own position for the dance. This one was far slower than even the second, and consisted primarily of a few dips and slow rocking in a circle. She found that she couldn't meet her partner's gaze and instead, her eyes kept straying toward Cici, who seemed far too comfortable with the prince. She'd shifted so that her belly didn't so much hinder their contact as extend it, as she rocked with her left hip pressing almost perpendicular to his right. He broke his gaze from Cici's to catch Lex's stare. He flashed his real smile and winked, before replacing the mask focusing on Cici once more.

The song ended and the young lord Lex had danced with released his grip on her waist, bowing low before mumbling thanks for the dance and turning away.

Lex looked toward Cici and Jairen who stood arm-in-arm but managed only one step toward them when the crier called out.

"Attention please, honored guests. Our Lady Calley speaks."

The lady stood atop the stairs and projected her voice to the crowd. "My friends, my family, my allies. I know many, if not most, of you are probably wondering why Prince Jairen, whom we took prisoner some four days hence, now walks and dances freely among us, despite the charges against him. And right you are, to wonder such things. After all, King Dalen died at the hands of the very prince that stands before you." She raised her hands to quiet the murmuring. "But I have had many a long conversation with the prince, and I believe his story. He claims that his father's death was but an unfortunate accident brought about by an argument the two had regarding my daughter. Who, as some of you may have guessed, carries Jairen's child."

"Silence. The lady speaks." The crier called over the growing chatter.

"Some claim the prince is a traitor, and accident or not, deserves a traitor's death. Yet, I ask you this: Would a traitor lead an ambush on Au'Dovien soldiers, risking life and limb to halt an advanced invading force?"

Lex managed not to snort. It hadn't gone that way, exactly.

"I say nay. You all know the circumstances by which he arrived, fleeing from La'Lune's elite soldiers. And he brings intelligence that we might better protect ourselves and our country. Prince Jairen has asked for our support in marching on the capital. We have delayed for far too long as many of you, my friends, have bickered for whom shall lead our troops now that my lord husband is gone. I cannot lead, I know nothing about military matters. And nor can my pregnant daughter. None of you has any claim over another, as each of you are my vassals, equal among peers. But what say you to the prince, the father of my grandchild? What say you to his leadership? What say you to a Calley with a claim on the throne? I posed this question to him when he asked for my

support: If we aid you, will you do right by and marry my daughter? Now I ask you again, Prince Jairen. What is your answer?"

Lex's heart sank. This spectacle made sense now. Jairen had claimed he wanted to change the system, to break the cycle of oppressed Second Son's, to fight against the Zekkerite religion. Had all of it been to get to this moment? To command an army. Perhaps he had played her for a fool. Perhaps she knew nothing of the man this prince actually was.

Jairen stepped away from Cici and straightened himself. Lex's eyes found his and that true smile flickered for an instant as he winked at her once more. Relief flooded her.

And then he spoke.

#

"Mark my words. On my honor as a prince, I will provide for Cici. Help me, join my cause, march with me on the capital, and when I sit atop the Alabaster Throne, I give you my word, I will make Claudia Calley my queen."

For a moment, an instant, a ghost of a breath, he thought Lex understood. But when Cici stepped forward and clasped hands with him, when the crowd roared their approval, Lex turned and ran from the room, nearly bowling Lady Calley over at the top of the stairs.

Jairen took a step to go after her, but Cici's grip on his arm tightened and she hissed, "Don't you dare chase her right now."

He turned, he knew his face was wild, unmasked, but he didn't care. The girl he loved thought he planned to marry someone else. And why wouldn't Lex have that idea? He hadn't had time to tell her his plan, hadn't had time to explain. Lex didn't know that he

didn't actually want the throne, didn't know that she was the only person he ever wanted to dance with, to be with, ever again. Yet, it was Cici who bore his child, not Lex. And now Lex thought he planned to marry the mother of his child.

He had to go after her, had to explain.

Cici's eyes softened and she said, "Jairen, she is upset right now. Give her some time, darling. I've been trying to soften her to the idea that she can't be with you since she got here. And though I do think she is quite smitten with you, she will get over it eventually, I'm sure."

Cici had been trying to *soften* Lex to the idea? What had she said? No wonder Lex had fled. After being so close, feeling how right they were together—a feeling he was sure she shared—while they danced, she would have felt assured that Cici had been wrong. But now?

How had he been so stupid? How could he have not realized that was the reason behind Cici and Eloise's shared smile? They had planned it, possibly this whole affair, to separate him from Lex. Or Lex from him.

"Jairen," Cici said again, placing a hand on his chest. "Darling, she will be okay. Leave her be. This is why I love you so. Always worried about others before yourself." Her voice was just louder than it needed to be, letting the nearby ball goers hear her words. He marked them as hollow, or at least not quite true.

But she was right. He could make up with Lex later. Could explain his plans tomorrow. He would have other chances with her. Tonight, though. Tonight was about securing the support he would need. He sighed and called for the dance to resume,

drawing his supposed betrothed close, though he kept the hand on her back rigid as he pressed it to her back just hard enough for her to pick up on his displeasure.

The rest of the ball saw Jairen meet with the heads of Eastveil's various mid and low tier noble families, attempting to garner their support for the war effort to come. He danced a fine line, doing his best to avoid making any promises. He spoke at length on some of the reforms he hoped to accomplish, using half truths to justify the deception to himself, until, at last, the final song came and went, allowing Jairen to retire.

He would go to Lex's rooms at first light and explain everything to her, would ask for her forgiveness in not having the time to inform her of his plans ahead of time. He wanted Lex at his side for the challenges ahead.

#

After fleeing the ballroom as fast as the dress would allow her to move, Lex made her way to her tower rooms. She entered and tore off her dress, donning her leathers in its place.

The door creaked open. "Where you headed, Lex?"

She drew her knife and turned on Dorran. "To Renhold. And don't try to stop me."

He raised his hands. "Why you going to the capital?"

"To do what I should have done seven months ago." She clenched her fists. "To kill Lucien rutting Darkmont."

Chapter 48

Malkai rode through the winding streets of the Fringe, putrid scents of refuse and unwashed peasantry accosting his nose, making his eyes water. As he wiped at the tears for the third time in as many city blocks, he resolved to fix the lower city. Besides, with the pending siege, large swathes of the city would likely need to be rebuilt anyway.

But thoughts of the coming altercation necessarily took over. He looked left to address Varlys: "How are our walls?"

"Does His Majesty want the truth or the optimistic answer?"

Malkai narrowed his eyes by way of answer. When she didn't continue he said, "How long will it take to ready them for siege?"

"A few years, I'd wager."

Malkai heard Rico sigh to his right and felt his heart sink at the apparent truth in the statement. But still he tried: "Varlys, please tell me that was a slip of the tongue and you actually meant 'days.'"

"It was a slip of the tongue and I actually meant 'days.'"

"In truth?"

"No. I meant years."

Malkai ignored Rico's soft laughter. "Then why did you say it was a slip of the tongue?"

"Perhaps, Your Majesty," Rico said between chuckles, "ought to recall that you told her to tell you that."

Malkai shifted in his saddle to turn a glare on the captain. "It was my hope, not a command."

"Even so, when the king orders, who are we to question?" Varlys's tone held the trace of a smile.

"Are the pair of you having a go at me?"

"Oh never, Your Majesty." Rico began.

"We would never dream of such behavior." Varlys betrayed the solemnity in her tone as her body shook with laughter, all the while doing her best to hide the very clear smile spreading across her face.

Heat bloomed in Malkai's cheeks and his ears burned, despite knowing on the intellectual level that the two jested in good nature. Yet, the recent defeat still weighed heavily on Malkai's mind. "Would you have spoken to my father this way?" He immediately regretted the words, making him sound very much the petulant child, rather than the dignified monarch.

Varlys's smile disappeared, her expression wiped clean. So too, Rico stiffened in his saddle, pulling his shoulders back and straightening to his full height in the saddle. Malkai tried to think of what to say to ease the tension, but it was Rico who settled it first.

"My apologies, Your Majesty. But with all due respect. You are not your father."

Varlys chimed in and Malkai had to shift in his saddle once more. "Aye, my king. Meaning no disrespect to your father, but as the captain said, you are not him. And I say it's a welcome change, Your Majesty."

"My father was a good king," Malkai protested.

"He was," Rico visibly swallowed, "He was a strong king. But, and excuse my presumption, for I know nothing of ruling save for what I have seen with mine own eyes, but strength does not necessarily make for a good king."

"Am I a weak king, then?"

"Strength, alone, that is." Varlys clarified. "Though you're new to your crown, I think you've done an admirable job thus far."

"Would that I could be both," Malkai muttered, thinking no one would hear.

"These are early days, yet, my king," Rico said. "You've done the best you can given the tumult you face."

"Aye, tumult." Malkai straightened in his saddle, trying to regain his poise. "What can be done about that, Councilor Varlys? The walls, I mean?"

The remainder of the journey through the city streets—nearly half an hour before arriving at the palace gates—was spent in discussion about the deplorable state of their defenses and what could be done to hide those weaknesses. As it turned out, little. Very little, indeed, could fix them, but Malkai ordered teams of engineers to see to the most strategic points of the walls. The Highlands, and indeed, the palace, beyond, boasted more formidable defenses, and would prove crucial fallback points if the city's outer walls fell.

The conversation left Malkai drained, even more so than before. How had his father let the city's defenses fall into such disrepair? Aye, the coffers were low, but such negligence?

Malkai dismounted, allowing a stable hand to see to his horse, and strode into the castle.

He passed Sorcha on his way to the baths. "Sorcha, be a dear and have someone fetch fresh clothes for me. I need to bathe." Then, on a whim, he turned and called to the servant who had already made it a few feet away, "Sorcha, do likewise for the Captain, as well."

"Your Majesty?" The protest clear in Rico's voice.

"You stink, man. And I would speak with you more."

"I'm on duty, my king."

"The baths will be empty, man. No threats within. Post guards at the entrance if you must."

Rico's eyes betrayed his placid acquiescence with something decidedly other. But Malkai paid the unidentifiable expression no mind and turned down the final hallway for the baths. He pushed past the door guard and into the room behind. "See, man. We already have a guard posted here."

"One is hardly enough."

"Fine, send for more, then." Malkai began undoing the clasps that held his left pauldron in place just as an attendant rushed to help with the rest of his armor.

"Meanwhile, I do believe I will enjoy the hot water."

Finally free of his mail, Malkai stepped free of his underclothes and waded into the first bath of lukewarm water and suds. A second attendant waded in and Malkai stood in waist deep water as the lad scrubbed Malkai's back. Just as the boy finished, the sound of another wading alerted Malkai to Rico's arrival. He fought the urge to turn to his friend, and instead moved into the rinsing pool where he dipped underwater to rinse away the suds. He climbed from the rinsing pool and donned the bathing shorts at the changing screen before the cold pool. Yet he passed up those invigorating waters and sank into the warm pool, instead, relishing in the muscle relaxing heat.

He had just lowered himself to the underwater bench seat so that only his head remained free when a commotion at the door drew his attention.

"Your Majesty," the door guard said from just inside the dressing area. "Lord Darkmont seeks entry. Shall I admit him?"

Malkai had half a mind to make the merchant wait. But he had business to discuss with the man. Perhaps Lucien could help fund some of the repair work on the city's walls. "Let him in."

A few minutes later, Malkai dismissed the attendants so the three of them could speak in private.

"Darkmont," Malkai nodded as Lucien lowered himself into the water.

"Your Majesty." He bowed his head. "Captain. Fancy seeing the two o—"

"I'm actually glad you've intruded, today, Lucien. See, I have an addendum to our previous business arrangement I'd like to discuss."

He outlined the plans he had for the city walls, both in the short term—to get them as ready for the siege as possible—and for the future *after* the war.

"I see, Your Majesty. I see. I assure you, I am terribly sympathetic to your cause, or shall I say, our cause. I'm already financially in league with you, and afterall, it is a poor businessman who doesn't protect his investments. However, I'm unsure as to how much aid I can provide on the matter."

"We merely need you to finance the labor and supplies. How hard can that be?"

"My king, the funds are not the issue. No, it's your ability to pay that gives me pause. Plus, there are the small issues of paperwork, official proposals, et. cetera."

Rico sighed, drawing Malkai's attention to the Captain.

"Something to add, Rico?" Malkai asked.

"I only wonder at the wisdom of going further into debt with this," he narrowed his eyes, "merchant. When you already contracted out nearly half the army's provisioning. I cannot believe I'm saying this, Your Majesty, but I agree with Lucien's sentiments. The coffers can't afford his fee, surely."

"Rico, in the future, leave the questions of our kingdom's finances to Eldwin." He turned back to Darkmont. "The crown will pay you in full, according to the same plan we outlined at the start of our partnership. It should be but a small issue to amend the paperwork."

"The paperwork, as you say, has been filed, Your Majesty. I do believe the terms are legally binding."

"By Zekker's good name, man. I am the law."

"Ah but Your Majesty, what an example would that set?"

"We're at war, Darkmont. I care not what example is set beyond doing what we must to survive the coming storm."

"And what of the storm growing in Miss Calley's belly?"

"He will *not* do it," Rico insisted. "That is a different matter enti—" but Malkai raised a hand cutting him off.

"You are testing my patience—both of you." He waited until Rico broke eye contact before continuing. "But Rico is right, Darkmont. I told you in the camp that I would take no part in the murder of an unborn child and its mother."

"As you will, Your Majesty." Lucien stood to leave. "Only, if I may—"

"You may not," Malkai said.

"I see, perhaps news of your brother's army has already reached Your Majesty, then?"

"Damn it, man. You should have led with that. Speak."

Lucien spun a tale of Jairen's arrival at Castle Calley with a band of refugees, of his arrest and subsequent release. "And, according to the report my man sent from Eastveil, Jairen has designs on your throne, my king. He even promised to marry this Cici if her family's bannermen rode with him on Renhold."

"Out," Malkai shouted. "I need to think."

"My king," Rico said. "I don't trust him."

"He's tied financially to our cause, as he said. I don't think he'd do anything to betray us. He is in it for the money."

"He has plenty of that already," Rico protested.

"Quiet. I well know your thoughts on him. Let me think."

How had Lucien been the first to know about this? His man, aye, but someone must have sent word, as well? Darkmont had a great number of resources at his disposal, but Malkai had a kingdom at his.

Zekker damn it all. The *how* of it wouldn't matter if what the merchant had said proved true. Renhold might repel one invading army, but two?

He wouldn't get anywhere worrying about it, leastwise not in the baths. Not with Rico tempting his attention from the matters at hand.

#

Malkai paced the length of his sitting room, only dimly aware of Sorcha standing in the corner watching him wear a six-step by six-step rut in his carpets.

"Your Majesty," she said, bowing low. "I—would you like some tea or wine?"

"This isn't the sort of issue I can fix with drink."

"What can I get to fix it, Majesty?"

"Information from Eastveil? News of my brother's intentions."

"Eastveil, Majesty? Haven't heard anything but gossip."

He stopped his pacing. "What kind of gossip have you heard."

"Not even the interesting sort, Your Majesty. Just something about two birds that flew in a day apart. See, Serith—that's my roommate—fancies one of the lads in the aerie and he told her that birds never come from the same place twice so soon unless something's amiss. There's only a few birds at each castle that know the way here so they got to be driven back by—"

Malkai held his hand up to cut the girl off. What had gotten into her? Zekker knew he'd never heard her say even a third that many words all at once before. No

wonder word of Jairen's tryst had spread around the castle in such a short time. The girl must love her gossip if she had that much to say on uninteresting topics like two bir—

"Two birds you said?" He crossed the room to stand directly before her.

"Aye, Your Majesty." She bobbed her head. "That's what Serith said."

"Did she say who collected the missives?"

"Dunno, her boy didn't give her a name so far as I know."

"Who is the boy, Sorcha. Which aerie attendant?" Malkai grasped her by both shoulders.

"He's not in any trouble is he?"

"Damn it, answer me. What is his name?"

Sorcha's lower lip quivered. He felt a pang of regret and let her shoulders go.

"Sorcha," he said softer this time. "What is his name?"

"Hestin, his name's Hestin. But please don't hurt him, Majesty. He hasn't done anything wrong, least not on purpose."

"Take me to him, Sorcha."

#

"Hestin? You're Hestin, yes?"

Malkai stood just inside one of the servants' chambers, Sorcha to his left, holding a candle aloft. Malkai had never visited this area of the palace before, and now that he had, planned to never return. Everything was so small, so close together. He was glad the candle didn't illuminate much more than the boy's face, for fear of seeing exactly how cramped the quarters truly were.

"Aye, sir. That be me." The lad was maybe fourteen years old with dark brown hair and almond shaped eyes.

Hestin rubbed sleep from his eyes and then dropped into a deep bow. "Apologies, Your Majesty. I was just dreami—"

"No need to apologize. It's clear enough I woke you. But I need information. The two birds from Eastveil—who collected the messages?"

"That'd be Master Lord Darkmont, Your Majesty. He came in and asked for a bird from Eastveil and well, I had two so," he shrugged, trailing off. "I didn't do nothing wrong, did I?"

Malkai glanced at Sorcha. "Not knowingly, at least. My thanks, Hestin. Get back to bed."

"Yes, Majesty, right away." He yawned. "Mighty fine idea that is."

Sorcha led the way out of the cramped servants' hallway and back into the public areas of the palace.

"Send for Lucien Darkmont, Sorcha. If he isn't in his quarters here, send a runner to his manor in the city."

#

Some two hours later, a knock sounded at Malkai's door, Rico's voice calling from without. "Majesty, Darkmont is here for you."

"Enter."

Malkai directed Lucien to a couch and nodded at Rico to remain in the room.

"Tell me about the second bird that came from Eastveil."

Malkai would have sworn that, for the barest moment, fear had flashed in the merchant's eyes. *But perhaps I'm just looking for signs of his deceit.*

"Ah, well, this is unfortunate, isn't it. I hadn't decided how—nor indeed it at all—I should tell you this. Being woken in the middle of the night and escorted to your chambers had certainly not crossed my mind as a possibility."

"How is he so loquacious even in the wee hours of the morning?" Rico grumbled from his place by the door.

"Good Captain, surely you'll remember that I'm a businessman. I'm often woken for this emergency or that catastrophe. Things go wrong at all hours. I don't like it, but alas, I must live with it."

"But for how long?" Malkai asked.

"Majesty?"

"You're trying my patience, Darkmont. Tell me about the second bird. You told me about the first."

"In point of fact, I told you about the second, not the first, but I suppose that is purely semantics at this point, is it not? Yes, the first message came from your brother, actually—"

"You intercepted a letter from my brother and *didn't* tell me immediately?"

"Aye, Your Majesty, perhaps I ought to have done just that. Yet, I knew not how to break this news to you, nor even could I vouch for its veracity. Moreover, I understand that a certain Captain—with whom you are quite close—does not like me over much. And who would a king side with in such matters—a lowly merchant, or a trusted guard and childhood friend?"

"What did it say, man? To whom was it addressed"

"Oh it said much. But as to for whom it was meant, all I know is that they are on your council. The heading merely said *Councilor*."

"And the contents of the letter?"

"Yes, well that is the source of my hesitation, such as it is. You see, it speaks of an alliance between your brother and whomever this councilor may be. He—that is to say—your brother inquired as to whether he had enough support to succeed. My assumption, especially given the second bird's news—of which you're already aware—Your Majesty, is that Prince Jairen has bought off a number of your palace guards—or attempts to, at the very least."

Chapter 49

Jairen paced back and forth between his bed and the table in his makeshift command tent which consisted of little besides the two pieces of furniture—a half dozen chairs around the table, and a trunk for his belongings. Traveling with an army—even a small one—took far longer than he had thought, and infinitely longer than he hoped.

He knew that as a Second Son, he had little to no worth. Yet this crass, crude girl, born in the city slums who never knew her father and watched her mother die before her eyes, had found something she felt worth pursuing. Even after just a short time with her, he had decided on his own course of action. He had been lost, with neither plan, nor hope. Her certainty, her direction, had given him a path to follow, and while he disagreed that revenge would mend the damage done, could he honestly say that his own goal—to dismantle and reform the system that had wronged him his entire life—didn't do the same?

Regardless, he now had his course, one entirely his. He had let Cici talk him into not going after Lex when she had fled the ball, and had lost her. He had let Lex steer him

toward the ambush, to further her own ends. Before that, he had let his father's torment tear his walls down, break him, to the point that he had lashed out.

But he *did* have a choice. If only he had seen it sooner.

He could direct his future. And those of all the empire's Second Sons so that none ever experienced the same detrimental lack of self-worth—spirits above, not even self-worth, but rather, a lack of self, a lack of identity—that he had suffered from, that the kingdom had perpetuated. He had resolved at Kedrick's funeral pyre to change the system, to tear it down if he must, and build something new in its place. Something that didn't discriminate against a person's birth. To create a system where the poor could rise through honest means, if not to nobility, then at least to prosperity. To create a system not dictated by antiquated religious beliefs, wherein blood need not be kept *pure*—whatever that meant—so that anyone might marry whomever they wished.

He would find a way to make that dream a reality. He had to, or risk losing Lex forever. But first, he had to get to the city, to break Au'Dovier's siege, talk his brother out of executing him, and—more important still—find Lex before it was too late.

Jairen started at Dederic's voice. "Deep thoughts?"

"How'd you know?"

"You only stop pacing when your legs can't keep up with your mind." His teacher smiled.

"Are you saying I'm slow?"

"Most certainly." He shrugged and gestured to someone hidden from Jairen's view past the tent flap. "But, it seems the smith finished her work, so perhaps that is one less worry to speed your thoughts."

A courier with dark, curly hair and darker eyes moved into the tent and bowed low—an awkward gesture given the heavy, oil cloth-wrapped parcel in his arms. The lad had barely seen sixteen years if Jairen had to guess by the patchy growth of beard on the boy's chin. Jairen shook his head at the thought of calling a person barely two years his junior "boy." But these last few months had forced him to grow. He just hoped he'd changed for the better.

He gestured that the boy could rise. "You have my mail?"

"Ay, Your Majesty, I am a courier. I deliver mail."

Jairen chuckled, unsure if the lad meant the play on words, but appreciating it all the more. "I meant the parcel you carry ought to be my new chain mail. Oh, and I'm no king. *My lord* or *my prince*, even *Your Highness* will suffice."

"Yes my lord prince, Your Highness, sir. I have your mail. Your chain mail, that is."

Jairen rolled his eyes and walked to the boy. "Well hand it over then."

The courier did as bid but lingered for a moment until Jairen realized why and flipped him a piece of silver—far too much for such a delivery, but he *was* a prince, after all. And appearances mattered.

Jairen unwrapped the heavy bundle revealing a coat—little more than a doublet, in truth—made entirely of interlocking riveted bronze rings. How she had made it so fast, he didn't know. Though he suspected spirits played no small part. Whatever her secret, with but two days between the city and their camp, it had arrived not a moment too soon.

"How long until we move out?" he asked Dederic as the two exited his tent and stepped into the crisp morning air.

"Not long. I'd say another hour at most."

Another hour. The closer he got to the city, the more impatient Jairen had become. He wanted to finish this, to be done with the pretense of leading these men against the capital. He hated that he saw it as a necessary evil. He hadn't promised that he would seize the throne of course, but merely that he would marry Cici when he did. Somehow, he figured the technicality wouldn't appease many nobles. Yet, if he achieved the reform he sought, maybe—just maybe—he could keep the country from dissolving into civil war. He walked a dangerous path along a razor's edge. One misstep could spell disaster not just for him, but also for the empire. Yet, no matter how he looked at it, he had to move forward. He had long since crossed the point of no return. He would see this to completion, one way, or another.

Chapter 50

"My king," a rosy faced man in messenger vestments bowed, breathless before Malkai, not fifteen feet removed from his chambers.

Malkai felt his heart rate increase, already knowing the man's tidings. "How far out?"

"Majesty, perhaps ten leagues."

Rico gasped from Malkai's right. "They'll be here in two days."

"Or sooner," Malkai agreed, nodding in Rico's general direction before addressing the messenger. "Send word to the city gates that we will be closing traffic to and from the city at nightfall."

"So soon?" Rico asked.

"They are sure to have advanced groups. Some are likely already in the city. I'd like to stop them from returning to the main body of troops to inform on our preparations. Likewise, I want to limit any further insurgents from entering to aid the efforts of those already here."

"My king," Rico began, "Our men are trustworthy and diligent. They—"

"Are human and can make mistakes," Malkai cut his friend off before the man's objection crossed into insubordination. Questioning him in private, Malkai welcomed, but not in public. For a man so fixated on procedure to question Malkai openly, Rico must be more worried than he had let on. Malkai continued, ice in his tone, "And more germane to the issue, Captain, our opponents have outsmarted us once. We will *not* willingly give them the opportunity to do so again. We face a siege, man. Threat enough approaches from without, we must do everything in our power to ensure we mitigate the threat from within."

Rico winced, either at Malkai's rebuke or the truth in his words, and bowed. "Of course, Majesty. Please forgive my impertinence."

Malkai turned back to the messenger without acknowledging Rico's apology. Their relationship had become so tenuous as of late. Why could he not have held his feelings in check? Should he have taken his councilors' advice and married Varlys? Not in light of what Lucien had told him, certainly. Perhaps Varlys herself was in league with his brother. "Well? I gave your orders, man. Was there more you had to report?"

"Yes, my apologies, Your Majesty. I'll be going now."

When the man had turned the corner and the corridor leading from Malkai's apartments seemed clear, he turned on Rico. "I value your opinion, but do not openly question me, Rico."

"Ay, Majesty. I was out of line. The news caught me off guard is all. Still, I do question the logic of halting traffic a full day in advance. What of the people left outside?"

Malkai shook his head, sad at the necessity of his next words. "They will have to make do. We already advised the limitation of travel outside the city for this exact reason. Any who failed to heed the warning," Malkai shrugged and trailed off, hating the callousness of his words, but believing them nonetheless.

"As you say." Rico bowed and followed as Malkai resumed his trek to Lucien's office.

They rounded the last corner before arriving at Lucien's office and pulled up short as a thin, wiry man, followed by a massive hulk of a man exited the room. Where had Malkai seen the bigger man before?

"Isn't that Lucien's grunt who brought us to him that day you inspected the empty flat?" Rico asked.

Malkai rubbed at his chin feeling the stubble of a nascent beard. He'd need to shave later. "Aye, what was his name?"

"Ahh perfect timing, Your Majesty," Lucien said, as he stepped from his office. "Rollo just left. I've had him inspecting the city walls. Care for some tea?"

Rico kept his voice low enough that only Malkai could hear. "But why is *he* inspecting the walls?"

They followed Lucien into the room. The merchant's office was almost as gilded as the man's daily vestments: rich crimson tapestries hung from walls left and right, while a painting depicting a horse drawn wagon traversing a dark road underneath a silver crescent moon hung directly behind Lucien's desk, the room's golden candelabras—though likely not solid gold—gave a strange, overly bright appearance to

the room, as candlelight flickered and reflected off the shimmering surfaces despite the natural light streaming in from the windows on either side of the painting.

"Ahh please, Your Majesty," Lucien gestured to a chair across from his own desk. "Have a seat. To what purpose do I owe the pleasure of your most esteemed company?"

"Why do you have Rollo inspecting the city walls?" Malkai asked, dispensing with tiresome niceties. "We have teams of builders and engineers doing exactly that."

"True, true. Your Majesty is quite right, of course. But you see, before I took Rollo into my employ, he worked—shall we say—beyond the scope of the average engineer. He specializes in demolition."

Rico tensed to Malkai's left. "Why is a demolition specialist inspecting walls that we need to reinforce—as opposed to *destroy*—ahead of the siege?"

"Merely exploring all options." Lucien addressed Malkai. "You see, Majesty, our walls are in deplorable condition. I said as much to Rollo and he suggested—jokingly, I'd like to think—that we destroy them and start over. Which got me thinking."

"We don't have time for that, merchant." Nor did they have the money for that.

"I concur, my king. However, we haven't the time to shore up our battlements, either. So my thought was, perhaps we could collapse whatever gatehouse the Au'Dovien army breaks through—assuming the break through at all, of course. It might not stop them altogether, but any killed in such a gambit would help our defenders at the Highland Wall, if and when we retreat, correct?"

Malkai rocked back in his chair, understanding Lucien's cold logic, surprised to find that for once, he didn't necessarily disagree. Indeed, what significance did a broken wall hold in the face of a city's survival.

"Have we the resources to make it happen?"

"I believe so, Majesty. My warehouses hold all types of goods. I daresay I'll take a loss, selling at a discount like this but," the merchant spread his hands out palms up, "desperation makes fools of us all."

"What say you, Captain?" Malkai cursed himself for not bringing Varlys along to this meeting. Though Rico had a keen mind for military plans, Varlys ought to have offered her opinion.

"I," Rico clasped hands in his lap, "see no fault in the plan, provided Rollo knows his work."

"Oh, Rollo knows his work well. It will turn out exactly as planned, Majesty, fear you not."

Chapter 51

Malkai spun the wine in his cup, wary of drinking anything the Au'Dovien prince offered. Despite the man's jovial face—bright blue eyes underneath sandy brows with long hair curling to the nape of his neck and only the barest stubble to age his almost-genuine smile—Malkai bore no illusion that the prince would do anything he deemed necessary to win this war. And what easier way than to poison the other side's commander?

Au'Dovier had called for parley two days after they'd arrived, camping less than a mile from the city's main gates.

Malkai looked up at the ceiling of the pavilion Au'Dovier's men had erected for this meeting, taking in the blood red fabric as he thought through the prince's proposal. It really hadn't been an outlandish set of terms. He and his councilors would surrender, and any who offered no resistance would be allowed to live in comfort—albeit secluded from the outside world—for the remainder of their lives. In fact, Prince Andre only sought the deaths of the High Zekkite and his eight juniors. Nine lives to save Zekker-knew how many if they met in battle. By all accounts, fair terms.

Nine lives to save his city, his people, from the carnage of war. Yet, acquiescing wouldn't merely mean giving up his throne, but also his birthright, his family's legacy. Could he abandon it that easily? Should he? His father would have spat in the Au'Dovien prince's face and stormed from the tent. But Malkai was not Dalen, for better or worse. Malkai had only to choose the path best for his people. But which one?

They still had the numerical advantage, and the boon of walls—and Lucien had reported that Rollo had finished planting the explosives. Moreover invasions always proved more challenging than defenses, according to all the tactical manuals he had read. Yet, he returned to that selfsame issue: Au'Dovier would have access to the same information, yet why then did this prince seem so confident. Aye, he had defeated Malkai's army in open combat, but how could the man equate a victory in the field to taking a city?

The thought struck him like a blacksmith's hammer on an anvil: Jairen. Intelligence told him that Jairen marched at the head of the Calley army—a force nearly as large as Au'Dovier's, based on the reports. If Jairen sought to lend his support to the invaders, they very possibly had the numbers to challenge the defenders. Especially given Jairen's knowledge of the city's defensive layouts.

Yet, even so, could Malkai simply stand aside and allow his apparently traitorous brother to usurp the very kingdom Jairen had destabilized the day he had killed their father?

Malkai stood from the velvet couch Au'Dovier had provided. He sat the goblet of wine on the table before him, careful not to spill a drop of the untasted substance. "Here are my counter terms:" he said, drawing himself to his full height. "Withdraw. Return to

Au'Dovier chastened and in six months' time, a treaty will be sent for your—or more germane to the point—for your father's signature ceding ownership of your," he cleared his throat, "kingdom to the Renmarran throne. In return, your family will maintain governance of the province insofar as the empire allows its other provincial governors. Your family will become vassals to the Renmarran throne and House Miraxes, and will be afforded all benefits therein. We will seek no further retribution for this ill-conceived invasion attempt, and allow you to return to your homes unmolested."

"Oh Malkai," Andre Au'Dovier said as he, too, regained his feet. "I am so very sorry that it has come to this. But those terms are most unacceptable. I would be remiss to have come all this way only to hand our kingdom over to you at the last, when your own military efforts have never so much as sniffed our capital city. No, we will not return until victory is at hand, one way or another."

"Then, I believe this parley has come to an end, Andre."

"At last, something we can agree on. Sleep well, tonight, this last that you shall ever know. Come dawn, we attack."

Malkai left the pavilion, making a point to turn his back on the so-called prince, the arrogant tosser. Once mounted, he set off for the city gates at a canter, Rico following close behind. Once safely behind the city walls, he slowed their pace to a trot as they wound their way through the twisted streets of the Fringe.

Malkai felt Rico's eyes on his back for several blocks before the captain spoke. "We have 'til morning?"

Malkai glanced up at the sky, estimating another four hours before full dark. "So he said. Yet—"

A horn blew at the city gate, heralding Au'Dovier's advance, confirming Malkai's suspicions.

Malkai cursed and kicked his horse back into a canter. He needed to arm himself and prepare.

#

Malkai stood on the battlements as Au'Dovier's siege towers rolled onward, right through the field of dead before Renhold's wall. By the time Malkai had made it back to the wall, his troops had already repelled Au'Dovier's first sortie. All about him, Renmarran archers readied themselves next to barrels of pitch. Rico stood to Malkai's right, tense as a bowstring, himself. The afternoon sun reflected off the Au'Dovien army's mottled arms and armor of bronze, steel, and iron.

"Nock," he called. Attendants stepped forward and lit the nocked arrows on the bow. "Draw." Malkai heard the creak of longbows as they bent to full draw. He waited a heartbeat, took a breath. "Loose."

He repeated the series of commands another four times before he realized ought was amiss. The fire arrows extinguished just before reaching the towers. Not a single structure took flame. He cursed, remembering the Au'Dovien fire magicks in their previous encounter.

"No more fire," he called, and heard his order echoed over and over down the walls. "Fire at will. Aim for those pushing the towers."

The next few minutes passed in agonizing nothingness as his archers attempted to pick off as many of Au'Dovier's men as possible. He watched in helpless silence as first one, then two of the four towers made it to the wall.

Makeshift drawbridges slammed into the tops of Renhold's battlement and Au'Dovien soldiers poured forth.

"Hold the wall." Malkai's troops picked up his cry, and he drew his sword. Beside him, Rico did the same. Together, they waded into the battle.

Malkai ducked an attacker and shoved out with the Will, toppling the man off the wall. Rico caught a sword meant for Malkai, reposted, pirouetted, and took a second man through the side. Malkai exchanged two strokes with another attacker before running him through. Rico and Malkai cut a swath through the enemy ranks, working in perfect unity, knowing where the other stood, covering for one another as they went.

Renmarran soldiers surged around the king and captain, looking for all the world that they'd stymie the flood of invaders there on the wall.

Another boom sounded, and another. The other two towers had made it to the wall. And in the confusion, they'd brought a battering ram almost unmolested to the gate.

Should they retreat?

Malkai took a blow to his ribs, grunting as the mace dented his armor. Rico dispatched the assailant with a thrust.

"We should retreat," the Captain called to Malkai.

Aye, retreat and blow the wall. He drew in as much of the Will as he dared, filling himself, feeling his spirit swell, then released it, knocking hundreds off their feet, off the walls. The nearest siege tower shuddered but stood.

"Retreat," he called. "Retreat." A horn blew passing his command along to his troops.

They fought back off the walls, down the stairs and into the street beyond. The gate bowed as the ram struck it again.

Their retreat had allowed the Au'Dovien troops a foothold on the wall. Invaders streamed down the stairs after the Renmarran defenders just inside the gates. Malkai prayed they had the timing right. Letting too many through would prove fatal, but not stranding enough on the inside of the wall after its collapse would waste the surprise tactic.

Malkai cut down two assailants and glanced at Rico. His friend was truly un-touched. His armor had lost its normal shine beneath the chaos of battle, but not a single scratch marred its surface. He breathed evenly, dispatching enemies with fluid grace that Malkai had only glimpsed in the training yard.

The Captain finished off the last of four Au'Dovien soldiers that had broken free and nodded at Malkai.

"Blow it," Malkai called out, raising his sword in the prearranged signal to light the fuse. "Retreat, fall back."

They would fight an organized retreat through the city, holding choke points along the main streets until all of his forces had made it safely behind the Highla—

An explosion rocked the city, even four blocks back from the wall, men stumbled and fell. Screams rose as stone blasted skyward. How many had the detonation killed? Had Rollo gauged the explosives right?

As the dust settled, Malkai's heart sank. Instead of collapsing the gate, a massive hole gaped in the city walls. Au'Dovier's army cheered and surged through the gap.

The Captain grabbed Malkai by the arm and pulled him away. What had he done?

What had Rollo done wrong? What had Malkai allowed?

Rico's voice rose. "Fall back to the Highland's."

Chapter 52

Lex knelt in the shadows of the very same alley as she'd done on the night Lucien's men had captured Bozarth so many months ago. She visualized the route she had taken to the top of the Highland Wall, though she couldn't see the handholds from her place in the alley.

Two nights before, Dorran had heard at a tavern that Lucien Darkmont had taken a role in the palace, and Lex had verified that rumor at two other pubs the previous night, wanting to hear the knowledge first hand before acting on it. She would not walk into a trap like they had done on their last trip into the upper city. Their headlong charge into the job had ended in Bozarth's capture, and the eventual death of her uncle. She couldn't take a risk like that again.

The similarities between that last time and this made the hair on the back of Lex's neck stand on end. Her plan to get over the wall was almost identical to then. She would climb the wall and throw a rope down for Dorran and Boz. Although, they had a larger margin of error this time. Whereas one guard had been on duty last time, this section stood abandoned save for one patrol that passed by only every five minutes. That fact,

too, made her palms sweat. Maybe the battle at the city's outer wall meant only a token force guarded the inner, but wouldn't a city under siege be more vigilant than this?

Movement off to the right caught her eye as the two man patrol came back into sight, they made it to the edge of their section of wall, scanned the alleyways beyond, and turned to retrace their steps. Lex tensed and shot off toward the wall, careful to run on her toes as she closed the hundred or so yards between alley and wall.

The crates she had used last time to clear the first segment of the wall weren't there, so instead, she increased her speed and ran up the wall two steps, before planting a third and leaping left for a small outcropping. She caught herself, arresting her momentum with her left before pulling herself up. She swung her right leg to find a foothold and then pushed up onto the ledge just below the crenels. She peered around, checking for any sort of motion, and seeing none, stood, and swung a leg over onto the wall beyond.

Dorran ran from cover and tossed a line of rope up to her, which she fastened around a merlon for the other two to climb up. She looked at the city beyond. From her vantage, she could see the battle happening at the gates, though she couldn't discern who was winning. Not that she cared anymore. Jairen had been interested in the fighting to come, not her. She only cared to see Lucien's blood dripping from her knives.

Just as Bozarth cleared the top of the wall, a horn blew in the distance. Lex's heart skipped a beat as she thought, for a moment, that someone had spotted them.

"I think," Dorran said, staring North to the city gates, "I think that was the horn for retreat. They'll be falling back to defend this wall. The Fringe is lost."

The tacit way he said it gave her pause. *The Fringe is lost*. Spoken with no inflection, merely stating a fact. She found herself swallowing hard as she struggled to make sense of her jumbled feelings. The city, itself, still stood, but her home, her place of birth and rearing, had been abandoned. What kind of leader abandoned the poorest of their people to their own fate in the face of danger with so little resistance? How had the mighty Renmarran empire been bested in fewer than three hours.

Dorran answered her unspoken question. "The wall's too long. And too long neglected. The watch will hold choke points as they retreat to this wall. It's a smaller front and can be held longer." He shrugged. "Probably."

Boz untied and began coiling the rope. "If they be retreating, we ought to move along too."

"I couldn't agree more," Lex said, heading for the stairs.

Their group trotted through the Highlands, winding their way up the hill, growing ever closer to the summit. Yet, they made slow progress, as companies of troops patrolled, messengers or scouts ran between wall and palace.

"Follow me," Dorran said after they ducked behind hedges to hide from what must have been the fifteenth group of soldiers to pass them since making it over the wall.

"I know a place we can lay low until the sun goes down in full."

An explosion rocked the city and a cloud of dust shot skyward. "Spirits save us," she said. "What was that?"

"Did that come from the outer wall?"

"Ay," Boz said, "I think 't did."

"Don't think we have time to lay low, if we're going to get to Lucien and get out," Dorran said.

Lex gritted her teeth. When they had made their plan the day before, Lex had tried to tell them she'd go in alone. She had held no illusions of escaping with her life once she had killed that rutting man. She wouldn't need to. Her revenge would be complete, Grans and Ked both dead, Jairen equally out of her reach. She would have no need to escape, but she hadn't wanted Dorran and Boz to die for her vendetta, whether they had loved her uncle or not. So when they insisted on accompanying her, she shifted some of her attention to allowing for escape.

Yet, that was *before* the battle had begun. Spirits, the army hadn't even arrived yet when they had made their plans.

"I'll finish this alone," she said, bringing Dorran and Boz to a stop in front of her.

"Not bloody likely," Boz said. "We made it this far didn't we?"

"We came for a reason, Lex." Dorran said. "You can't do this job alone." He pulled a knife from his belt and spun it between his fingers. "We want a stab at the bastard too."

"I can't," she swallowed, "I can't guarantee you will get out alive if you come with me."

"Tis true enough." The locksmith scratched at his mangy beard. "But we knew what we was getting into beforehand. 'Sides," he said, cracking a toothy grin, "What if you need a lock jimmied?"

"Two pairs of knives are better than one, Lex." Dorran motioned her along. "Come on now. We best be going."

Chapter 53

Jairen and his army swept through the Au'Dovien camp like winds over a plain, encountering little to no resistance. Jairen shouted orders to form back up and prepare to march on the city when an explosion rocked the world. Even a mile from Renhold's walls, the boom sounded as thunder directly overhead.

He turned and beheld the scene at the gate. How had Au'Dovier blown a hole in the wall? Aye, the battlements were likely still in disrepair, but he couldn't fathom what had caused the explosion.

He'd planned to ride in and crush the Au'Dovien forces between his charge and Renhold's walls—praying that his missive had reached Malkai and Renmarr's forces knew not to attack him. Yet, now, with the invaders spilling into the city unchecked?

He called for Dederic.

"Take two of your best rinnaard and ride ahead. I need eyes." He sketched a quick map of the garrison's retreat plans, outlining the likely choke points the guards would hope to hold in order to protect the soldiers as they made their way back to the Highland

Wall. Then marked the drawing to indicate where they would rendezvous. "And Dederic." He grabbed his mentor's arm. "Be careful."

Dederic nodded once before mounting his horse and riding away. It felt odd to give orders to a man who had taught him so much. But, perhaps the ability to do so marked him as a good leader—to compartmentalize relationships in order to produce the best results with the troops under his command.

He turned to Lady Astrid Kimbeau, Cici's cousin, whom he had appointed one of his commanders. She led one of the largest contingent of soldiers in his force, accounting for nearly a third of his overall forces. That fact alone would have given him ample reason to select her. But her cool disposition and the fact that people touted her as having a keen mind had sealed his decision. Plus, he'd watched her sparring with three of her men at once, not just fending them off, but besting them with the twin short swords she wielded with such alacrity.

"Stick close, keep your men organized. I have a rough idea of where Au'Dovier will try to breach the Highland."

She nodded her assent and Jairen called for their troops to resume their march on the city. This battle would be nothing like any of the texts he'd read. Taking a city was one thing. Defending a city, another. But taking a city from an invading army while the city inhabitants defended?

They cleared the remaining mile, approaching the city walls at a trot, weary of any straggling troops—from either side. Jairen took in the sight as they neared.

Closer up, he drew a mental picture of what must have happened. The crater left by the explosion centered *inside* where the wall once stood.

"What could have done this?" He heard himself ask amid the throbbing in his ears. His voice sounded hollow and far off.

"Is this the product of the strange magics you spoke of? Does Au'Dovier wield this kind of power?" Astrid asked from his right as they passed through the rubble-strewn gap in the wall and into the city beyond.

Au'Dovier's magic, maybe. Either that or treachery from within? Treachery in the form of Lucien Darkmont? It fit with the image he'd drawn of the man after uncovering the smuggled weapons—even if Jairen still didn't understand the man's motivations.

After several minutes of winding through narrower side streets to avoid barricades and rubble along the main streets, they finally emerged into the central plaza. Jairen's breath caught as he took in what had befallen the once beautiful square. The central fountain which once held a statue of Zekker had its side blasted open, spilling its water onto the street beyond. The marble statue of Renmarr's god figure had been reduced to rubble save for the statue's left leg, which ended just above the knee. The other seven statues about the plaza lay in similar states of destruction. All the major storefronts lining the square blazed, or smoked from charred remains.

Jairen felt the sting of tears welling in his eyes. He hadn't come to the lower city often, yet, he had liked this spot. The anonymity he had once felt as a well dressed—but unremarkable—youth perusing the shops, where he was no more and no less than Jairen. Not Jairen Miraxes, not Prince Jairen, nor even a Second Son. To see this square in such disrepair, if he hadn't already wanted to repel the Au'Dovien invasion, the spirits damn well knew he did now. He clenched his fists around his reigns until his knuckles turned white.

"Statues can be repaired, my prince. Fountains refilled, and stores rebuilt," Astrid said, her green eyes and dark hair reminding him in that moment almost painfully of Lex. Where was she, anyway? Hiding within the city already? Secure in some safehouse, he hoped. But, knowing her, she would have gone for Lucien already. Had she succeeded or failed?

More germane to the issue at hand, though: where was Dederic?

Another explosion shook the city, collapsing an already burning building to the west side of the square. Gouts of flame shot skyward to the south. Near to the Highland Wall, toward the Highland Wall. The tremor lasted nearly a minute.

Astrid looked around, eyes wide. "What in Zekker's name was that?"

"That," Dederic said, riding into the square, accompanied by only one of the two rinaard that he'd left with, "Lady Kimbeau, is the Au'Dovien magic at work."

"Tell me what you saw," Jairen ordered.

"It's like we saw during that ambush on the caravan," Dederic explained. "But more powerful. And focused on specific points."

"Specific how?"

"I don't know how they knew to direct the fire where they did," Dederic shrugged, "but they blasted a hole in the wall *next* to a gate."

Astrid gasped. "Not in the gate itself? Is that what happened at the outer wall?"

"Maybe," Dederic nodded. "They turned their fire on a spot next to the gate, for barely a moment, in truth. But the wall exploded. That's what made the tremor."

"How'd you get here so quickly?" Astrid asked, eyes narrowed.

Dederic cocked an eyebrow and glanced at Jairen, "The clearing before the wall starts just past those buildings, my lady." He gestured to the line of burning structures just south of their location.

Astrid made an O with her mouth but said no more.

"Lady Kimbeau," Jairen said, "Take your cavalry and skirt around to the east. As soon as we engage the center, start your charge."

She cocked her head sideways and blinked, hesitated a heartbeat too long, then nodded. "Your will." She turned away to organize her men.

"How many are they?" Jairen asked his mentor.

"Hard to tell. More than us though. Maybe ten?"

Jairen cursed under his breath. He had hoped the fight at the wall would have proven more taxing on the Au'Dovien forces. "Form up." Jairen called to one of his officers who passed the orders along. The men arrayed themselves, cavalry in front for the initial charge, with infantry bringing up the rear. He knew the risks of barreling into a superior force, especially driving right at their center. Yet, if they had blown a hole in the wall, Au'Dovien troops would bottleneck at the opening, hopefully facing resistance from retreating Renmarran soldiers as well. If he could catch them with even a third of their forces on the other side of the wall, that would even the odds. Provided Astrid's charge came through in time.

Jairen trotted his horse to the head of his modest army and turned to face them.

"Men and women of Eastveil," Jairen called out from atop his black-as-night destrier. His voice rising above the distant din of battle, through the ranks of his small army. "Around this bend lies the Highland, the seat of the kingdom. Even now,

Au'Dovien forces climb the hill toward our palace, toward the Alabaster Throne. I know not what fate has befallen the Renmarran defenders, but I *do* know that my brother would not have given up easily. We will find out whether they still hold out behind the palace walls. But for now, we face the enemy directly before us. One wall, one hill, one army, stands before us. Three obstacles, three hurdles to overcome. I will not lie to you, my friends. The task ahead shall not be easy. And when we prevail—Ay, when we stand victorious—and our enemies lay scattered, defeated, as the dust settles on the throne, the real fight will begin. This is but the beginning of our journey, the first hill we must climb." He drew his sword. "For our kingdom, for our people, for our children. Who among you stands with me?"

Jairen paused as his small army—barely six thousand strong—cheered in assent.

"To battle," he cried, turning, spurring his horse toward the city.

"Ride at my side," he said to Dederic.

His mentor merely nodded his assent and turned his horse to face the battle to come.

Heart beating in his throat, palms slick with sweat inside his bronze gauntlets, bronze chainmail armor clanking in time with the beat of his horses hooves, he drew his sword and called for the charge. They rounded the narrow bend in the road that had hidden his men from view and he spurred his horse into a gallop, wondering in a brief moment of panic if his men had followed, or if he charged an entire army alone. Then the thunder of hooves picked up behind him as his men joined the race. An insane laugh escaped his throat and he screamed determination as Au'Dovien troops, perhaps six thousand still on this side of the wall, turned to meet his charge.

He barreled through three men, hacked at a fourth. All around him, men kicked and horses screamed as the charge's momentum slowed perhaps halfway into the Au'Dovien center. With a start, he realized his error. He had moved straight through, rather than hitting at an angle. His charge had faltered and his men would be surrounded. He tried to steer his horse away, out to safety, to lead his men through, but which way was out?

His vision had turned all silver and red with armor and blood, he hacked at anything that came near, a wild fear setting in over him. A pair of hands pulled him from the saddle and he communed away. He congregated and cut one man down from behind. He turned and caught a sword slash with his blade. His longsword's reach slowed him down in close quarters, so he switched his grip, left hand on the hilt, right hand grasping halfway up the blade. He deflected one thrust and ran the man through. Pain seared through his left leg and he toppled to the ground.

He communed again, congregated on his feet a short distance away to hamstring an Au'Dovien soldier with his own dagger. He spun and hacked at another man, then another, carving his way through the bewildered soldiers until a blast of heat shot past him, burning his vision. On instinct, all but blind from the arcane fire, he communed again, and recongregated in time for a second blast of fire to engulf his left arm. He screamed, smelling the burning leather jerkin he wore atop his mail. He communed again, his breath growing ragged, and solidified next to the soldier who'd cast the fire. Jairen drove his sword into the man's gut, then kicked him off the blade. He had only a moment to take in the three soldiers before him, each wielding a bronze sword of their own. He

wouldn't be able to heal any wounds from them by communing. And would be defenseless in his incorporeality if they cut through his mistform body with those blades.

The middle man rushed Jairen, the other two edging around to flank him. Jairen parried the first man's overhead slash but had to cut his repost short to deflect a thrust from the man on the right. He felt, more than saw, the third man slice for his back, but was too slow to spin away entirely. The chain mail saved him, but the impact still knocked him off balance. He risked communion for an extra burst of speed in escape and reformed a few feet away, nearly breathless. These men were no amateurs. They had plenty of experience fighting together, their movements timed almost perfectly.

Jairen drew a dagger from his belt. He had never excelled with shields, finding them too heavy, but he'd seen the way Lex moved, danced with her knives. Maybe he could do something similar.

Two of the three advanced on him this time, the middle man hanging back a step. Jairen sidestepped the left man's thrust, spinning inside his guard, and drawing the knife across his forearm. He screamed out, dropping his sword, but before Jairen could deliver the killing stroke, he had to check the other man's overhead swing. The third chose that moment to advance, aiming three cuts at Jairen's chest and a fourth at his legs in quick succession, forcing Jairen backwards. One man lashed out at Jairen's side, but instead of stepping out of the man's reach, he closed the distance, the blade painting fire across his bicep, using the man's surprise to twist around and shove him into his comrade's swing. The second man couldn't check his blow and cleaved through his companion.

Anger like Jairen had never seen lit like fire in his attacker's eyes and Jairen couldn't help but feel sorry for the Au'Dovien soldier in that moment. But then they

advanced and the time for pity ended. Jairen stepped forward to meet the first attacker when the beating of approaching hooves reached him, mixed with the din of battle and the screams of the remaining Au'Dovien soldiers as they dove away from the charge.

Jairen's eyes went wide as a wild-eyed Astrid Kimbeau rode through one of Jairen's attackers, heading straight for him. He saw recognition and panic in her eyes as she realized too late that she was a heartbeat from trampling her commander.

He communed, felt a strange dispersing sensation he'd never experienced as the horse ran right through his cloud of mist, scattering his essence. In a moment of panic, Jairen wondered if he'd be able to reconvene, but then the cavalry charge passed him by and he congregated. He checked himself, patted his body down to ensure he had all his limbs, and finding himself whole, he sheathed his sword. The fighting around him had all but ended with that last charge, and he turned to see that the Renmarran defenders had rallied to halt Au'Dovier's advance on the other side of the wall. Perhaps three hundred Au'Dovien troops remained, having thrown their weapons down and surrendered.

"Zekker damn you," Astrid's voice drew Jairen's attention from the wall. "I thought I'd run you over." She dismounted her horse a few paces away and fell to a knee. "My apologies, my prince."

"In point of fact, Lady Astrid, you *did* gallop right through me." Jairen smiled. No point trying to hide his ability to commune now, anyway. The ladies Calley both knew, and after the battle, who knew how many others.

"So you *did* turn to mist then? I didn't hallucinate that?"

"Ay, it's a longer explanation than we have time for now. Roundup our survivors."

He looked over his left shoulder to see a still helmeted soldier in Renmarran officer's insignia striding their way. "Be ready for anything."

Chapter 54

Dorran, dressed in a guard's uniform that he had liberated from a lagging patrolman, shoved Lex forward, past the sentries at the palace gate. Bozarth, walking next to Lex stumbled as he received the same treatment.

"Who do you got here?" one gate guard asked.

"Dunno," Dorran said. "The man said he had information for Lord Darkmont. The girl refused to leave his side. She ain't done nothing wrong so I didn't see the harm."

"There's a battle going on man."

"Hectus Baldwin sent me. Guess he thought the information was worth having."

Lex studied the interior of the palace wall's portcullis, doing her best not to look suspicious, to not look back at Dorran. In truth, the portcullis *was* interesting. Though clearly designed with beauty in mind—gray stone sealed in some sort of glimmering substance that gave the walls a silvery-blue hue—looked functional as well. Murder holes and narrow arrow slits lined the length of the short tunnel on the way to a second gate that could be dropped into place if necessary. To her eyes, it didn't quite match Castle Calley for scale as a fortification, but it certainly looked defensible.

"Might be hard to escape," she muttered, her heart skipping a beat when Boz hissed beside her. Spirits damn her loose tongue. But she breathed a sigh of relief when the gate guard, who had apparently not heard her, waved them through.

"Stop gawking, girl," Dorrان said louder than necessary.

Dorrان steered them through a wide courtyard that, perhaps, once held flowers, but had since been trampled by soldiers and tents erected for what Lex could only assume served as sickbeds for injured soldiers, judging by the chorus of moans coming from within the nearest one. Girls in blood splattered aprons rinsed rags in a fountain off to one side of the yard, and a man with darkened skin in impressively polished armor spoke to a bald man in yet more impressive armor. The second man turned his head and Lex got a glimpse of familiar eyes. Her heart skipped a beat as she realized the bald man could only be Jairen's brother, King Malkai. Which meant that the man he spoke to would be Rico, Captain of the Guards. The man Jairen claimed to be the most skilled swordsman in the kingdom. She ducked her head—though she couldn't say why, as neither man would know who *her*—and let Dorrان guide her and Bozarth through the massive double doors into the palace proper.

They turned down a narrow hallway devoid of decorations but lined with doorways. Dorrان walked past them and checked the first door on the left. Locked. "Well, try the other doors."

"What are we looking for?"

"An empty room so you can change."

Lex cocked an eyebrow. "Change?"

"Ay, into a servant's uniform. You'll stand out in those leathers."

She made an o shape with her mouth but moved to try the other doors. She liked her leathers, felt comfortable in their snug fit, secure in the fact that her knives lay concealed in place beneath. From behind her, Boz cleared his throat. She whirled as he rose to his feet and pushed the first door Dorran had tried open.

"Didn't you bring me along for this exact reason?"

After a few seconds, she followed the locksmith inside with Dorran close on her heels. The room beyond had two beds, both with a trunk at their feet, and a wardrobe in the far corner. The tiny room smelled stale—obviously lived in—but the bedsheets looked crisp and fresh, speaking to a cleanliness that didn't match the odor.

Another explosion sounded and the castle shuddered around her. She glanced at the stone walls. Surely they wouldn't crumble. Right?

"Think that was the Highland Wall?" Bozarth asked.

"Wouldn't doubt it. We need to hurry," Dorran said. "Check the wardrobe, Lex. We'll get the trunks."

She gritted her teeth at Dorran giving her orders, but saw no reason to oppose, so she walked to the wardrobe and swung it open on well oiled hinges, revealing four drab straw-colored dresses and a pair of gray aprons. She held up one of the dresses—about the right length, but a bit loose, she guessed. She sighed, thinking about the dresses she had chosen from for the ball at Castle Calley. The feel of silk that fit so well it felt like a second set of skin, the thrill from Jairen's hand resting on the exposed small of her back—

"Well are you going to put it on?" Dorran asked.

After an embarrassing moment of trying to focus on the task at hand, she nodded.

"It'll be loose, though."

"Better to hide your leathers underneath."

"Oh." She hadn't thought of that. "And my knives." That thought brought a grim smile to her lips as she pulled the dress over her head and situated it so that she could still reach the knives in her sleeves—and possibly the ones strapped to her calves. Though, the ones in her belt would be of no use. "Apron too?"

"Ay," Dorrان said. "All the other serving girls I've seen wear them."

"Do you need help tying it?" Bozarth asked, stepping forward, flush in his cheeks.

She met his gaze, narrowed her eyes, and reaching behind her, tied a quick knot.

"Right, just thought I'd offer," Boz half mumbled, but Lex ignored him.

Lex turned to Dorrان. "Do we have any idea where his office is?"

"We'll find him." Dorrان put his hand on Boz's back and pushed him through the door, back into the servant's corridor, resuming the guise of escorting him to Lucien.

Lex followed behind, head down, careful not to catch anyone's eye, though with the chaos of battle not far off, few people seemed to pay them any mind.

They had gone some way down one of the main hallways, dodging couriers and courtiers alike when finally, Dorrان grabbed a servant's attention. "Oi, girl." He said, not unkind, but rough enough to make the girl flinch. "Oi, where's Lord Darkmont right now?"

"There's a battle going on. How should I know? They broke through the Highland wall in case you didn't hear."

"I have information Darkmont needs to hear. Where is he?" Dorrان said.

"He—" she stammered, "Have you checked his office?"

"No, where is that?"

"Second floor, west wing. Fourth office." She wrenched her arm free of his grasp.

"You didn't have to grab me." She hurried away muttering unpleasant things about soldiers beneath her breath.

"Do you know how to get there?" Lex asked Dorran, her voice low.

"Ay, I've worked this palace before. This way. We aren't far."

They wove in and out of traffic following the rich blue carpets, past tapestries that showed everything from birds of prey to depictions of battles fought sometime probably long ago. With every passing person, she grew more worried that someone would realize that they didn't recognize her, that she was an impostor. Or worse yet, would call her to attend them with whatever palace serving girls did.

After several minutes—how big was this palace?—they reached a spiraling staircase leading to the second floor. Traffic thinner here, Dorran led the way up the stairs and down a long hallway with heavy doors lining the right side. They moved to stand before the fourth door, just as the servant had said.

Lex took a deep breath and tried the latch. Open. Boz grumbled something about only getting to pick one lock, but went silent when he saw Lex's sidelong glare.

She took another breath and opened the door.

The room beyond was spacious, easily larger than her flat had been, with a tapestry hanging on the wall behind a large oak desk and a small sitting area situated atop a colorful rug. Yet Lucien was not inside.

She turned to look questioningly at Dorran who shrugged, but the sound of footsteps on the stairs drew their attention, and Lex closed the door. They could explain their presence, but not the open door.

She looked back down the corridor just as a pair of men, one hulking and massive, the other slight and distinctly oily, rounded the corner into view. Bozarth cursed under his breath, Dorran chuckled, and Lex pulled knives from her sleeves.

"Ahh why Lex, what a lovely surprise." Lucien rutting Darkmont said in that tone that left her feeling like she bathed in pond scum. "It seems you beat me here. I had *so* hoped to prepare the room for your arrival. But no matter, we're all friends here, of course. I mean, other than that nasty business between Rollo and your dear sweet dead Ked. Nasty business, indeed, but I don't think you'll need that knife."

"Spirits but you love to hear yourself talk."

"I do find myself most eloquent from time to time. Quite charming don't you think."

"Reckon I'd like him better with his throat cut open," Bozarth said.

"Why now Boz, that's hardly the way to greet your future employer."

"Not bloody happening, you sorry excuse for a turkey's tail feathers."

"What does that mean, you ginger twat?" Rollo rumbled, his voice like granite.

Oh how Lex wanted to gut the mountain of a man. She took a step forward, but a hand on her arm brought her attention to Dorran. "What?" she demanded.

Maybe it was something in her tone, or the look in her eyes, but Dorran let go and she turned back to the traitor and the scumbag. Her heart beat with anticipation, at the thrill of being within striking distance of her sole ambition over the last eight months. Her

end goal was almost in her grasp. This thrill, not that of Jairen's hand on her back, is what she lived for. She was a climber, a thief, a fighter, and she didn't need anyone. Not even a prince.

She cut a slit in the dress going down her leg from her waist, freeing her for full motion and giving her access to her hidden daggers. It didn't matter now if the disguise wouldn't hold up on her escape. It didn't matter if she escaped at all. Dorrان would be able to get Bozarth out. She would end these two men, one way or another, and couldn't care less about what happened to her in the process.

She chucked a knife at Rollo, not expecting to do any real damage from that distance, expecting him to dodge it entirely. Instead, he shifted his body and caught it in the meat of his left arm. He grunted, knife sticking out of his bicep, and smiled, drawing the mace from his belt. "Enjoy this little amount of my blood, girl. That's all you'll ever see."

"Oooo," Lucien crooned. "I've rarely seen Rollo so riled up. I would tell him not to kill you, as I do, have exciting plans for you." His smile held no mirth. "But I suppose dead will work almost as well as alive." Then, almost as an afterthought to Rollo, he said, "Do try and preserve her pretty face, though. Wouldn't do if we couldn't recognize her."

Plans? What plans did they have for her? Spirits, damn the man, she had plans for him, too. She thumbed the hilt of one of the knives in her belt as Rollo advanced.

The big man raised his mace over head and Lex darted forward, drawing her knife across his belly, leaving only a shallow cut, but drawing blood regardless. "Thought I wasn't going to see any more of your blood."

The man turned, swung at her head, faster than she had expected him to be. She ducked, stumbled out of the way, but his boot connected with her side, sparking pain through her whole body as the impact lifted her into the air and she skidded a few feet away, stone floor tearing at her servant's dress.

She struggled to her feet just in time to dive away from another overhand swing. His momentum going unchecked, he stumbled forward and Lex drove a knife into his calf, feeling resistance as it clipped femur. He howled in pain and Lex surged to her feet. She drew her longest knife from her belt and drove it into Rollo's back, stabbing him the same way he had done to Kedrick.

She wrenched her knives free as his body slumped over, final breaths escaping his lungs. She turned to face Lucien who, for the first time, didn't wear a perfect little contemptuous smile. Instead, his jaw hung slightly agape, both eyebrows raised, and though he hadn't quite gone pale, his face stood in stark contrast to his black doublet.

Rollo's lifeblood dripped from her knives, a warm wetness between her fingers, Lex smiled and took a step toward the man who started this whole spirits forsaken mess.

Lucien worked his jaw open and closed several times before recovering enough to speak. His smile brought Lex to a halt. That wasn't the self-deprecating grin of a cocky man trying to talk their way out of a hopeless situation after realizing he'd lost, but rather, that of a man who had one more card left to play.

Too late, it clicked into place. Everything that had seemed off, too convenient. Why had Dorrnan been at Castle Calley? How had they gotten through the city gates so easily? Why had that section of the Highland Wall been so near empty? How had Dorrnan known the palace so well?

She turned, hand rocking back to throw, but didn't finish the motion. The sight before her brought her to a full stop. Bozarth stood with eyes wide with shock, betrayal, hatred, a knife pressed to his throat while Dorran's other hand pulled the locksmith's head back by his hair. How had she been so rutting stupid? How had she not seen it before?

She'd been relieved to find a familiar face following Jairen's arrest and Grans's death. He'd offered to help when she fled the castle, insensate at Jairen's betrayal. Trying to avoid thinking about the prince, she had focused on her revenge, blinding herself to a truth so clear to her now.

She could still kill Lucien. She could still complete her revenge. But Boz—he was the last friend she had. Eva had decided to stay with the Ardenaan people, Jairen marched to win a throne for the mother of his child, Dorran had betrayed her just as Rollo had. Could she betray Bozarth? Could she let him die so that she could finish her mission, complete her revenge? She could kill Lucien, Dorran would kill Bozarth, then she and the man who taught her how to use a knife would fight. Whatever the outcome of that fight, she would have nothing left.

She dropped her knife and fell to her knees.

"Ahhh now there's a good girl. Search her, will you, Dorran?" He stepped forward and drew a knife of his own to hold to Boz's throat as Dorran did an overly thorough job of patting her down. "Do hurry, Dorran, I would imagine the king's meeting will be starting any moment now."

Chapter 55

Jairen strode forward to meet the approaching Renmarran officer with Dederic and Astrid following a step behind to his left and right. Closer now, Jairen could make out the commander's insignia emblazoned on the breastplate. Jairen squared his shoulders, preparing to meet who he suspected was Captain Rico. Yet, she removed her helmet revealing bright red hair and devilish blue eyes.

"My lords and lady," Varlys said, bowing not-low enough. "Your arrival was most fortuitously timed."

"A bit late for the lower city, though," Jairen nodded acknowledgement of her gratitude. "We didn't expect them to break through the outer wall so easily."

"Ay, my lord," she rubbed the bridge of her nose. "True enough. Don't know how they destroyed this wall. Unholy magicks to be sure."

Jairen looked at the gap in the wall, rubble laying scattered about. This crater, like the first, originated *inside* the wall. Yet, Dederic had seen Au'Dovier's forces shoot fire at the now-destroyed segment of the battlement.

"Strange magicks abound today, it seems." Astrid said, and Jairen could feel her eyes boring into his back.

The captain nodded. "Anyhow, I spot Calley colors among your men. Who do I have to thank for your assistance?" She wiped at her eyes and stepped closer, squinting to see in the dying daylight. "Bide, do I know you?"

"I'm sure you've crossed paths with Lady Astrid Kimbeau," Jairen said gesturing to his right. "But allow me to introduce Dederic," he smiled and made up a surname on the spot. "Dederic Oplaet."

Dederic snorted at the word, which was a close approximation to the Aardenan word for *teacher*.

Varlys stepped back, and rested her right hand on the hilt of her sword, but didn't draw it from its scabbard. "Prince Jairen?"

He swallowed. He considered lying for a moment, giving a name other than his own, yet the memory of claiming to be Baxton Korwin when he met the real Lord Korwin on patrol flashed through his mind. He swallowed again. It was a risk, and he knew it, but a calculated one that he hoped would pay off. Too, Varlys had never treated him particularly poorly. Indeed, he'd even considered courting her once, despite her being four years his senior.

He took a deep breath and spoke in the most formal, most commanding tone he could muster. "I am Prince Jairen Miraxes, and I have come to clear my name. If you would be so kind as to escort me to my brother, Commander Varlys."

To her credit, she didn't completely draw her sword. Though whether her blade stayed in its scabbard through power of will or due to the sight of Astrid drawing her twin short swords, Jairen couldn't say.

"My lady," Jairen said, keeping his voice calm. "We mean you no harm. Currently, you're cut off from your men, the wall has a gaping hole blasted away, and my men outnumber your defenders. If I meant you, your men, or the kingdom ill, we would have little trouble overwhelming your forces and resuming where Au'Dovier's invasion faltered."

After a tense moment wherein Jairen's fingers itched to draw his own blade, unsure of the woman's intentions, she finally lowered her blade the rest of the way back into its sheath and nodded once. "Very well. If you'll come with me, Prince Jairen." She turned back to the Highland Wall.

Jairen took a step to follow, but Astrid grabbed his arm and hissed low into his ear, "This wasn't the plan."

Fair observation. In point of fact, it wasn't the plan he had laid before his various officers. But he had certainly planned something similar in private. He had no desire to be king, especially not now that he'd promised that he'd marry Cici if he took his brother's throne. Rather, he meant to clear his name, to use his aid in squashing the invasion to leverage for the change he sought.

"Plans necessarily change, Lady Kimbeau." He stepped free of her grip and followed the commander through the now open gate—a fact that Jairen couldn't help but chuckle at when the wall lay in pieces not ten feet from the now open portcullis.

"Make way, make way," Varlys called, clearing a path as she and Jairen made their way south through the throng of captured Au'Dovien soldiers and the remaining Renmarran defenders. "Have you no horse, Your Highness?"

"I seem to have lost it in the charge."

The commander motioned for two of her warriors who dismounted and offered the horses to Varlys and Jairen. They had just climbed into the stirrups when Astrid cantered up atop her own steed.

"Lady Kimbeau. Please return to our forces. You are the next ranking officer, and I need you with the men."

"Your Highness, I swore an oath not just to you, but to Lady Calley, as well."

"Your oath was to aid me in my endeavors," Jairen reminded her gently. "I do not trust our men to not get into mischief without a commander around. And nor do I think it wise to return to the palace at the head of an army. It looks bad enough to return to the capital in such a manner, as it is." He knew her mind. She likely wondered how he thought to take the throne by himself. She thought the plan was to crush both Au'Dovier's invasion and the Renmarran defense. He smiled and winked. "Trust me, my lady. Don't do anything reckless."

Astrid didn't seem convinced, but she nodded and wheeled her horse back toward their troops.

"It's heartening, I must say, Your Highness, to hear you order your troops away." She nudged her horse into motion. "I was a bit nervous, I have to admit."

They rode in silence as they climbed ever higher up the hill that gave the Highland its name—nearly five minutes with the horses at a slow trot. Jairen took in the

different manor houses, noting the disparate styles representing the architecture from each family's seat of power. From the coastal houses built around a central garden to the marble pillared mansions of the east, to the harsh beauty and sharp features of the northern provinces, each house told a small part of the story of the families who built them. Yet, riding up this hill necessarily reminded Jairen of the last time he made his trip down the hill, fleeing the castle, his father's blood quite literally on his hands, staining his court finery, he, himself, bruised and bloodied from the beating he'd endured first at his father's hands, and then his brother's.

He had loved Malkai. Still did, to be sure. But their relationship had undoubtedly changed that day. As Malkai had held Jairen suspended with the Will glaring death, Jairen had seen something break in his brother's eyes. He just hoped that the months away had healed that divide. If it hadn't, no amount of reason would get through to Malkai.

Too soon, Varlys reined in before the main palace gate. His mind still elsewhere, Jairen followed the woman's lead and dismounted. The gate guard dispatched a runner to find the king and council, not just of the result at the wall, but also that of Jairen's arrival. Lady Varlys ushered Jairen through the gates and into the palace beyond.

"To the throne room, I suppose?" He asked Varlys, glancing over his left shoulder.

She nodded but said nothing, apparently content to follow him through the castle.

Jairen pushed through the doors, bypassing the guards. Unlike that day with his father, Jairen did not stumble as he entered the throne room. Unlike that day, Rico accompanied the king. Yet, like that day, Malkai sat atop the throne, just as his father had, brazier lit behind the throne to cast the king's face in shadow.

Varlys stayed without as the doors closed behind Jairen. Their audience would be private, save for Rico's presence. Rico, who'd broken King Dalen's decree and had helped Jairen continue practicing his swordsmanship. Rico, who'd never been bested in single—or even triple—combat. No wonder the door guard hadn't confiscated Jairen's sword.

Jairen stopped at the edge of the sapphire carpet, three paces from the base of the dais, four paces from the first stair where Rico stood, left hand relaxing on the hilt of his sword despite his otherwise rigid stance. Wearing a black and silver gambeson atop chain mail that peaked out his sleeves and collar, the captain looked every bit the Defender that the sword and shield broach on his lapel signified. Not a spec of dirt marred Rico's attire. Surely the man hadn't worn that armor to battle.

Jairen dropped to a knee. "My King," he said, eyes fixed on the floor in the humblest supplication one could expect from a prince, "Au'Dovier is defeated, the city is ours."

"Ours you say?" Malkai asked, his icy tone crushing all but the last vestige of hope Jairen had left. "Not mine? Not yours?"

"My King?"

"Was it not your army that swept through Au'Dovier's forces at the base of the upper city?"

"It was."

"And do you, who stands accused of not just patricide, but regicide, not return at the head of an army that, prior to your leadership, had refused to march to answer my call when first we met the invaders in the field?"

"Mal, I—"

The doors to the throne room creaked as they swung open and Jairen's breath caught in his throat.

Chapter 56

Lex was only vaguely aware on their journey back through the palace corridors, down the stairs, through more hallways, and finally coming to a halt before a set of dark wooden doors carved with the crowned falcon of House Miraxes. An armored woman with flame red hair stood with a group of palace guards.

"Lord Darkmont, sir," one of the door guards said, a thin smile turning the corners of his lips. "His Majesty speaks with the prince within."

"Perfect. Stand ready for the call." Lucien said.

Despite telling herself she didn't care for him, despite his betrayal, Lex's eyes found Jairen as soon as the doors opened, revealing the throne room beyond. She only dimly registered the blue carpet running between two rows of pillars. She could neither bring herself to care about the king on his dramatically backlit throne, nor the captain off to one side.

"Lex," he croaked, sounding like the word had stuck in his throat. "Lex, what happened?"

"Your Majesty," Lucien spoke before Lex could answer. "I fear I've caught a pair of assassins sneaking about the councilor's offices. No doubt they've come to kill your advisors while your brother, here does the same to you."

"Silence, Darkmont." Malkai looked at his brother. "Is this true, Jairen?"

"No, Mal—" he picked at his fingernails. "Didn't you get my missive? I sent a bird."

"So you see, Majesty, he did send one," Lucien said.

When had Princeling sent a message? Why would he have risked sending anything to the palace if he planned to attack?

"Of course I sent one, I wanted to avoid this exact situation. Just ask Varlys."

"Varlys was the councilor you sent word to?"

Princeling jerked his attention to Lucien. "What? No, Varlys is—"

"Your Majesty," Lucien interrupted. "I passed Commander Varlys on my way in here with these two. She was standing just outside the doors."

"Of course she was, she escorted me to the castle from the Highland Wall where *my* army routed the invaders."

"My king," the Captain—Rico—said without turning his gaze from the scene before him. "Something about this seems off. I think Jairen speaks the truth."

#

"I do," the Princeling said. "Why won't you believe me, brother? You must know Lucien lies. Surely, you must."

"Darkmont has invested heavily in our defense. Why would he betray us?" Malkai argued.

Could he have guessed wrong? Lucien's history with Lex, aside, what if the man actually had joined Malkai's effort. The words shook Jairen to the core, far more than either explosion had. "The explosions. How did the walls explode?"

"Perhaps Rollo calculated incorrectly?" Lucien offered.

"Rollo don't know jack all about explosives." Bozarth grunted as Dorran hit him with the pommel of his dagger.

"How do you know of Rollo?" Rico asked the locksmith.

"He was in our crew," Lex answered. "Until he killed my uncle for this piece of—" Her head rocked sideways as Lucien backhanded her.

Jairen took a step toward Lucien. "Touch her again and I—"

"Enough," Malkai called. "Guards."

#

Malkai couldn't think with this arguing. One of them lied. Nothing added up. He'd throw them all in cells and talk to them one by one until he got to the truth of it.

A dozen city guards filed in. Why *city* and not *palace* guards?

"Seize them."

The guards moved forward en masse, but they stepped past Lucien and Dorran with their two captives, stepped past Jairen, advancing toward the dais.

"Take them into custody," Rico called. "Do as your king commands."

"King don't command us," the lead guard said.

Rico dodged the first spear thrust and drew his sword in a single motion, he turned and cut down his attacker.

Who did these guards work for? Jairen, as Lucien had said? Malkai rose and drew his sword.

Chapter 57

The captain cut down a guard and chaos broke out everywhere. Malkai and Princling drew their swords, Lex stomped on Dorrان's foot and pulled away.

She turned to face her former teacher and only just ducked his slash. Lex drew a knife she'd managed to hide and squared off. The two circled one another, neither willing to step inside the other's reach. They knew one another too well. Who would make the first mistake?

Dorrان lunged as the sound of battle rose behind her. She dodged left and sliced at his knife arm, but he spun with swiping across her chest, just short of cutting her.

As his guard opened, she stepped in, nicking his shoulder. He hissed in pain and swung again. She ducked but he swept her legs out from under her.

Lex toppled to her backside, only just falling under his thrust. She scrambled backward, needing distance. He kicked at her side, she rolled away, climbing to her feet.

Dorrان changed the knife to his other hand and drew the sword on his hip. He smiled and advanced.

#

Jairen drew his sword as Rico cut down the lead guard. Four more advanced on the captain, and another three outnumbered Malkai. Jairen had to get to Malkai's side, had to protect his brother. He communed, congregated at Malkai's side, sword raised overhead, ready to parry a strike. Jairen froze, unable to move, bound by Will. Out of his periphery, he saw Rico dispatch one of his four opponents with ease, one hand stretched toward Jairen.

Even distracted, fighting four—now three—trained guards, Rico had the strength and finesse to lock Jairen in place?

To Jairen's left, Malkai pushed his three attackers back with the Will. But how long could he hold out against so many opponents.

"I'm on your side," Jairen urged.

"Then call off the guards." Malkai grunted as he parried another thrust.

"Rico let me go."

"Call off your men," the captain barked.

"They aren't mine." Why could they not see that? Lucien had played them all.

Twenty yards away, Lex and Dorran circled one another, the latter having just drawn a sword, fighting with sword and dagger just as Jairen had not an hour before. Lex held but one blade of her own—and a small one at that.

Jairen communed to the first guard's body and drew the dagger from his belt.

"Lex," he called, sliding the knife to her.

He turned just in time to catch Rico's overhead slash—the man's four opponents laying dead in his wake.

"Rico, spirits damn you man, I'm on your side."

"How'd you break my Will?" he asked, their blades still locked.

"That's what you want to ask about while Malkai fights for his life?" Jairen achieved partial communion and shoved the captain backward, scrambling for space.

Jairen risked a glance at his brother. Two of his three opponents lay dead, but three more had filled the gaps.

#

Just when Malkai thought he'd earned a respite, having felled two of his attackers, three bloody more stepped up. He could feel his muscles starting to tire in the wake of all the fighting he'd done that day. The Will responded sluggishly as he called upon it again and again to fend off these guards.

Had Jairen really not paid them off? Lucien, then? He glanced at the merchant who struggled with the redheaded man for control of the knife. Zekker curse them all—what was happening?

He parried a sword thrust and sidestepped a spear shaft aimed at his chest. Malkai chopped down on the spear, splintering its haft. He sensed a blade enter his Cloak from behind and blindly blasted the attacker away, expending far too much of his Will on the counter.

#

Lex rolled left and scooped up the dagger that the Princeling had slid her way. Two knives didn't exactly even the odds—Dorran's sword gave him far too much reach—but anything helped.

Dorran cut low and she stepped backwards. He thrust right and she twisted her torso. She cut high and he checked the swing with his knife. They separated, her knives

in the fore and reverse grip he'd taught her, his knife and sword both held in the fore, the latter tracing circles in the air.

She set her jaw and changed her second knife into the fore grip, matching Dorran's own, despite the reach his sword offered giving him the advantage if they faced off in the same style. She just had to get inside his reach. Make that length work against him.

He smiled, slashing high and she ducked, moving her right hand to check the thrust she knew would arrive. She swept that aside and drew the blade in her left across his uninjured bicep before spinning past him and aiming a cut at his back. He stepped away just in time and her momentum left her off balance. He spun to face her, bringing his sword around in an arc, aiming to cut her in two. She dropped to the ground under the blade and rolled left just in time to see Dorran's knife spark against the marble floor where she'd laid a moment before. She pushed to her knees and caught Dorran's sword in the V she made with both her knives. She realized her mistake a second too late as his other knife sliced for her belly. She lurched away, but not fast enough to avoid the cut altogether.

Pain lanced through her, and she hoped it wasn't deep. She looked up and saw manic joy on Dorran's face.

She grimaced and stood, taking a calming breath as she did.

She flew at him then, cutting high, thrusting low. She reversed her grip on both knives as he swung his sword in an overhead arc to cut her from collarbone to hip but she spun, not away, but in, toward the blow, bringing her right hand up, slicing deep into his forearm and completed the spin, using her momentum to bring her left hand into her

former teacher's throat. Her back slammed into his right shoulder, knocking the sword from his already faltering grip. He fell forward, his weight knocking her off balance. She stumbled forward, felt heat on her left side and looked to see Dorran's knife jammed to the hilt just above her hip.

She pulled it free and slumped to her knees. "Just rutting perfect."

#

"Rico," he hissed. "Don't fight me. You see it too. I know you do. Lucien is a rat, a liar, a thief. He has no honor."

"You're right on all counts, Prince." Rico slashed at Jairen's midriff and Jairen checked the blow. "Yet, the evidence against you is damning."

"What evidence? It's Lucien's word against mine."

"Your word means less than it once did."

The Captain was right, of course. Jairen had fled when he should have stayed, should have explained. But after everything he'd done, marched on to Renhold's aid and betraying Lex's trust in the process, to have it end like this, some up-jumped merchant outmaneuvering him at the last?

He parried another thrust, forcing Jairen back another step.

Malkai cried out, a spear lodged through his gut. Jairen didn't think, he just communed. He walked the edge, the boundary between his world and the spirits'. He didn't hesitate, walking *through* that veil, achieving Final Communion. He reached out with ephemeral fingers and yanked on Malkai's aarda—so empty, so depleted of the Will—and dragged his brother, body and soul, off the spear shaft, both of them congregating some fifteen feet away from Malkai's assailants.

Rico fell on the guards from behind as Jairen coughed, pink-tinged spittle on Malkai's doublet. Jairen's lungs burned, like he inhaled glass, or fire, with every breath. He rolled off his, flopping onto his back as he struggled to breathe—wishing he could stop breathing altogether. Each lungful proving Final Communion's name true.

Across the chamber, Lex cried out as Bozarth slumped to the ground, a crimson pool spreading beneath him. Lucien made for the double doors. Lex sat on her knees, clutching her side as the last remaining guard stalked closer.

#

Lex's eyes went wide as the sword rose. She cursed herself, cursed her weakness. Oh aye, she'd beaten Dorran, but at what cost? Bozarth lay dead not ten feet away, Lucien had escaped, and she would die to this paid-off guard.

Tears welled as the sword descended, proving her grandmother's words a lie, at the last. *When you have nothing to cry and scream about, you lose your ability to fight, to survive and endure.* Well, there were her tears, but she lost her ability to fight with each ounce of blood seeping from her side. She wouldn't survive, couldn't endure.

She took a ragged breath just as her vision grew white and her limbs succumbed to the weightlessness of death. She felt a tugging sensation—her soul tearing free of her body, perhaps? Then weight pressed down on her limbs and detail returned to her sight. Lex scrambled to her knees. She checked her side, the knife, the wound, both gone. She rubbed the smooth skin beneath the gap in her dress and leathers, amazed. She had known Jairen could heal when he communed. But, for him to heal *her*? He hadn't—no he rutting well had better not.

Jairen bent double and braced himself on hands and knees. He wheezed, terrible and wet, then broke into coughing. Crimson liquid staining the blue carpet beneath. She put a hand on his back, tried to calm him. He'd rutting well done it. He'd forced her into communion, taking her with him. She looked around. They were no longer in the throne room, but nearly to the palace doors.

"Jairen?" His coughing had stopped, they had to go.

He croaked a word, one single word, before collapsing. "Live."

She hauled herself to her feet as Grans's words revisited her, tears falling, mixing with the Princeling's crimson spittle. If she had something to cry about, she had something to live for.

Live, he'd said. She would. She would flee the castle, not because she didn't want to die. But because she wanted to live, because he'd told her to, because he'd likely given his life so that she might escape. She didn't know what she'd live for, but by the spirits, she would rutting-well try.

Epilogue

The physicker put his ear to the youth's chest and listened to the wet gurgle within. When coughs wracked the boy's body they sprayed red-tinged spittle airborne. Already, the substance looked clearer than it had just a few hours back. Still, the physicker wondered if recovery wouldn't prove the crueler fate.

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The King leaned against a wall, heart equal parts full on sorrow and rage—familiar emotions as of late. Sorrow for the brother lost, and rage at himself for losing the selfsame brother when he might have acted differently. Rage at what must be done, sorrow at the thought of the doing.

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The Merchant bounced in his coach as it hit another bump. He pondered the irony, given the rough road his life had turned down. He didn't mourn the change, but he didn't relish the bumps as he headed south, not chastened by his latest misstep, but anxious about the days to come.

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The Girl with eyes of green stood on a precipice and pondered her next step. One direction would lead her to pain and suffering, the other, to oblivion via anonymity. She knew which one the old her would choose, but what about the new?

She took a breath.

She took a step.

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