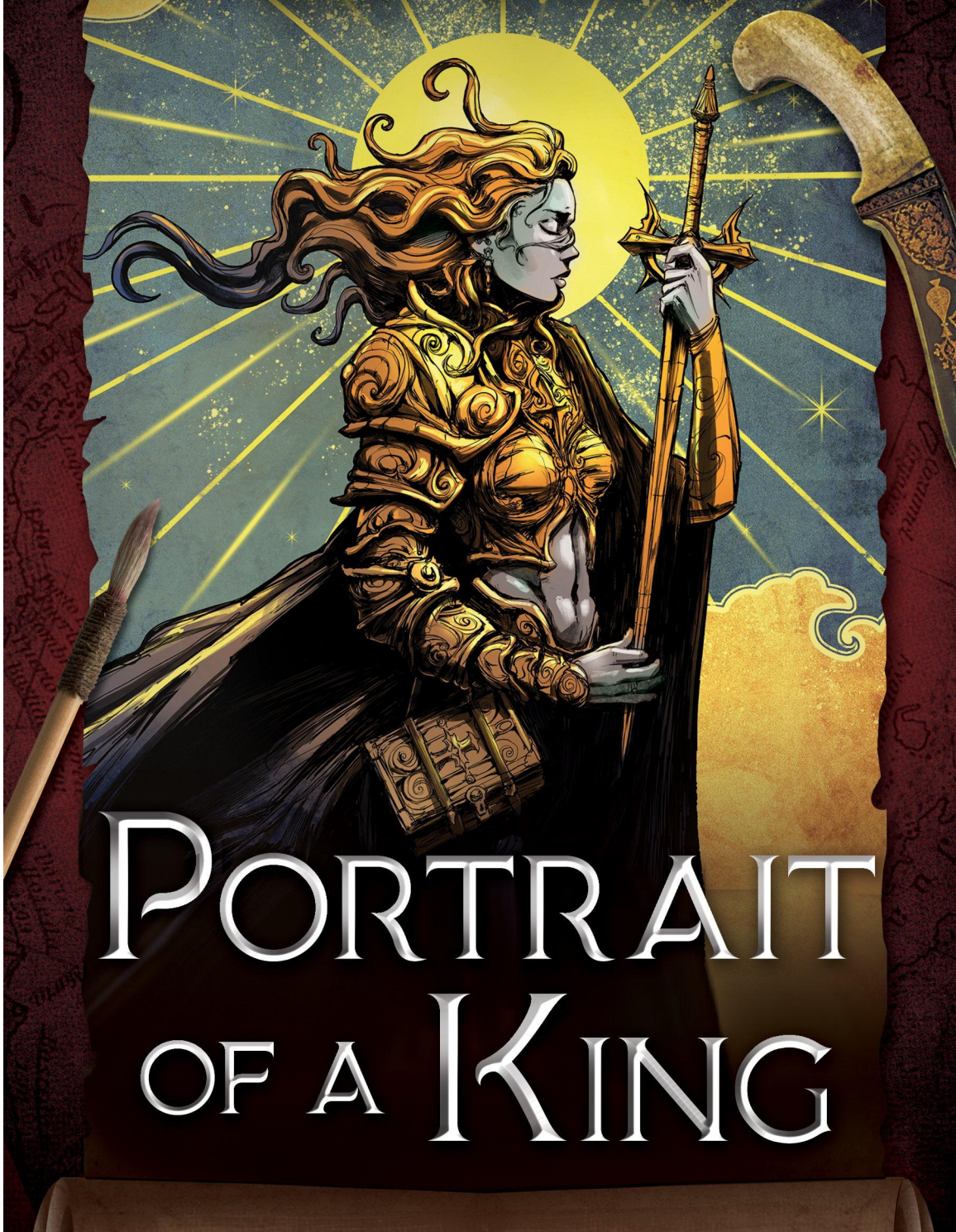


L.A. BUCK



# PORTRAIT OF A KING



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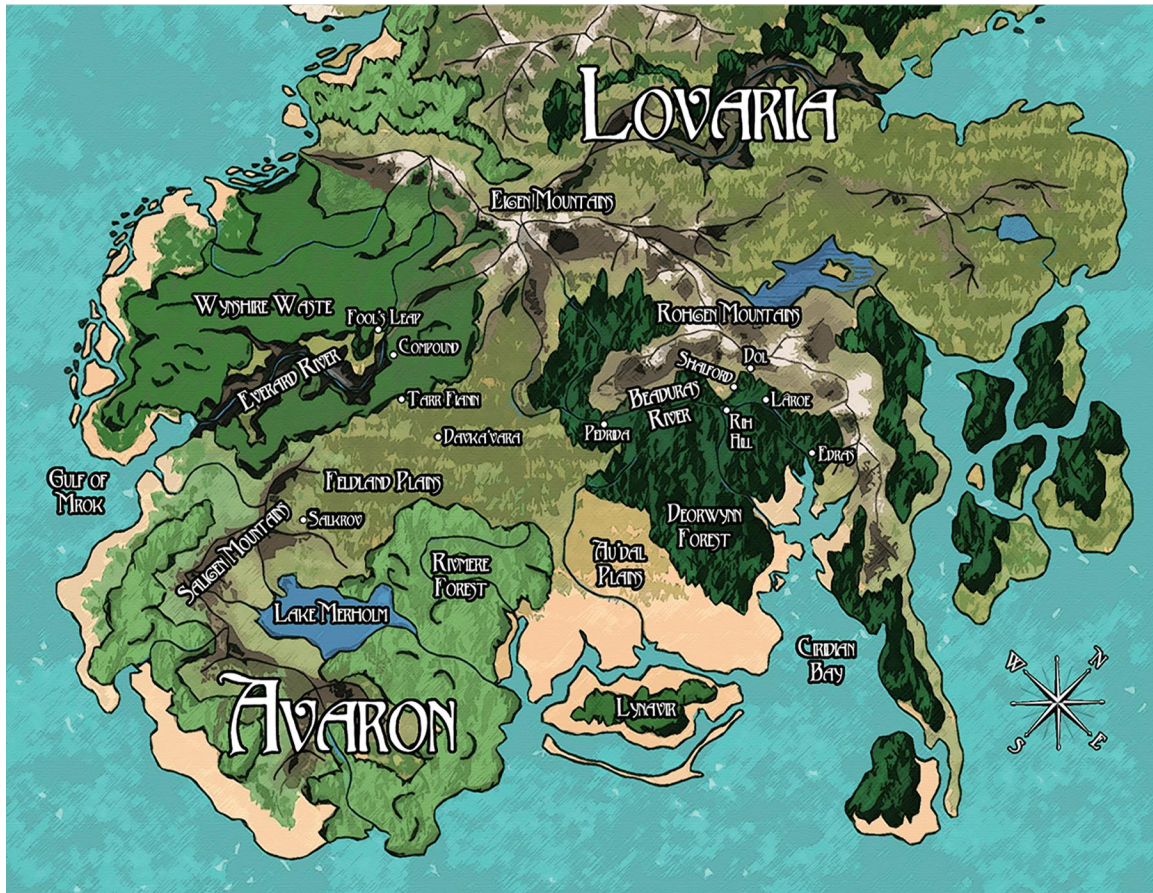
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# Map



## One

Lyara fumbled with the soggy quilt, not for the first time cursing her height.

Her mother used to assure her she'd grow. "*We're tall in this family,*" she'd say, unconsciously straightening to increase her own respectable stature. "*Our ancestors, on the other side of the ocean, they were warriors. Drink more Mucuna.*"

Lyara scoffed as she heaved the quilt over the clothesline. Her ancestors had braved the sea and its monsters—running from that country—for a reason, and at twenty-four, going on twenty-five, she knew no amount of tea or anything else would change her fortunes. She'd just have to spend the rest of her life struggling with the wash.

"Here," Adela said, grabbing hold of the one corner Lyara'd managed to flip over the line. "Let me."

Lyara helped heave the freshly cleaned cloth over the clothesline anyway, as if that proved something. Her mother's maid was five years her younger and already a handbreadth and a half taller. They had the same black hair, though, and the same white skin and round, light blue eyes—most strangers mistook them for sisters.

Adela fished a clothespin from her apron pocket and leaned towards Lyara as she secured the quilt. "He's still watching us."

Lyara sniffed and looked over her shoulder.

Her father owned a large house at the edge of the Inner Circle—that left their lives comfortable, though still filled with the menial chores the wealthier paid others to do. Their clothesline ran from the wall of their second story to the post set in the court square fountain, one of a dozen in this tight-packed neighborhood.

All the grey stone buildings were houses, but a few families made their living by turning the lower floor into a business. Lyara had the fortune of living beside the bakery, while across the street sat the only bar permitted to operate within walking distance of her district.

A single soldier—his crimson cloak and his white tunic, with the blackbird and crossmarks, gave him away—sat on the ground beside the bar's now closed door. He might've been her age, but the well-trimmed black beard on his cheeks made him look older. His long, dark hair was greasy, pulled back and hastily tied, but his bright green eyes watched her and Adela work with a soft smile. Like a pilgrim gazing at the sunrise.

Lyara shook her head and pulled one of her mother's dresses from the laundry basket to hang it on the line beside the quilt. Any *decent* man would've put three hours of work behind him by this time of morning. Or, he'd at least have climbed out of the bar's shadow and looked toward the mountains to watch the actual sky.

But, uselessness was not a crime—a lucky thing, the city of Edras would be a den of criminals if it were.

“I don’t like it,” Adela whispered, stealing glances in the soldier’s direction as though he were a rabid dog that might notice and snap at her. “What’s he doing?”

Lyara grunted. “Working through a hangover, I expect.”

An entire troop had closed the bar last night, drinking the barrels dry, shouting and dancing in the streets into the dark of the wee morning hours. The din *would* have kept her up—revelers at the bar often did, no matter how much her mother complained—and made her cross, except this time her oil paintings did a better job. Her inspirations were so fickle lately, she’d taken to letting the muse consume her the rare occasions it reared its ugly head.

“He’s not right,” Adela said, hanging Lyara’s father’s shirt beside the dress.

Lyara tilted her head. “A soldier has more right to drink than most men.” Especially last night.

Avaron’s troops had won a decisive victory against a Lovarian raiding party by the Rohgen Mountains. A rarity—not the victory, but the fact King Hilderic had actually deployed men to defend the poor border towns at all. Lyara’s parents said Hilderic used to allocate resources equally among all his subjects, but in her years she’d only seen him expend effort on those citizens rich enough to pay him back.

“I’ll have to walk past him on the way home,” Adela continued, too worked up to keep her whisper. “What if he follows me?”

Lyara lowered the trousers she’d picked from the basket and gave Adela a smirk. “Do you want me to go talk to him? Tell him to leave?”

Surprise sprang in Adela’s eyes, which quickly turned to a conflicted sense of relief. “No. You’re probably right, it’s nothing.”

Lyara chuckled. She dropped the trousers, wiped her hands dry on her pastel violet skirt, and turned to stride across the courtyard.

“Wait!” Adela called out, then yelped and covered her mouth as her voice echoed within the small ring of houses. Lyara didn’t turn back.

“Hey,” she said, stopping less than a stone’s throw from the soldier to cross her arms. “My friend doesn’t appreciate how you’ve been staring at us. Maybe it’s about time you went home, huh?”

The man held her gaze, his grin widening the longer she spoke. “No trouble. I wasn’t watching her, anyways.”

She rolled her eyes. “Watching, like what? A ravenous wolf?”

He kept staring, with that stupid grin. “Like a damned fool trying to pluck up the courage to go talk to you.”

She wouldn't give away her good graces that easily. "Look, I appreciate your service, but don't you have somewhere to be?"

The soldier just shook his head.

Lyara frowned, scanning him up and down. Dried mud splattered his riding pants and boots, brown splotches of blood stained his white tunic, and he even had a bandage wrapped around his left forearm. Apparently, he wasn't habitually useless. A half-empty bottle of whiskey sat on the street at his side.

She scoffed. "Isn't it a bit early for drinking?"

"Early?" He picked up the bottle, sloshing the amber liquid within before returning it to its place beside his leg. "I assure you, milady, I started drinking at the proper time and I simply haven't finished yet."

She sighed. Adela was a poor judge of character—too nervous to see the kindness in this man's eyes—but that didn't make his behavior any less despicable. "How much overindulgence do you need to celebrate killing?"

The smile faded from the soldier's eyes for the first time, and she was almost sad to see it go. "I kill, sure, but I don't celebrate *that*. I celebrate because what I killed won't have the chance to kill you."

She lowered her arms, her heart softening. "What's your name?"

The soldier's smile returned, tinged with disappointment. "You don't recognize me, do you?"

Lyara frowned, studying his face again. She ought to be able to place those striking green eyes in her memory, but she couldn't. A past suitor, possibly? She'd had her share—usually the better-off in the Outer Circle, trying to marry their way deeper into Edras. The unwed daughter of a successful merchant was a worthy pursuit. Though, none were rich enough that her father insisted she entertain them, and few suitably captured her attention to court her more than one or two dates.

The soldier laughed, fully smiling again, and pointed to an upper window in the house beside the bar. "I used to watch you from up there. Still like a damned fool, just a lot younger so I might have had a better excuse." He pointed next to the alley beside Lyara's house. "Back there, you knocked Gode Evrich on his ass after he pulled your pig tails. And Mhiler took the fall for it, but I know you were the one who goaded him into filling the fountain with weaver's dye on Iverset."

Lyara caught herself smiling, too. "We went to school together?"

"Until fifth year. My father remarried that summer and we moved deep into the Inner Circle."



She squinted at his face, trying to picture all her old classmates. It wasn't easy—fifth year was a long time ago, and only a man grew a beard like that.

“Dradge,” the soldier said with a laugh. “Son of Rhowan.”

“Rhowan!” She remembered that name—everyone in the neighborhood remembered those of their peers who succeeded in the generational quest to creep closer to the castle Avtalyon.

Dradge nodded sheepishly. “No one here seems to forget my *father*...”

“Haven't you been home? I'm sure he's waiting for you.”

“Nah. I'm not welcome there any longer.”

She pursed her lips, unsure whether to offer sympathy or think he deserved it. “Sharp as a cane rod, gentle as the growing field, a father molds the clay of his children into the statues of men,” she said, quoting *A Poor Son's Dialog*.

Dradge grimaced, as though struck. “Oh, don't tell me you spend your time these days reading that shit. Please.” He resettled in his seat, grasping the whiskey bottle by the stem. “Actually, if you do, just let me down now and I'll get back to my drinking.”

She laughed heartily. It'd been a long time since she'd done that. “My father encouraged me to memorize different passages, he thought it'd help attract a suitor of a higher station. Though, I do enjoy a little of Ivard of Gebrama's *Summerwind*.”

“Yeah?” Dradge peered up at her, ragged grin spreading across his face. “*Summerwind* is poetry, right?”

“Mostly.”

He nodded, relaxing his grip on the whiskey bottle. “I can work with poetry.”

She shook her head, still smiling to herself. “You eaten breakfast?”

“Nope.”

She offered him her hand. “My mother's always happy to cook something.”

“Gods Lyara, I'm drunk! I'm not meeting your parents.”

She re-folded her arms. “So you want to keep sitting there in the dirt? Adela's going to have to walk past soon and she very much wanted me to chase you off. Besides, my father's away on business.”

“Yeah?”

She held out her hand again, more forcefully this time. “Just leave the bottle.”

## Two

Dradge hunched over his meal, elbows on the table, shoveling scrambled eggs into his mouth as though he hadn't eaten in days. Lyara sat on a stool beside him, one leg crossed over the other, tempted to laugh—she would have, if her mother wasn't watching. A dusty soldier in a threadbare uniform was just so deliciously out of place in this pristine white marble kitchen.

Honora walked a plate of fresh biscuits from the stone oven to the long table, her smile polite but strained. She wore a simple yellow dress, casual flowing skirt the same style as Lyara's own, but had her hair braided against the back of her head for that constant touch of formality.

"Are the eggs seasoned to your liking?" Honora asked.

"Yeah, they're—" Dradge started, nodding, before he seemed to notice he was talking with his mouth full. He swallowed, straightening in his seat, then cleared his throat. "Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

Honora's brow creased as she nodded in reply, and Lyara caught herself grinning at that, too.

"You say you're Rhowan's son?" her mother asked. "I thought he sent his boy to the University at Drosala to study."

Dradge froze, spoon of eggs halfway to his mouth. He nodded again but didn't meet her gaze. "Yes ma'am, he did."

Honora's frown won out this time, and she even added a quiet, disapproving *hmm*.

"Plenty enough men read books as it is, mother."

Dradge gave her a bit of a smile after hearing that, but Honora huffed and turned back to her wood-fired stove. "And there are plenty of women left to take in strays as well."

Dradge glanced between the two of them, eyebrows raised, then slowly reached for one of the fresh biscuits.

Lyara kept smiling at her mother's back as Honora tamped out the fire in the hearth. "When the tamed men hide behind their tomes, leaving the poor to die, while the untamed look death in the eye for all our sakes, which would you say are truly astray?"

Honora turned around, hand on her hip, more bemused than frustrated. "Is that what this is? Another attempt to get a rise out of me?"

Dradge frowned at Lyara, mouth full of half a biscuit, but she shook her head. "No, mother. I'm sorry. I only speak my mind."

Honora nodded, expression softening. "Well, I suppose I won't fault you for that, dear." She stepped forward to push the plate of biscuits closer to Dradge. "We do appreciate your service, young man. Take as many as you would like."

Dradge held Honora's gaze as if weighing her sincerity, then snatched up the remaining biscuits—he shoved one in his mouth and the rest in his pockets.

Lyara grinned again as her mother's eyes bulged. She held no animosity for Honora—she was a kind woman, strict though gentle—but sometimes the walls of her parent's expectations pressed on her and she *had* to scratch at them. Same as she pushed against any boundaries, perhaps, but theirs were the most constant and readily available.

It was far worse when she was young. Although, of the three here, it appeared only she and Dradge remembered those days. Her parents should be grateful she now restrained herself to snide comments.

A knock sounded at the door. All of them turned to look, but Lyara rose and walked down the two short stairs to pull it open. Three soldiers—in clean uniforms—stood in a row on her stoop. They were all about her age, two of them probably a bit older, and the middle one smiled at her.

“Hello, ma’am,” he said with a curt bow. He had bright grey eyes and a neatly trimmed brown beard, and while bearing the fewest patches on his right sleeve, he seemed the leader of this little group. “This may be an odd inquiry, but we’re searching—” He glanced into the kitchen and his gaze fell on Dradge. “Hey!” He laughed. “What are you doing? We were beginning to think someone walked off with you.”

Dradge started to answer, but on the other side of the table Honora folded her arms and all four soldiers stopped to stare at her.

“Ma’am,” one man said, bowing at the waist, and the other two at the door followed his lead.

“Our apologies,” the grey-eyed soldier said, a smile creeping back to his face as he met Honora's gaze. “Would you like us to collect your garbage for you?”

“Oh,” Dradge said, grinning, as he pushed himself to his feet. “Is that how it is?” Swaying a bit, but keeping his balance, he turned to Honora and slapped his right fist to his chest in a formal salute. “Ma’am, forgive me for my part in it, but your hospitality is the best I’ve received in weeks.”

Honora managed a true smile this time—demure, her lips pressed thin, but it lit up her light blue eyes. “Stay safe, all of you.”

Dradge almost stumbled down the stairs. Both Lyara and the middle soldier jumped to catch him, but he steadied himself against the wall, as though it were a matter of pride that he moved only under his own power. Lyara held the door open as he and his fellow soldiers stepped out into the street.

Dradge stopped suddenly and spun around. He pointed at Lyara, and with jaw set met her gaze. “Can I have permission to call on you?”

She smiled, stomach fluttering with foolish emotions she hadn't felt in years. “You may.”

Dradge grinned, big and stupid, his green eyes alight with such sincere excitement. He gave her a wave, then stumbled after his friends. She watched them a moment—the other men slapped Dradge on the shoulders in congratulations—the whole time bearing a big and stupid grin of her own.

Honora sighed deeply as Lyara shut the door. “Precious daughter of mine, do you ever find it in your heart of hearts to show your dear mother even the occasional small mercy?”

Lyara laughed softly as she climbed those stairs and retook her seat at the table. “He might not even call on me.”

She grunted incredulously at that. “You were up late again, painting? All men in uniform?”

Lyara glanced down at her hands. She didn’t intend to stay up, but after she looked out her window to see what the commotion was about, she’d settled down for a few sketches before attempting to fall asleep again. She’d only *painted* the one of the group tossing a member of their squad in the fountain.

“It was ironic, Mother, that’s all. The harsh lighting was straight from the Lothwarde Era, the scene properly focused on the downfall of man, but all the subjects were so *happy*.” She smiled. “Can you imagine what Master Ribaud would say if he saw that piece?”

“I imagine he’d mourn once again the sum of firri I wasted trying to get you educated.” Honora walked to Lyara’s side and planted a kiss on the top of her head. “You should always *listen* to your heart, but don’t presume you have to follow it.”



## Three

Lyara adjusted the set of her green veil as she sank to her knees at the last row of kneelers.

Thunder pealed in a low rumble outside, a light rain pattering against the slate roof of the modest chapel. The room was small—larger than a house in the Outer Circle, but about the size of her parent’s sitting room. It was modestly lit with fat, scented candles set on iron stakes against the walls. The air hung heavy with cedar-wood and cinnamon.

The alcove was mostly empty—two other devotees knelt in prayer towards the middle-front of the rows of kneelers—but current *Láefe* traditions only demanded a prayer once a month. Lyara’s parents dutifully attended that required service, they’d brought her since before she could walk, but as she grew she found that frequency inadequate.

This was a centering experience, a reminder of the wider world beyond her, contained within a single building of solid stone she could touch and breathe in and *know*. She hadn’t yet found what her place in Edras—in anywhere—should be, but here it felt like she might have an idea. Devotion gave her a purpose—however idealistic, however diminutive.

She bowed her head, tapping her right fist against her chest six times—one for each of the founding Fidelis houses—and mouthed her favorite prayer.

*Essence, shield me from the blade, guard me from the arrow, and keep me from destruction. But if I should die, let it be with my sword in hand and my face toward home, on the field of victory.*

It was a tad dramatic for her to say, considering she hadn’t faced a *true* danger in her entire life and had never even picked up a sword, but she loved the sentiment. It was confident, it carried a certain raw strength; the spirit of it reflected in her soul, even if she couldn’t technically emulate the particulars.

Besides, Gallian himself wrote it. His prayers probably carried more weight than the others.

Lyara glanced up at the center wall. Center was a bit of a stretch; the alcove had six walls, each adorned with the sigil of one of the founding Fidelis houses, but the caretaker had arranged the kneelers to face the particular wall which held Gallian’s. It was a sweeping line edged by three linear marks—it somewhat resembled a head of wheat, or the wing of a bird. Most chapels etched the symbols in stone, but here Fidelis themselves had come and crafted their house marks out of their respective preferred elements.

Gallian’s sigil burned in a constant, low flame, fed by an oil-soaked wick the caretaker replaced daily.

Two hundred years ago those six troops—some blood relatives, some sworn by oaths—left a land of tyranny behind and settled here on this continent. They drove back horrid monsters called *saja*—none had been spotted in Avaron for generations—and fought with marginal

success against the centaur tribes. Gallian emerged as the first Fidelis and first King of Avaron—as *fonfyr*—before those beast-men slaughtered him.

The more frequent devotees typically came to pray for the *fonfyr*'s return. A warrior with the same strength and ideals was supposed to come back, one day, and bring peace with him. There was a prophecy. Lyara was a bit ashamed to admit in public, but sometimes she prayed for his return, too.

It seemed the least she could do; every age waited for some kind of savior, why should she not hope for the same? Fewer believed now than they'd used to, but at the monthly service, *Láefe* stretched into the street.

Only, this hero was more than a hundred years late.

She folded her hands and placed them on her lap, bowing her head. She hadn't come to pray for that tonight, anyway. Lightning flashed behind the window shutters and she whispered her prayer again—this time altering the words to offer it up for the Avaronian soldiers fighting for her life in Edras to keep trickling lazily from one day to the next. That was her custom. Tonight she said it again, a certain soldier in mind above all the rest.

After all, that prayer was meant for men like him.

## Four

Clutching her hands to her chest, Lyara pretended she didn't notice how her heart pounded. Her father sat in an armchair behind her, reading the latest issue of *Whispers in Brief* and smoking his pipe, but she stood pressed against the railing of her home's balcony, peering over the rooftops at the main street winding through Edras and toward Avtalyon.

She was a fool to fall for a soldier. She told herself that every night as she fell asleep, smiling like a giddy school girl. Soldiers courted danger, a soldier's wife would be forced to do the same. Perhaps that was what she wanted.

Dradge had waited one day to call on her, and then only two days after that to call on her again. The third time he'd showed up at her door in his chain-mail and plate armor to bid a quick goodbye before heading back out on assignment.

Centaurs were raiding western villages. *Centaurs*. Lyara filled their month apart picking through her father's basement library, studying the histories that'd been such a chore to read before. She'd sketched a few and painted one: a fearsome beast, eyes cold, flanks splattered in blood. Though proud of the work, she kept it hidden in the bottom drawer of the guest room dresser, where it wouldn't catch her gaze unbidden.

"You're not still printing these on my printers, are you?"

Lyara glanced back and found her father frowning as he held up the periodical folded open to the center, displaying a pointedly unflattering cartoon of King Hilderic lying fat and drunk on a bed made of the corpses of peasants.

Lyara snorted. She was rather proud of that one. "Adela introduced me to a man in the Outer Circle with an old machine. Takes us a lot longer and we can't make as many, but it should keep you from being implicated in any of it. But we won't get caught."

Her father nodded, with a grunt, then unfolded the periodical to turn to the next page. If she remembered right, that was a crude limerick about guild taxes—Orvist's narrowed eyes and wrinkled nose just about confirmed it.

"I don't write much these days," she said. "Really, the whole thing has taken off without me. I think it resonates with a lot of people. Gives them an outlet for their frustrations."

Her father grunted again, and she knew he didn't believe a word she said. "I hope you recognize your mother and I tried our best to keep your idle hands busy about something useful."

Lyara smiled. "Are you saying my *Whisper* is not useful?"

"The intemperate who sows discord one day reaps it," he said, quoting *Epigram*, "and the world will weep with him."

"And tyranny finds the man who runs fastest from it," she said, another line from *Epigram*. An easy quip, since the text was a collection of contrarian proverbs. "Maybe that silly thing is the best I can do."

Orvist looked up at her with a smile, his manicured mustache and beard hiding most of his lips. "I suspect I'll rue the day you finally realize that isn't true."

A cheer rose somewhere near the base of the hill and Lyara's breath caught. The crowd in the street below parted to make way for the procession. Dozens of soldiers, all on horseback, paraded towards Avtalyon, their horses' hooves clapping against the paving stones. She studied each face, looking for those green eyes.

The men were tired, dirty, their faces haggard. Still, they smiled, waving to folks they knew and even strangers. This was a victorious return, but not by much.

With a heavy sigh, Lyara's father closed the periodical, leaving it on the side table, and rose from his chair to join her on the balcony. They watched the procession in silence, and Orvist gently draped his arm over her shoulder. The sweet scent of his pipe-smoke enveloped them both.

"Father, I'm alright."

He simply nodded. "I know you are."

At the end of the procession, cartmasters drove open-topped wagons filled with the wounded. The dead didn't return; they were buried with honor in the ground they bled to defend. There were three carts in total. Some men sat on the edges, various limbs wrapped in bandages, smiling and waving with perhaps greater enthusiasm than the healthy riders. Others lay on beds of hay, still or writhing in pain.

Three riders rode among the wagons. The two on the ends reached for the man in the middle as he tried to stand in the stirrups to look at the houses above him. Lyara's heart leapt in her chest, relief washing through her.

She waved, and after a moment Dradge noticed her. Was his leg broken? It was splinted and wrapped in bandages, the left stirrup extended to accommodate his straight knee. Grinning, he waved back, his eyes on her the entire time his attendants tried to get him to sit back down in the saddle.

Orvist squeezed her shoulders. "He'll leave again. You know that. Are you willing to go through this, day after day?"

She stared at Dradge, his smile making her smile. "I might be."

Orvist released her, nodding to himself. "So long as you know."

Lyara patted the hand her father rested on the railing, then charged down the stairs to throw open the door and run out into the street. The crowd filled the town square and her accursed height left her staring at backs and shoulders. Fortunately, the folks before her moved aside to make way for three horses that broke from the procession.

Dradge's two fellow soldiers dismounted first and rushed to catch both his horse and him as he struggled to dismount. These were not soldiers she recognized, both were older than



Dradge—one looked older than her father—but they doted on him like he was King Hilderic himself.

“I’m alright,” Dradge grumbled, trying to fend the two men off, but they forced him to let them lower him to the ground. He winced as he tried to put weight on his splinted leg.

“Stop that,” the older soldier said, whacking Dradge over the shoulders with the crutch he pulled from beneath the stirrups.

“Let me,” Lyara said, slipping her shoulder under Dradge’s arm in place of the crutch. Maybe her height was good for something after all.

Dradge peered down at her, smiling as he pulled her close. He studied every curve of her face, as though it’d been decades since he’d last seen her. “You waited for me.”

“Just how many suitors do you think chase me in a month’s time?”

He shook his head. “Dozens?”

She laughed, cheeks flushing with heat. In truth there’d been one, a freckle-faced scholar from the Inner Circle she’d rejected outright. And even his offer was a rarity this past year. It seemed most eligible bachelors in Edras appreciated her curt wit and mischievous tendencies about as much as her parents did.

“You watch him, miss,” the old soldier said, handing her the crutch. “He’s not supposed to walk on that leg for four weeks at least.”

Dradge grunted in disagreement. “It’s a *simple* fracture. The bone never stuck through the skin. I’m fine.”

The other soldier scoffed. “A simple fracture in at least three places. Please try, ma’am. Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

Dradge muttered something under his breath, but Lyara looked up at him with a grin. “So, they’re saying you need a place to stay?”

His smile quickly returned, sheepish this time. “I can try and speak with my father. Or lodge at the barracks. But, I thought I might ask you first.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear those other options. I’m sure my parents will take you in, since you have nowhere else to go.”

The two other soldiers laughed, the older letting out a low whistle. “Oh, she’s a troublemaker too? Well, that could be the only chance anyone’s got at making him listen.”

## Five

Dradge muttered curses as he stubbed his foot on the guest room door frame.

“Sorry,” Lyara said, helping him the rest of the way to the bed.

The cover was another of her mother’s quilts, colorful and intricate in its design but dusty from lack of use. Guest rooms only had purpose when guests visited, and in recent months those who could afford to avoided travel. The centaurs were the newest scourge, years before that vicious talking animals—the nostkynna—had dogged roads instead. But not in Edras, of course.

Dradge sucked in a sharp breath as he lowered himself onto the bed. He offered her a smile, and almost hid the way pain tightened the creases beside his eyes. “See? No trouble.”

On the opposite side of the small room, Adela pulled back the curtains to let the last burning rays of the evening sunlight warm the air. Then, she plopped down in the upholstered armchair in the corner.

“You won’t even notice me,” Adela said, meeting Lyara’s gaze in apology. She pulled a newly started knitting square, needles, and a roll of yarn from her apron pocket. “I hope you aren’t mad at me for agreeing to this, but your mother pays well. I promise, I’m on your side, really. I’ll have nothing to say unless she presses me.”

Lyara scoffed, cheeks flushing with heat, and made a point to leave Dradge’s side and wander to the other end of the room. “We’re not going to do anything.” She fiddled with the unlit oil lamp on the bedside table.

Adela just nodded and turned furiously to her knitting. “Pretend I’m not even here.”

Eyebrows raised, Dradge glanced at Adela sitting in the corner. When she didn’t look up from her knitting needles, he shrugged, then hauled himself onto the bed and leaned back against the headboard. He sighed contentedly and shut his eyes.

Lyara watched him, not sure if she wanted to let him rest or if she was ticked at him for trying. “How’d you hurt your leg?”

“Trampled,” he said, not opening his eyes.

“You were *trampled*? By your own men?”

He chuckled. “They can’t always help it. But no.”

Old fears stirred in her heart, and she sank to a seat on the bed. “...what are they like?”

He opened his eyes, slowly, and stared pensively at his own feet. “Big.”

She started to grin, ready to poke fun at his answer, but he continued.

“Stronger than me. Faster than most cavalry mounts, too. I would’ve been fine, but the thing got me in the chest with the butt end of a pole-arm and knocked me off my horse.” He

tugged down the loose collar of his shirt, and Lyara gasped as that revealed a horrid black and purple bruise. It covered nearly his entire chest.

She reached for him, as if to mend it, then hesitated. She was useless when it came to things like this.

He looked at her, somewhere between amused and pensive, as he resettled his shirt. "It's fine. Hit the hard part in the center, didn't break anything."

Lyara could only stare at that bruise, then at his bandaged-and-splinted leg, heart aching with the pain she'd buried while watching the procession, waiting to see if he'd come home at all. "It doesn't bother you?"

"What bother me?"

"Well..." She glanced down at her hands. "Death. That you could have died."

Dradge shrugged. "Everyone dies. I guess I don't really think about it."

"You don't even *think* about it?"

He frowned. "You think, you hesitate. You hesitate, you die. The battlefield isn't a place for *thinking*. It's a place for *doing*." He adjusted his position to sit up straighter, grimacing. "Gods know I'm not made for thinking."

She watched him, even though Dradge didn't lift his gaze to meet hers. Her previous suitors thought of themselves as thinkers, all while they stumbled along paths paved by others they never knew and never tried to understand. But that's how Edras folk lived. They thought, and they spoke, and they never did anything.

Most days, she was one of them.

Lyara rose, then rummaged through the bottom drawer of the dresser to find the painting she'd made of that centaur. She returned to the bed with it, sitting a bit closer to Dradge this time, and placed it in his lap. "This is what I did while you were gone."

He gently picked up the canvas, tracing each brushstroke with his eyes. "Wow!" That wasn't a placating smile—she'd seen plenty, and long ago learned the difference. He pointed to the centaur's head. "His ears are too big. And not so much fur here on the chest. But everything else... How did you do this?"

She shrugged, smiling with a swell of pride. "I read about them in my father's books."

"You *read* about them, and put something together like this?" He studied the painting, eyes wide like he didn't quite believe it. "Glad someone put those old things to use for once." He gingerly handed the canvas back to her—as though it were something delicate, something valuable, and looked away. "Sorry. Read what you like. I'm just bitter I guess, from all those years my father tried to make me sit still turning pages."

She tossed her painting on the nightstand, then grasped Dradge's hand and held it up. "No man should ever be ashamed of making his living with these."

Gradually, he smiled at her. "What's that from?"

"It's not from anything. I say it."

His smile widened and he intertwined his fingers with hers, lowering his arm to rest it on the bed beside him. He rubbed his thumb on the back of her hand, the clink of Adela's knitting needles filling the silence. "...you ever put in a request with the army? As a cartographer maybe?"

Lyara snorted. "I'm not inclined to commit parricide. Because that's what would happen, you know. Both my parents, dropping dead the moment I floated the idea."

He smiled at her in apology, but that didn't hide his disappointment. "With skills like that, you're probably painting portraits?"

She glanced away. He'd prodded at her sorest point, and didn't even realize. Four years she'd put in requests, to different houses and officers and even King Hilderic, and she'd made nothing of it. Most, after seeing the best of what she'd done on her own, gave her a test commission. Every time, she choked.

Lifeless eyes... stiff postures... Uninspired use of color...

A muse was a fickle beast indeed, and it thwarted her every attempt at earning an honest wage for herself. She lived day to day on her father's charity, if she made any money at all, and as time stretched on she grew closer and closer to accepting a simple—though useful—role cleaning houses or sweeping streets.

Her parents welcomed her in their home, they provided for her every need, they assured her they were happy to do it—for as long as they needed—until she found the job or the place in the world she wanted. And she was grateful. Ashamed, more and more so with each passing day, but still grateful.

"Lyara's a bookkeeper," Adela piped up—violating her promise to remain unnoticed but, given how long Lyara had let the silence linger, she meant well. "Mister Orvist says she's invaluable, his trade records would be an absolute mess without her."

Lyara offered her friend a pained, though appreciative, smile.

Dradge nodded, placatingly. He studied Lyara's face a moment. "Sometimes cartographers travel with the troops. Not at battles or anything, but in the camps."

She grinned. "I suspect you're trying to ask me something."

He returned the grin sheepishly. "I might be. The only other way they'd let you tag along is if we were married."



She laughed, but cut off suddenly as she realized her heart was more *intrigued* than amused by the idea. “I’d be a fool to marry a man when we’ve only gone on two dates.” She repeated that again, in her own head, for her own sake.

A mischievous gleam glinted in his eyes. “Then I guess I’ll have to ask you on a third one.”

## Six

Dradge was the youngest to make general in over a generation, but to look at him, Lyara wasn't sure anyone would even know. He *belonged* where he stood, owned the space like few men could, his jaw set and his eyes gentle yet stern. This is where he wanted to be, and the world welcomed that reality with open arms.

She chewed on her inner lip as she glanced between the balcony above and her canvas. No one noticed her here, and she didn't mind. She wasn't made for the spotlight; long ago she'd accepted that, and realized she might prefer the shadows anyway. As long as she left some mark behind. It didn't have to bare her name or her face, just her brushstrokes.

Her father had traded in a favor with his friend in charge of the guard to get her this position, a seat on the outer wall surrounding the castle Avtalyon—the best vantage point for watching the King's platform jutting out from the castle's main tower. The crowd below her filled the courtyard and she spared them a glance and a grin.

*Who's short now, huh?*

The castle Avtalyon itself was a haphazard collection of walls and towers dotting the steep ridge of the mountain beside the bay. It was unsymmetrical in an almost artistic display of recklessness, a testimony in stone to the volatile ambition of her forebears. On most other occasions she would have been distracted by that—how gorgeous would those ramparts look in an oil painting, the soft sun rising behind?—but today her eyes never wandered far from Dradge's face.

He stood tall and proud, flanked by a few of his best men, but beside him they seemed small. His uniform was stiff and clean—it looked a bit out of place on his broad shoulders, but that might just be because she knew how little he cared about that sort of showmanship. He'd been courting her seven months now, but after today her parents—maybe even her neighbors—would welcome an open betrothal.

In any case, she was ready to accept whenever he plucked up the courage to ask.

It was a terrifying thing, to realize she'd abandon everything and tie her life to his at a moment's notice if that's what it took, but it was exhilarating, too. Was there really anything wrong with wanting to be sure her world was wide enough to hold him in it?

The doors of the tower swung open and King Hilderic, draped in deep blue robes, stepped into the sunlight. Many gasped, then the crowd gave a brief cheer before hushing to a near silence. While it didn't feel so long ago, the King had aged considerably since Lyara had attempted to paint his portrait. Grey dominated his once brown hair and beard, and his round eyes sat a bit too closed as he stepped to the balcony and surveyed his people.

She couldn't decide if he watched his subjects in disdain, or if he was simply half asleep.

The King turned to Dradge, who, along with his men, saluted. Lyara hurriedly sketched the scene—she'd already arranged the background, but needed to add the figures. She placed

Dradge and the King in more prominence than reality did, shrinking the railing into the foreground and the other soldiers into the background. She didn't change their heights, though. Dradge was a head and a half taller and Hilderic would have to accept that.

The King murmured something and Dradge nodded dutifully. Hilderic then lifted a hand, sunlight flashing in the color of his jeweled rings, and an attendant emerged from the tower carrying a folded crimson cloak. The King unfurled it, then Dradge sank on one knee for Hilderic to drape the cloak over his shoulders and clasp it beneath his chin.

Lyara flipped to the next page in her drawing pad and hurriedly sketched the scene—she'd have to add the background afterwards. In an official sense, her father commissioned these pieces, but if one turned out well she'd save it and present it as a gift to the King to mark her and Dradge's intent to wed.

An obnoxiously coy move, but that was the way a general kept his King's favor. Dradge wouldn't think about that sort of thing; he needed her—he was too honest to play at Edras's silly games.

Hilderic placed his palm on Dradge's head, whispering something more she couldn't hear, then held out his hand. Dradge hesitated. The crowd didn't notice—Hilderic didn't notice—but she recognized the look in those green eyes. It was anger.

She turned to a new page, her last sketch half-done, and eked out an approximation of that face. The style was too free and sloppy for Edras folk to appreciate, but she wanted this for herself anyway. While no gift for a King, it was what her muse feasted on: passion, raw and unfiltered and—preferably—dangerous.

Dradge kissed his King's ring, then rose to his feet and saluted again, his expression an appropriate mask of military discipline. Hilderic nodded to him, then stepped toward the balcony railing and offered a limp wave to his people below.

"My friends," his voice echoed through the courtyard, thanks to the inherent acoustics of the construction, but he sounded... soft. Weak. "I know many of you are concerned about rumors filtering in from towns along the border. I tell you, fear not. Brave men and women live among you and rise to your King's call. This,"—he motioned to Dradge—"is but one such man. I promised you peace and prosperity, and by the gods above and below I swear it again."

The people clapped, a few raising a cheer. It sounded forced, but she might just be projecting her own sentiments. Lyara stared at the King, a grin creeping across her face. She turned to the next page and poured her soul into that sketch. Hilderic, standing there back hunched, Dradge looming at his shoulder, hands clasped behind him—looking more a King than the real one could ever dream to be.

She'd paint this one. That dangerous energy churned in her heart, and she thought one day she might even frame and display it.

With her brushstrokes an artist could lie in a thousand ways, but true masterpieces always captured the truth.

## Seven

The revelry stretched on past midnight, and as usual the later the hour the more alive Lyara felt. She didn't partake of the beer—what fun was there in dulling your senses?—but Hilderic rarely opened his halls to the public, so this was an occasion ripe with excuses for overindulgence.

Most of the guests were Dradge's fellow soldiers and their families, so Hilderic himself had graced them with his presence for all of two minutes before the main course. Although, with how the conversation turned after dessert, that might have been for the best.

"And he would've had me *abandon* those villages." Dradge scowled as he fixed his gaze on the empty corner of the room, far over the rows of tables and benches filled with drunken soldiers. "Too far away he said, when I reached them in a quarter dayride's march. And since I come back alive he's forced to promote me, pretending it was his idea all along."

He'd kept the proper smile plastered on his face for most of the night, but he was five beers into the evening and that finally loosened his tongue. Lyara doubted anyone else would be so cross on the night they'd made general, but his earnest passion was too real to hide for long, even if that were prudent.

She grasped her mug and nudged it closer to his—close enough that their hands *almost* touched, which was more than proper society would tolerate from the unwed. "You know, that kind of talk is exactly what's driven all your friends away."

Dragde glanced up, as though just noticing this end of the table was empty except for the two of them. He sighed, then offered her a smile. "Didn't chase you off yet, though."

"No, I'm quite used to reflections on the macabre. Stuffy folk prefer it, if a conversation inflicts theoretical pain it makes us feel as though we've done something more than sit around sipping wine."

His smile widened, but slowly faded again as he stared off towards the closed doors through which Hilderic had long ago departed. "What's the point of making general if I still have to answer to that man? You watch, he'll figure a way to station me in Edras. Permanently. He'll pretend like it's to keep folks here under the protection of the 'army's best', but really it'll be to keep an eye on me."

She tried to grin at him. "Would that really be so bad? Staying here, I mean?"

Dragde held her gaze for a long moment. She could see it on his face, the honest answer was a quick *yes*—that spark in his eyes was the fear of a wolf about to be caged—but he knew how that would hurt her. "What's the farthest you've been from the city?"

She glanced down, running her thumb along the texture of her mug. "Three steps beyond the outer gates. I was thirteen and set on reaching the river, but my father caught me and dragged me back."

"Do you still wish you'd made it farther?"

Lyara drew in a deep breath. “Yes,” she said quietly.

“So what keeps you here, then?”

She hesitated. What *was* keeping her here? She poked fun at a system she didn’t respect, and yet she willingly stayed and lived in it. Her father wouldn’t stop her any longer—he’d advise caution as always, but she kept *herself* locked behind the gates now.

There was a special shame in that. She painted herself as a rebel, but in true Edras style, she *talked* about doing something far more than she really did it.

“Take me with you,” she asked finally.

He looked at her in surprise.

“Wherever you go next, I want to come. I’ll sign up as a cartographer if that’s what it takes.”

Dradge studied her, thoughtful mostly, then glanced away. He shifted almost uncomfortably in his seat to dig a crumpled parchment out of his pocket. He held it in his hands, still folded. It was a page torn from a strategist’s ledger, but was now worn at the edges and stained in places with dirty fingerprints and spots of dried blood.

“I...” He swallowed, and didn’t meet her gaze as he unfolded the paper—holding it close so only he could read it. “I’ve been working on this since...” He growled under his breath and closed his fist around the parchment. “Gods, I should have at least copied it onto something nice. Forget I said anything—”

“No,” Lyara placed her hand on his, to keep him from shoving the note back in his pocket. “Let me see it.”

He breathed a sigh, then slowly opened his hand so she could pick up the paper and smooth it out on the table. It’d certainly lived in his pocket for months, parts were scribbled out to make space for new lines, and half the text was so shaky she had to guess he’d written it while riding horseback. But she *could* read it.

It was a poem. An original piece, styled after *Budding Daisy*, the most renowned work from Ivard of Gebrama’s *Summerwind*. The rhyming scheme was a bit juvenile, the similes cliché, and it spoke of a woman whose beauty exceeded that of every gorgeous thing in nature—Gods, this was about her.

Lyara put her hand to her mouth and read the poem again. This time the technical mistakes didn’t stand out. What were such rules, anyway, except another way for the educated to lord their tutoring over others? This was, without question, the most genuine, most beautiful expression of love she’d ever read, and she couldn’t keep the tears from welling up in her eyes.

Dradge chuckled, brows creased in concern. “That bad, is it?”

She pressed the worn paper to her chest. He could have at least given this to her in private, or on the walk home, where she could've had the decency to kiss him. "No, I love it. Thank you."

He watched her, as though to be certain she wasn't placating him, then a smile crept across his face as red flushed all the way to the tips of his ears. "I meant to give it to you when, well..."

"When what?"

"When I asked you to marry me."

She smirked. "So, *are* you asking?"

Dradge held her gaze, then rose to his feet. He snapped his heels together as though to stand at attention, but instead took her right hand in his. "Lyara, daughter of Orvist, I stand ready to devote my heart to yours. Will you grant me your hand?"

She grinned, still clutching that poem to her chest. "I will."

The nearby table cheered. Lyara flinched in surprise—she'd forgotten they weren't the only two here—but the news spread quickly and Dradge's fellow soldiers crowded around, offering congratulations and fresh mugs of beer for both of them. She laughed, cheeks burning, but somehow their drunken excitement couldn't match what she felt.

Dradge nodded to his friends, but kept his smile fixed on hers, lifting her hand to press his lips against the back of her glove. Although, after a moment, guilt tinged his excitement. "How quickly do you think we can put together the ceremony? We're supposed to head out in a week."



## Eight

Lyara jumped down from the back of the wagon, adjusting the strap of her satchel on her shoulder. There were horses to spare, but she didn't know how to ride, so after she fell from the saddle three times moving from a trot to a canter, she'd spent the rest of the day bouncing around in the back of that rickety old cart, rattling her bruises.

It was absolutely thrilling.

Her mother, lecturing the entire time—still smarting from the wedding party she'd flawlessly planned and executed in less than three days—had bought her new riding dresses, with the center sewn up the middle to resemble trousers, and then two trunks full of sundry other items. Only one of them she'd taken on this trip, as boots and sketching materials seemed the most useful, and—really—what kind of adventurer left home with more than she could carry herself?

Spoiled, foolish ones, that's who. And she wanted to keep pretending that wasn't what she was.

Here, the trees were short and leafy, the branches filled with a soft rustling that grew to a whisper in the gentle wind. The air was warm for the beginning of autumn, and the leaves hadn't started changing colors like she heard they did. She would have liked to see that.

The group of soldiers spread out in the clearing beside the forest, but Lyara lingered at the forest's edge, digging a sketch pad out of her satchel. She'd tried to draw as she rode, but the bouncing left her attempts at capturing the plains or the mountains as impressionist at best. She sat down, cross-legged, in the grass beside the wagon's wheel and hurriedly outlined the tree line in thin charcoal.

"Lyara?" Dradge dismounted from his black stallion and led the massive animal by the reins as he stepped towards her with a grin. "What are you doing?"

She offered him a smile, then pointed to the forest. "We don't have these back in Edras."

"Trees?" He shook his head, then sank to a seat beside her. "I'm pretty sure we have trees."

He didn't have much time to spare her during the day—he *was* general, after all, and she tried not to hold it against him—but he always came and found her when they stopped to make camp.

Lyara grinned, then sketched an approximation of him sitting, arms folded, beneath those charcoal branches, frowning because a large leaf had fallen on his head. "There." She tore the page from her sketchpad and plopped the drawing in his lap. "Something for *you* to remember the trip by. If you'll notice, these are *deciduous* branches, not coniferous."

He picked up the paper and laughed. That smile didn't fade as he folded it and shoved it in his inner pocket. "Come on." He offered her his hand. "I'll show you how to pitch a tent."

She smirked. “Pitch a tent? Is that proper for a Lady? Next you’ll be trying to teach me how to swing a sword.”

He perked up at that. “Do you want to learn? I could show you some of the basic stances. I think we have training weapons—”

She laughed, heart fluttering with intrigue—she’d cave, as long as he asked a few more times. “One step at a time, dear.”

## Nine

“Scouts say they’re holed up here.” Dradge’s friend pointed to a spot on the large map he struggled to keep spread across his lap.

Dradge nodded, shoveling spoonfuls of that borderline inedible soldier’s ration mash into his mouth. It was the man’s second bowl. That boded well for future marital fidelity; despite her mother’s best efforts, she never had been a good cook.

The three of them were seated in the grass surrounding a campfire outside her and Dradge’s tent. A chill had settled across the clearing with the night, and Lyara was snuggled in that crimson cloak King Hilderic had given her husband a week and a half before. It was thicker than the typical soldier-issued uniform, and had a soft fur lining.

The camp bustled with energy at all hours, but she came to appreciate it in a special way once darkness fell. Now, she could blend into the shadows and watch the world pass by, simply appreciating it for what it was.

Sketching had lost its appeal, so for the past hour she’d pretended at reading as constant distractions stole her attention. She felt alive, in a way Edras life had never permitted her to be. The sensible part of her called for restraint while her heart longed to run head-long into whatever came next.

Would Dradge let her follow him to the battle ground, or was this as far as the camp women were allowed to go? It did strike her that few other men brought their wives along at all.

“What about this pass? Fox Run?” Dradge jabbed at a spot on the map with the back of his spoon. “It’s a bottleneck.”

His friend narrowed his grey eyes at him and brushed some crumbs of mash off the parchment. “Against foot soldiers I’d give you decent odds of holding it, but not against these beasts. Cornered animals always fight harder, and those things fight hard enough as it is.”

Lyara glanced up from her book—Commander Faldore’s *On Military Strategy*—and tried to orient herself on the upside down map. “What if you chased them in, then sent archers to finish the job?”

Dradge’s friend glanced up at her, holding her gaze with such intention—as though he hadn’t bothered to notice her until that moment. “Ah,” he said. “You’re the wife.”

She snorted. “Yes, that’s my name. ‘The wife.’”

Shouldn’t be that hard to remember her name, it was simple enough. And this man was the one who’d come looking for Dradge those many months ago when they’d met outside her parent’s house. She swore she’d seen him again at their whirlwind of a wedding ceremony. But Dradge had *a lot* of friends, most of whom got quite loud quite quickly when drunk.

Dradge grinned and motioned for her to take a seat beside him. Lyara gladly climbed to her feet to sink to the ground, leaning against his side.

“Seren,” Dradge said, pointing to his friend, then wrapped that arm around her shoulders. “Pretty sure I introduced you two at the wedding. But, the perpetual scholar here finds no need to remember a name unless the person’s been dead three hundred years and he just read about them in a book.”

Seren sneered at him. “Maybe I’m still thinking of that one girl you always went on about...”

Dragde laughed and patted Lyara’s knee with his other hand. “That’s this one!”

“Oh.” Seren studied her face again, more sincerely. “L...Leirah?”

“Lyara.”

“Lyara,” Seren repeated with a nod, turning back to the map. “Archers are useless, takes a dozen arrows to drop one centaur when we’re lucky enough to hit them. We’ve tried different poisons but even then they die too slowly.” He tapped his finger on a patch of trees beside the river. “We’d have better chances controlling the terrain. A Fidelis could swamp—”

“A Fidelis?” Lyara’s heart leapt in her chest and she looked over her shoulder at the camp. “They’re *here*?”

“Should be by tomorrow,” Dradge said with a grunt. “Assuming they listen to a damn thing I say. I’ve asked for them on the last thirteen campaigns I’ve led and this is the first one they’ve agreed to show up at.”

“They will come,” Seren said, still surveying the map. “Deploy two, here, and—”

Lyara chuckled. “They aren’t soldiers. The *Elaedoni* is not a weapon.”

Both men looked at her with a similar confusion.

“Have you tried to learn what they believe, or did you find what looked like a sharp stick and simply point it at what you wanted it to poke?”

Dragde shrugged, but Seren weighed her through narrowed eyes.

“The rivers ran red, but not with our blood,” he said, quoting Rendre’s *Account of the New World*. “We grinned all the while, promising to paint the sky as well, need be. That’s what one of the *founding* Fidelis houses wrote about—”

Lyara lifted her chin. “Peace is what we crossed the oceans looking for,” she said, quoting another passage from the same text. “If we were stronger, or kinder, or wiser—Essence have mercy—we would have found it.”

A smile sprang into Seren’s eyes, and he shrugged as well. “Point made. But, traditions change. These centaurs are slaughtering villages—women, children—they have no concept of mercy. Surely they would kill all of us, given the chance. It seems to me that *peace* demands we defend ourselves. Or would you prefer to lie down and die quietly?”

It was Lyara's turn to shrug.

Dradge heaved a sigh. "I think I'll regret re-introducing the two of you. Just tell me, where am I leading the main wave? I want to catch some sleep tonight."

## Ten

Lyara woke slowly to the soft warmth of Dradge's lips pressed against her forehead. She drew in a breath, not wanting to open her eyes just yet, and reached for him on the other side of the tent. But he was already gone, his blanket warm and piled in a heap beside her.

She sat up with a start, tossing aside the covers. The air was cool—it stung her throat and had clogged her nose overnight—and the drowsiness faded as her heart pounded in her chest. Sleep hadn't been as hard to find on the rocky ground as she'd expected, but she didn't want to snooze through his sending off.

Lyara smoothed back her hair, tying it hastily with the strap she'd stored on her wrist, and crawled out of the tent, resettling her simple dress on her shoulders. It wasn't fit for any dinner parties, but she hadn't felt comfortable stripping to her underclothes when her walls consisted of two thin sheets of cloth, so it was presentable enough.

The camp was mostly empty, lit by a dim and pink morning sun and wreathed in fog. A few other wives sat outside their husband's tents, tending to cooking fires. The smell of fried meat wafted into the air. Lyara muttered under her breath as she gathered her skirts up from her ankles and ran through the grass in her bare feet. A proper soldier's wife got up *before* the sun and cooked her soldier breakfast; she'd remember for next time.

The line of horses paraded away from the empty corral, each man dressed in chain-mail or chest plates and armed with sheathed broadswords, loaded crossbows, or shouldered spears. She charged past them, drawing more than a few curious eyes, but she focused on that dark-haired general seated on that black stallion beside the standard-bearer.

Dradge turned back with a smile as she ran to his side, breathless. There was a certain edge to that smile, a deep joy in his eyes that only shone when he looked at her, but he seemed apologetic all the same as he pulled his horse to a stop.

"Love," he said, "you can sleep, I didn't mean to—"

Lyara wrapped her arms around his leg in the stirrup—the best she could do—and kissed his knee, above the hem of his boot. "Essence, shield him from the blade, guard him from the arrow, and keep him from destruction. But if he should die—"

"Hey, I'm not—"

"But if he should die, let it be with his sword in hand and his face toward home, on the field of victory."

He gave her a soft smile. "Thank you." He leaned down, taking her hand in his to kiss the back of it. A few soldiers farther down in the line whooped and whistled, but she and him both ignored them.

“Superstitions,” Seren, the standard-bearer, said with a laugh as he nudged his horse beside Dradge’s. “What’s next, huh? She’ll have you carrying talismans, sacrificing to Svaldan myths?”

Lyara snorted, and stepped back to look Seren in the eye. “Why would I seek the dirt’s intervention when I’m on speaking terms with the Essence that made it?”

Dradge just grinned, studying her face like she was some beautiful mystery he didn’t understand—but wanted to. “I liked that last part. *Field of victory*.”

## Eleven

Crouching beside the fire, Maierva whispered to herself as she periodically tossed sprinkled dirt on the sputtering flames. Opposite her, lounging on a pile of blankets, Lyara pretended to be reading that same chapter from *On Military Strategy* she'd started yesterday, as she stole glances at the other woman.

Maierva was six years younger than she was, a black-skinned fur tanner with dark, angular eyes, who followed her sergeant husband from one end of Avaron to the other since they married two and a half years ago. This was her fourth campaign this season, and she apparently spent an hour during each battle performing this same ritual. That was as much as Lyara had pried from her up to now. And she was the most talkative of the other camp wives by far.

"Who are you praying to?" Lyara asked, genuinely curious.

Maierva frowned at her and kept whispering. Lyara folded her book shut and waited, trying to piece together what the woman was saying. It was in the same Ristaer they all spoke, but she mumbled.

Finally, Maierva leaned back and dumped the rest of the dirt from her bag on top of the fire, smothering it. "Tácnere," she said, meeting Lyara's gaze with an edge that suggested she expected some kind of debate, or at least a teasing. "The Guardian."

Lyara nodded, trying to appear anything but confrontational. "What prayers do you say?"

Maierva tilted her head. "It's not any of your business."

Lyara nodded again and glanced away. "I'm sorry. I really am just curious. I pray Gallian's prayer a lot myself, and from what I've read about Svaldan tradition the two strike me as surprisingly similar—"

Maierva's frown deepened. "There is nothing similar, *Láefe*. You abandoned our ancestor's traditions to follow new ones on this New World. You are fickle and easily swayed from what we all used to know as truth. If there *are* similarities it is because you cling to what you once knew while pretending not to."

Lyara laughed, soft and uncomfortable, and looked deliberately at her book. "...I'm making a mess of this, aren't I?"

Maierva nodded, the spark of a smile in her eyes as she cinched her bag. "You are." She shifted her position to sit cross-legged beside the fire, pulling a strip of jerky from her pocket to gnaw on. "I guess this permits me to ask a few wrong questions, now?"

Lyara shrugged.

"What are you doing here?"

"Following my husband?"



Maierva snorted. “The way you prance about, reading and drawing, we all thought you came on holiday.”

Lyara shrank back into her chair of blankets. “...why are *you* here, then?”

“If I wasn’t, I’d be sleeping on the floor with my mother’s dogs, eating scraps with them so my siblings don’t starve. Three more campaigns and Renard might save up enough to buy me four walls and a roof with a leak.” She patted her satchel. “If I steal two more blankets I’ll have enough to sew my own bed.”

Lyara studied the other woman’s face in sympathy, but Maierva’s fierce stare said that was the last thing she wanted.

“You’re spoiled. You don’t know how good you have it in the Inner Circle.”

“No, I do, but...” The words didn’t carry any weight. Lyara’s shoulders drew in as the silence stretched on. Ashamed, and not looking up, she gathered her book and sketchpad, then paused, hand brushing over the pad’s cover. “...if you could speak with the people of Edras, what would you say?”

Maierva stared at her, raising an eyebrow. “What does it matter? They don’t listen.”

Lyara fished her charcoal pen out of her pocket and flipped to the nearest blank page. “Imagine they did. What would you say?”

## Twelve

The company trudged back into camp at sunset, covered in mud, smiling and laughing. It seemed they left behind a field of victory after all, one hard-fought and well-won. Lyara bounced on her tip-toes, standing as near to the procession as she dared—*she* didn't think lightly of being trampled—scanning each grimy face for the one that mattered most.

She'd distracted herself well enough throughout the day collecting stories from the other women in camp—heartbreaking paintings of a life of poverty, when quoted properly Edras folks would see it that way, too—but now the anxiety gnawing in her chest was even more potent than it had been waiting for the return processions back home.

Perhaps it was more real, here. She could see the fresh blood herself.

Seren, still holding the King's standard on a pole notched in one of his stirrups, emerged from the crowd, his white gelding pulling Dradge's black stallion behind—the saddle empty. Simple fears leapt in her heart, silencing all else, and Lyara ran to his side.

Seren looked at her a moment, as though once again having to remind himself who she even was, but quickly offered a sympathetic smile. "He's alright," he said. "Wait here, he's in the infirmary tent—"

Lyara took off at a run. Puddles splashed muddy water over her boots and the skirt of her dress but she didn't care. She wove between trotting horses and treading men until she reached the simple, white-cloth overhang set up on temporary stakes at the edge of camp. Many injured soldiers—a dozen at least—were being tended to by army medics, but Lyara still searched for her one.

She heard his voice carrying over the others—commands, short and direct—and found him tucked in the corner, four other men hovering around. Lyara shoved through, thanks to her height they didn't seem to notice her until she brushed against their elbows, then stopped in her tracks, her breath catching.

Dragde was propped up on a table, the jagged remnants of a pole-arm protruding from the stain of blood in his lower left stomach. Tears stung her eyes, but for that instant she couldn't move. Seren had said he was alright, why would the man lie...?

She stumbled to her husband's side, he only noticed when she grasped his hand in hers. Panic flashed across his face, then he tried to smile through the pain.

"Lyara, it's—don't look. They'll fix it."

Tears streamed down her cheeks, she shook off the hands that tried to steer her away, but could only stare at the wound in his stomach. His own blood had already soaked through his clothes and the bandages a soldier pressed around the jagged hole in his flesh. She could see the torn entrails underneath. Medics didn't just *fix* that.

“You ready?” A soldier said, meeting Dradge’s gaze. Only, this was not a soldier. He wore the same crimson cloak, but beneath that were a civilian’s shirt and trousers, not chain-mail or plate armor—not even a tunic with the King’s blackbird and crossmarks.

Dradge nodded, setting his jaw, though his face proved him a liar.

The man—he had dark hair and round, green eyes much like Dradge’s, although his skin was a shade darker and the start of wrinkles on his bare cheeks made him at least a few years older—whispered under his breath. Not in Ristaer, a tongue more fluid and elegant. The veins in his hands began to glow a soft blue.

Lyara gasped, and suddenly it all made sense. The man was Fidelis. Her anxiety paled beside growing awe.

Continuing to whisper, the Fidelis grasped the pole-arm fragment and, with a sharp tug, pulled it from Dradge’s stomach. Dradge bit down on a scream, clenching Lyara’s hand in his. That hurt her, but she simply squeezed back, glad to participate in a way that at least felt useful.

The Fidelis jammed his bare hands against the gushing wound, and slowly the flow of blood dried up. He probed the hole with his fingers—Dradge gritting his teeth all the while—mending torn intestines and picking bits of debris from the gore.

“Water,” the Fidelis said, holding out an expectant hand without looking up. A soldier placed a filled tin cup in his hand and the man splashed the contents through the wound. He tossed the empty cup aside, then grasped Dradge by the shoulder to roll him on his side and tend to the exit wound in his back, knitting that torn skin together with his glowing hands and his whispers until only a jagged scar remained.

Dradge tried to hold back a whimper as the Fidelis let him resettle on his back.

“Bandages,” the man said, and another soldier handed him a wad which he pressed against the wound. “I’ll cover this, but I’ll have to clean it again before I close it up.”

Dradge nodded, shuddering as he let out a deep sigh.

The Fidelis looked at him with a wry grin. “You’re also an idiot. You understand that?”

Dradge’s eyebrows rose, but he returned most of the grin. “That’s no way to speak to your superior officer.”

“You’re not my superior. And no officer I’ve ever known would take a spear meant for someone else.” He gave a sharp salute. “Thank you.”

Dradge laughed, the sound cut short as he grimaced. “I wanted to be sure my men would have a healer waiting when we got back.”

The Fidelis looked at him in wonder, shaking his head. “There wasn’t the time to think up that excuse. You jumped in front of that pole-arm and *then* realized who I was.”

Dradge grumbled under his breath. “I was trying to block the damn thing...”

The Fidelis stuck out his hand. “Féderyc. I owe you my life, least I can give is my name.”

Dradge offered his left hand—Lyara still clung to his right—and awkwardly shook it. The Fidelis turned, meeting her gaze for the first time.

Lyara dropped to one knee, placing her right fist against her heart and her left hand over her right as she bowed her head. She wasn’t prepared for this; she wasn’t worthy.

The Fidelis sighed and sank to his knee in front of her, mimicking the same motion. It left an imprint of his hands, outlined in her husband’s blood, on his grey tunic. “The Essence moves by its own intentions. Don’t turn your devotion towards me.”

Trembling, she met his gaze. With more than a little disappointment, she realized the eyes that held hers belonged to only a man.

Féderyc offered her his hand, and hesitantly she took it and let him lift her to her feet.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her voice hoarse and weak.

The Fidelis just nodded as he stepped towards the next injured man in the tent. “Keep an eye on him, I think he needs it.” There was a finality to that statement, something that suggested it didn’t apply to just here and now.

Lyara turned to Dradge with a shaky smile, taking up his hand again as she smeared the tears from her cheeks. He returned the look, his face pale and eyes sunken—but he didn’t try to sleep, he tried to pull her closer.

“I’m sorry, I told Seren to distract you...”

She laughed, tears catching in her throat, then leaned down and planted a kiss on his sweaty temple. “He did a terrible job.” She climbed up onto the table beside him—there wasn’t much space, but she fit, curled against his side—and placed her head on his chest. His heart beat steady and strong, quickening at her touch. “What were you thinking? I’m too young to be a widow.”

He chuckled, the sound echoing beneath her ear, and wrapped his arm around her shoulders. “I told you, I don’t think. If there’s something that needs done, I do it. When I’ve got good people at my back it always works out.”

## Thirteen

Lyara jogged at her husband's side, struggling to keep up with his long stride. Dradge didn't seem to notice. He walked with his brow furrowed and eyes downcast, straight towards the walls of the prison like he intended to storm them all by himself. That wound still hurt him—it'd only been two weeks, Fidelis were healers not magicians—but he hid the limp.

The structure was a part of the castle Avtalyon, one of the many towers jutting from the mountain side, although this one stood out thanks to its lack of windows or banners. A terribly dull building—a flat grey, even in the bright autumn sunlight—it didn't live up to the majesty of the others. Maybe it shouldn't.

A messenger had met Dradge at the gates this morning, as soon as they'd rode back into town at the conclusion of the campaign. The boy hardly dared to look any of them in the eye, and apologized profusely as he handed over the letter. Hilderic had thrown Rhowan—her husband's father—in prison. That was as much information as the letter offered; it was a threat, not an instrument intended to convey fact.

Dradge had said little, since—just hurried off to confront the issue. He hadn't told her she couldn't come, so Lyara tagged along, unsure of what to make of the sadness in his eyes. She couldn't say he held the same worry she would if *her* father was the one in prison, but then again he was a better soldier than that.

She did want to meet her father-in-law. And, well, even if the circumstances weren't ideal, she'd try to make the best of it. Dradge had invited him to the wedding but he never showed—she still had his gift, a painting of Dradge making general, from one of her proper sketches. She'd entreated one of Dradge's men to fetch it from her parent's house, and carried it rolled up in her satchel.

That sort of thing would make for a good first impression, right? She was surprised to find herself nervous. It wasn't like she had to win his approval; she and Dradge were already married, there was nothing he could do about it. His stepmother had shown to authenticate the wedding—she was a curt woman, with a taste for wine, and while Dradge smiled and spoke with her like he should, they seemed anything but close.

The two soldiers guarding the prison tower saluted as Dradge approached and pushed open the doors for both of them. Lyara nodded to the two men with a smile, but they met her gaze and nodded back as an afterthought—they opened that door for her husband, she just also happened to be there.

This first room was open, a spiral stair at the far side wound to the upper and lower floors, the space filled with a large but well-worn wooden table. The chairs held council members—Lords and Ladies dressed in fine colors and flashing jewels—with Hilderic seated at the head. Next to them, he looked like a lump of blue cloth with a dandelion wisp for a head.

The King rose, cheeks flushed red with anger, and pointed a finger at her as he glared at Dradge. "You disrespect me again? This council will not be privy to prying ears!"

Dradge stopped stiffly at her side. “Surely, my liege, my wife is not suspect?”

The King laughed, the sound devoid of mirth, as he sank back into his chair. “Is she not? Your father is the one printing those papers about me, I know he is!”

Lyara cringed, then tried to pretend she hadn’t. Gods, if *her* periodical had landed her husband’s father in prison... she didn’t even want to think about it.

Lady Tanith released a delicate sigh, tugging at the wide brim of her hat. “My King, calm yourself. Remember your health.”

Hilderic turned his scowl on her. “My health? If you cared about my health you’d find each and every person responsible for printing that vile *Whisper* and see them all thrown in prison! Or, better yet—hanged!”

Lyara cringed again, hand drifting unconsciously to her neck.

Lord Therburn rubbed his bushy mustache. “Your majesty, whether you like it or not, the people have their own minds. Surely you can stomach it if a few voice them.”

Hilderic rose from his chair again, pointing a bony finger at the aging councilman, but the eloquence of his rage eluded him.

Dradge glanced at Lyara with a pained smile, gently placing his hand on her back. “I think it would be best if you waited somewhere else until we sort this out. Shouldn’t be long.”

Lyara nodded, gathering her skirt and her satchel before her, and scurried down the back stairs. Her husband probably meant for her to step outside again, but that would be too boring—she wanted to find a place to eavesdrop, and what was better for that than basements and darkened stairwells?

A single torch lit the staircase, and after winding in a sharp loop it ended abruptly on the lower level. This space was open like the floor above, but iron bars divided it into prison cells. Lyara froze, fist clenching the strap of her satchel. She had expected to find a root cellar, or at least a collection of storage shelves.

Some cells were empty, but most housed a single person. The air was dank, the floor dirty, and each poor soul wore threadbare clothes that hadn’t been washed in weeks. The nearest cell contained a young girl, maybe eleven. She had her face pressed against the bars, but looked up at Lyara with a lopsided grin.

“What they yellin’ about?”

Lyara straightened her shoulders, stepping towards the girl—a false display of confidence, as she didn’t want those other criminals sensing weakness. “That periodical, *The Whisper in Brief*.”

“Oh.” The girl laughed. “I like that one.”

“You’ve read it?”

The girl shook her head. “Looked at the pictures, though. Pretty funny.” She made a face, puffing up her cheeks to mimic the Hilderic cartoon.

Lyara chuckled, then glanced down at her satchel—there might be something better for her to do here than eavesdrop. She rummaged to the bottom and produced her handy travelers’ sketchbook. “Why are you in here?”

The girl shrugged. “I think my Da owes taxes? I’m stuck here until he pays them.”

Lyara’s hand froze, charcoal pencil hovering over the empty page. “You... Hilderic is holding you here as leverage over your father?”

The girl shrugged.

“Is that even legal?”

The girl shrugged again.

“No, it ain’t!” an old man in the back shouted. Lyara stepped around the girl’s cell, following the narrow hall down the center until she spotted him. He sat hunched in the corner, his beard long and ragged, his clothes worn through at the elbows and knees. “But, better your kid than you, huh?”

“You have debts, too?” Lyara asked.

The man nodded. “Only I don’t got no family. So *I’m* in here until I can pay it back.”

“And how do you earn money behind bars?”

He scoffed. “I don’t!”

Lyara glanced around the prison in disgust. “Are all of you here like this?”

The prisoners began to shout, each of them over the other, some of them slamming their hands against the bars. Lyara stumbled back, clutching her sketchbook, desperately trying to pick one—any—particular story from all the others. The cacophony rose like that of a rioting mob and she began to wonder if she’d made some foolish mistake.

“Hey!” Dradge’s stern voice carried from the bottom of the stairs and the prisoners fell silent. He eyed each of the cages, then offered a curious smile as he met her gaze. “You... making new friends?”

Several of the men in the back shouted something, but fell silent when Dradge frowned at them.

Lyara strode back to the stairs, wrapping her arm around his as she returned the smile. “A few.”

He shook his head, his smile fading too quickly, then nodded towards the stairs. “My father’s on the second floor.”

She held more tightly to his arm and followed at his side as they walked. “Did you work it out with Hilderic?”

He nodded. “The man has no evidence—of any kind, don’t worry. The council is not interested in prosecuting anyone on their King’s whim, they’ve been burned too many times on that as it is.”

She nodded, thoughtfully. “...when’s the last time you saw your father?”

Dradge peered ahead. They reached the lighted main floor—the King had apparently stormed out of the council room entirely, but the Lords and Ladies still mingled. They all looked to Dradge as she trudged up the second stairs beside him, each giving a cordial—respectful—nod of their head.

“...eight years?” Dradge said softly as they continued climbing. The torchlight cast his face in shadow. “Might be nine. We haven’t spoken since I dropped out of university.”

She rubbed his arm. “I’m here, alright?”

He nodded again, then took her hand in his, lifting it so he could kiss the back of it. “I think he’d like you. Really. If he gave you the chance.”

They stepped onto the second floor. It was a mirror of the basement, only emptier and cleaner. Each occupied cell also had its own guard. Additional torches burned on the wall, lighting the space a bit less ominously, although perhaps a prison should embody that sort of energy. Dradge let go of her hand but she still clung to his arm—married couples were allowed to parade around like that, and she had no intention of letting him go.

The nearest cells were empty, but a single man rose from his bench seat on the far wall. He was tall, with Dradge’s same broad build and bright green eyes. It might just be her prejudice, but his face seemed to lack his son’s kindness; his brown beard hid hardened edges, his furrowed brow expressed judgment instead of concern.

Rhovan turned to look at them and Dradge nearly wilted under his gaze—she could feel her husband tense at her side. He stood his ground, though, straightening his shoulders, and led her to stand before those bars.

“Father,” Dradge said, with a nod nearing a bow.

Rhovan’s eyes narrowed. “You playing at politics now, boy, or is the threatened destruction of my livelihood the only goad worthy of prompting a visit?”

Dradge drew in a breath, then motioned to her. “This is Lyara, I sent letters—”

“That lowborn girl, from the neighborhood we left behind? You know I had better lined up for you—”

Anger flashed in Dradge’s eyes and Lyara gently tugged on his arm.

“It’s alright,” she whispered.



Rhowan fixed that gaze on her for a moment, before turning it back on her husband. “You expect to walk in here like I don’t remember how you spat in my face?”

This was a horrible man. A horrible, terrible man and she suddenly no longer wanted his blessing at all.

Dradge shrugged, and tried to offer a smile. “We’ve got to start somewhere, right?”

Rhowan just scowled. “That university was our birthright. It was denied me, but I got you in. My life’s work, *I got you in.*”

Dradge ran a hand across his face. “Da, I don’t learn that way! I never could! I thought you’d finally understand when you had to start bribing my teachers to pass me, but you didn’t.” He turned his shoulder towards the bars. “Look at these patches on my coat. Look at this gorgeous woman on my arm. I have almost everything I’ve ever wanted and I’m good at what I do. Isn’t there something in that to be proud of?”

Rhowan studied him, unyielding. “Anyone can swing a sword. *You* were meant for more than that.”

Dradge hung his head, eyes clenched shut, hands balled into fists at his sides. Lyara pulled him closer, resting her cheek on his upper arm, as if she could *will* the pain from him. Maybe it worked because he heaved a sigh instead of speaking.

Dradge stepped back, making eye contact with the guard beside the cell door. “Release him.”

The soldier immediately did as commanded, but Rhowan frowned. “What are you doing? I’ve been charged with sedition—”

“A war crime,” Dradge said, face stern. “Hilderic can levy charges as he likes, but it’s my jurisdiction to see those punished. He would’ve known that if he bothered to understand how his country functioned instead of just ordering it around.”

A hint of surprise flickered across Rhowan’s face. “You’re punishing me?”

“Yes. A fine of twelve hundred firri, to be given to the Corner Street orphanage.”

Rhowan stared at him. “I already give them as much, every year.”

Dradge grunted. “Funny, that.” He turned towards the door, and Lyara let go of his arm, giving him a gentle smile.

“I’ll be just a minute.”

He stared into her eyes—for a moment she thought he’d forbid her from staying—but in the end he nodded, then stalked down the stairs and didn’t look back.

Rhowan hadn’t moved from his place in the cell, so Lyara stepped towards him to stand in the threshold.

Anger flared in his eyes, colder than her husband's. "What do you intend to do, argue for him? My son is more than capable of speaking for himself."

Lyara fished her painting out of her satchel. "He saved a seat for you, at the wedding. He pretends otherwise, but I know it hurt him to see it go empty." She placed the rolled canvas in his hands. "I was in charge of choosing the wedding favors, and fortunately they keep longer than a son's naïve hopes. Most fathers would be proud to display this."

She left him to stew in that, following after her husband down the flight of stairs, but as she turned the corner she paused in the shadows where Rhowan wouldn't see. Listening. The canvas creaked as he unrolled it. She waited as long as she dared, but she never heard him close it up again.

## Fourteen

The string band played soft and slow, filling the dimly lit patio and alcove with continuous music, and Lyara sipped at her wine glass to keep from visibly grinning. *Whisper in Brief* was no longer so quiet or limited. Most tables—there were over a dozen—had at least one Lord or Lady flipping through the thin pages, discussing the contents in hushed tones and with furrowed brows.

Hilderic had released a formal written statement, denouncing the periodical as sensationalist and fabricated, but few seemed to listen—there were even *requests* for this second edition printing. This feast tonight appeared designed to change that sentiment.

“I’ve seen that sort of thing myself,” Lady Rigan said on the other side of Lyara’s table. The Lady was about Lyara’s mother’s age, although thanks to her petite frame and the agelessness of her dark eyes and hair she could have passed for much less. She was a young upstart, breaking into the shipping industry with the small fortune her late husband left behind after his untimely death. “I’ve spent a third of my profits this year in housing poor in the Outer Circle.”

“About time someone did something,” Lord Therburn muttered before sipping his beer. He was anything *but* young and upstarting. “I’ve been speaking about these issues for years and no one listened.”

Rigan offered him a demure smile. “Perhaps, my Lord, if you ever *stopped* talking on occasion we would be more inclined to notice when you started up again.”

The table rippled with appropriate laughter and Lyara nodded her head, pretending to take part. She’d been given a prestigious seat here with these two families thanks to Dradge’s rank, but she found herself less inclined to these sorts of political games than she really ought to be. She already knew what a proper Edras wife should be doing: gathering secrets, ingratiating favors. Instead, she stole another glance at Dradge’s empty seat beside her.

The King himself had requested a private audience with him—more than half an hour ago. Surely the old man had nothing to say for that long. Nothing good, anyway.

Adela leaned over Lyara’s shoulder to refill her mostly full wine glass. “Miss!” she gasped. “I’m sorry, did I spill on your gorgeous dress?”

The dress was gorgeous—ivory in color, silver and crystals sewn into the hem, with a tight bodice, flowing skirts, and draping sleeves—but Adela most certainly hadn’t spilled any wine on it.

“Oh my,” Lyara muttered—probably with too much enthusiasm, but she always struggled not to laugh at times like these—and quickly stood up to turn away from the rest of the table, toward the wall.

“I’ve distributed as many as I could,” Adela whispered, as she pretended to inspect Lyara’s dress. “Shoved them in coat pockets and handbags and beside the bar. I don’t think anyone saw me.”

“Thank you,” Lyara whispered, biting her bottom lip to keep from grinning outright. “You’ve been marvelous, as always.”

The girl smiled, then stepped back to curtsy. “My apologies, miss. It must have been a trick of the light, I don’t see any spill.”

“Hmm, I should hope not,” Lyara said with a haughty lift of her chin as she sank back into her seat. “Be sure to keep that hand steady in the future.”

Adela curtsied again, face scrunched up with dutiful servility, then moved to the next station at the table to continue refilling wine. Seren, seated on the other side of Dradge’s empty chair, glanced up and inspected the girl’s face as she topped off his goblet, and he kept watching her as she moved on to the next table.

Lyara watched him back on Adela’s behalf, not sure she trusted the steely intensity in his grey eyes. He hadn’t participated in the group conversation since it shifted away from Ivard of Gebrama’s *On History*, and had instead spent the time pouring through her *Whisper* as though it were a text of equal renown.

He was alone. No family, no girl to court, no friends other than Dradge. She wasn’t sure if she should pity that or think it was what he wanted.

Seren folded the periodical open to the print of the charcoal sketch Lyara had done of pious Maierva praying beside the fire for her husband’s safe return, and slid it into the empty space on the table between them. It was a humanizing portrait, one that put a face on the nebulous idea of poverty. Maierva had almost seemed honored when Lyara asked her permission to draw it; she’d gifted the girl the original copy, telling her to hang it on her wall once her husband bought that house.

“This is well done,” Seren said, meeting her gaze, that intensity unabated. “A shame the artist didn’t sign it.”

Lyara froze. “Yes.” Slowly she nodded, then snatched up her wine glass to at least keep her fidgeting hands occupied. “A shame.”

With the ghost of a smile, he nodded in Adela’s direction. “I understand that waitress has worked as a maid in your mother’s house. Is she proficient? My housekeeper is getting on in years and I may need to locate a replacement.”

Lyara scowled at him. “What’s my husband told you?”

Seren smiled outright. “Come now, give us both some credit. Dradge can’t hide the fact he’s got a secret, but he’d go to his grave before divulging it. Especially if it’s for you.”

Lyara grunted. “He is honorable. I don’t know why he tolerates your company.”

Seren just laughed. “I used to wonder that myself.” He leaned back in his chair, glancing aimlessly across the room. “I recognize I don’t make the proper investments to keep most people’s good will for long. But he’s not easily offended, and sometimes even appreciates my

unsolicited advice.” He turned back, looking at her in a manner that was moderately congenial. “The way he always talked about you, I figured you were either a goddess incarnate or quite the swindler. But I see you’re neither.”

Lyara nodded, trying not to frown. “...thank you?”

Three sharp horn blasts announced the King’s return. Like a poorly trained performer’s troop, the mass of nobles attempted to rise to their feet in unison. Lyara mimicked them a few seconds behind, Seren pausing to sip from his goblet before following after her.

The massive mahogany doors opposite the patio swung open, pushed aside by two men in uniform, and Hilderic glided to the top steps, eyes squinted and nearly shut. Dradge tagged at his heels, and it didn’t take a wife’s gaze to recognize the anger on his face tonight.

The King lifted a withered, bejeweled hand. “Our people ask I defend them, and so I will.”

Lyara drew in a breath, pressing her folded hands to her chest with the audacity to hope, but she couldn’t with her husband leering like that.

“Our gallant troops will see to it,” Hilderic said, poorly hidden frustration prying his eyes open to narrowed slits. “We will defend Salkrov.”

The crowd murmured, mostly in confusion. A few clapped but that applause died before it could catch on.

“You don’t know Salkrov?” Hilderic took the single step down to stand on the same plane as the tables spread around him, meeting the gazes of the few brave enough to keep looking at him. “Dearest Salkrov? A town of twenty-two at the base of the Saligen Mountains? On the other side of the Feldland plains? Tell me, you heartless monsters, that the downtrodden there haven’t slipped your minds?”

Seren rested his face in the palm of his hand, shaking his head.

“Your majesty,” a voice piped up from somewhere in the back. “You’ll divert resources from Edras, a city of four thousand, for a town of twenty-two?”

Hilderic straightened, looking entirely too pleased with the question. “Mustn’t I? Or would that be foolishness?” He glared over his shoulder at Dradge.

Dradge set his jaw and stared back, saying nothing.

The King growled. “His squad volunteers. Two hundred on the line for twenty-two. Let that speak to the volumes of my charity.” Hilderic gathered his robes around them, then spun on his heels and stalked back through the open doors. The two soldiers hesitated when the King’s back was turned, stealing glances at Dradge, but ultimately followed, closing the door behind and leaving their General standing alone on the single-step platform.

The crowd dispersed, huddling together in groups to whisper and speculate with an almost drunken fervor. Edras thrived on this sort of drama, after all. It was half the reason her *Whisper* carried the weight it did.

Seren sank to his seat, crossing one leg over the other, and calmly took a sip of wine. Lyara didn't know what to do—with herself, with her hands—so she stood there and clenched her skirt in her fists as Dradge crossed the room, ignoring questions, to reach her side.

Gently, she placed a hand on his arm, but he didn't look up, just scowled at the floor.

"I was wrong. He won't stick me in Edras, he'll send me under-manned on a suicide mission."

"Suicide mission?" She clung more tightly to his arm. "With two hundred men?"

Dradge eyed her, gaze softening a little. "Centaurs have taken Salkrov, reports say more than sixty are there right now. One of them is worth at least ten of my men, I'd need six hundred to *match*—hundreds more to reasonably expect victory. Hilderic wants me dead."

A chill ran down her spine, and she pressed a hand over her mouth to hold back the tears.

"He'll try to see to that," Seren said. He sat back in his chair, arms folded, a treacherous smile in his eyes. "But you and I both know you'd leave with far more than two hundred if you asked."

Dradge straightened. "I'd be court-martialed. Hanged afterwards, if I was lucky."

Seren tilted his head and laid a hand on the *Whisper in Brief* on the table before him. "I suspect we could control the narrative. If we wanted."

Lyara drew in a sharp breath and stared at her periodical. Such a simple thing, the imprint of her original sketch wasn't even that good—the edges were smeared, it bled over the page on one side. Did she have any inkling what could become of it when she'd set out on this path? Did she really want to steal thrones, topple kingdoms? It was dangerous. Deliciously, deceptively dangerous.

She latched onto Dradge's wrist first, then Seren's, and dragged both men toward the side stairs exit. "This is not the place for that sort of talk."

## Fifteen

Firelight, from a single lantern set as the centerpiece, flickered in the dark.

Lyara and her two co-conspirators leaned their elbows on her father's thick reading table, each seated on the edge of their upholstered chair cushions as they poured over the collection of texts. Most of her father's books still occupied their proper places on the wall, filling the massive shelves that lined the entirety of the long and narrow room, but Seren had done his best to make a royal mess of it.

Really, she expected better from a supposed scholar. Or was it that, back home on his estate, he had someone to fetch and put away books for him?

"I don't want the crown," Dradge said. Not for the first time, but at this iteration he held each of their gazes—it wasn't a statement any longer, it was probably as close as the man came to begging. "Seren, why aren't you answering me? This is supposed to be your sort of thing. Don't go thinking I'm that dense, I'm pretty sure I know why you agreed to follow me here."

Seren glanced up from his book—he'd rifled through so many in succession Lyara wasn't sure which one this was—suddenly interested in the last of what Dradge had to say. He gave a wry grin—Gods, aside from that smile he might be everything she hated about Edras rolled into one person. "You think I befriended you on a calculation?"

Dradge stared at him, with the barest hint of a shrug. "Didn't you?"

Seren's smile faded, and with the way the light flickered in his grey eyes Lyara could almost believe he was genuinely hurt. "Nearly every human heart carries the need for companionship, let me assure you I was most displeased to find that weakness in myself. The platonic sort is the easiest to locate and maintain, but it is not something anyone can calculate."

Dradge's gaze seemed to soften at that, but Seren just leaned back, shoving his book towards the center of the table.

"This is our key. Most any man who's served with you, which is about all of Edras, will follow if you ask him, but I can't say you hold the same sway over the Fidelis. They aren't loyal to Hilderic, either, but I suspect they'd prefer the status quo over uncertainty without proper motivation, and they won't be able to resist fighting for one of you."

Dradge nodded, folding his arms, as though listening to a briefing. Such the soldier. Lyara frowned as she peered down at that book, and her eyes widened as they skirted across the page. That was a volume of her father's religious texts—they were simply numbered, with no titles at all—that was the forebears prophecy. She knew it by heart.

*A child of scythe and sword*

*This song the blackbird sings*

*Right by Ísendorál restored*

*Victory the autumn brings  
One flame from the shadows  
Will light one thousand more  
A gallant heart overflows  
Taking back what was before.*

“Fidelis don’t ‘take sides,’” she said, “they are holy—”

Seren chuckled. “Please. You worship at their altars but I’ve studied with them, lived among them, been privy to their councils. They are men and women of ambition, same as the rest of us. What sets them apart are not their ends, but their means of achieving those ends. What we need are those means, and the means to make their ends *our* ends.”

“...what are you saying?”

Seren tapped the page. “You’re *Láefe*. Tell me, what would your holy men give to see this fulfilled?”

Lyara pressed her arms against her chest; the room suddenly felt very, very cold. “*We* don’t fulfill prophecy, prophecy is fulfilled by—”

“Was Gallian god or man?” Seren peered over the lantern’s light, holding her gaze. She started to shake her head. “You need to answer this, Lyara, for your own sake. Was your *fonfyr* a god or a man?”

She shuddered, forcing herself to keep looking at him, but she couldn’t push that false strength to her voice. “Gallian was a man.”

“And so who should we expect to produce a *fonfyr* now, gods or men?”

Lyara let out a breath and had to look again at those flowing stanzas on the page before her. *The Essence moves by its own intentions*—the quip floated through her mind, but even echoing there, safe and fully hers, she knew it didn’t say enough. What did she expect to do, sit in chapels whispering prayers for another hundred years while men like *that* twisted what was sacred to serve their own appetites?

Dradge grasped her hand, glaring at Seren. “Leave her out of this.”

Seren raised his arms, about to start into an apology, but Lyara shook her head. “...no.” She squeezed Dradge’s hand. “Don’t leave me out.”

Seren grinned, a boyish excitement softening the edge in his smile. “I’m glad to hear it, because I doubt we’ll pull this off without you.”

Lyara frowned, but almost thought he meant that. “Why?”

He pointed at the third stanza. “We need an *Ìsendorál*.”



## Sixteen

After Seren and Dradge left—the former eager to return to his estate, the latter to sleep, at her insistence—Lyara spent the next hour kneeling in the corner of the library, in the flickering dark, face turned toward the promise of a sunrise she couldn't see. She whispered every prayer she knew by heart, then dug out more of her father's books to read through a few others. She didn't mean to cry, but it felt necessary and so she did, softly, wiping her tears away as soon as they escaped.

Her heart screamed within her chest—how could she even *consider* doing this, much less agree to it?—but in her mind she already knew the truth. It had to be done. Some dastardly corner of her soul *wanted* to do it. Better heresy be committed by someone who'd feel the proper remorse than someone who didn't understand at all.

Finally she drew in a breath, dried the last of her tears, and picked herself up from the cold, stone floor.

She started with Ivard of Gebrama's *On History*. His short section on Gallian was mostly speculation and far less than detailed, but Randre's *Account of the New World* filled most of those gaps. Though both men steered into the fantastical when describing the blade itself—probably a natural response when standing in the presence of such an immense power.

Gallian rarely drew the sword unless it was to call down lightning from the sky.

That wasn't something she could replicate, but she also figured it was Seren's problem. What she had was already a proper challenge for any artist, and her fickle muse leapt at the chance to pursue it. That monster whispered sweet wonders in her ear.

*This will be your legacy. This will live longer than colored oil on canvas.*

And if she had her way, Seren would never touch it.

She did a few rough sketches first, letting her hands work as they willed while she kept those passages of text in mind. The results were...tolerable. Next, she rooted through the religious volumes—skipping the prayers this time—to see what they had to say.

Fantastical was an understatement.

She blew out a breath, unsettling the strands of dark hair that dangled over her face, as she slouched in her chair. This was the wrong approach.

She jumped to her feet and moved to a different section, picking out one of her past suitor's graduation work: *Swords of Avaron, from Year 1 to Year 132, by Berwin Bontalenta*. She'd actually gone on four dates with that fellow; he'd commissioned her to draw the illustrations.

She flipped a few pages in, until she reached the section labeled *Year 5*. She'd read through all this dribble at one point in order to properly draw the ideal blade of each era, all she needed now was the reminder.

She turned to a new page in her sketch pad and tried again, keeping the historical *context* in mind this time, instead of just the official historical accounts. The image she produced was plain, the blade shorter than modern weapons, with a two-handed hilt. Gallian's sigil, inlaid above the fuller, added an air of regality, but no one in Edras would believe this sword belonged to the *fonfyr*.

Well, Berwin probably would.

Lyara tore out that page and started again, this time blending the two ideas together. The proper size, with jewels on the hilt. The authentic sigil, with the symbols of the other Fidelis houses lining up the fuller. In her haste, her palm smeared some of the charcoal lines, but that didn't matter. This was an Ìsendorál Edras would believe in.

Perhaps that meant the Fidelis would as well.

She rose and shoved the parchment on top of the books on the nearest shelves. She'd need more than heresy to make a King.

Kneeling, she rummaged through the drawer that made the lowest shelf—the one place in the library her father permitted her to store her sketchbooks. She rooted through to the bottom, where she'd hidden the improper sketches she'd made of Dradge when he'd earned General.

Lyara flipped through to the final sketch, Dradge standing proud and regal as the actual King stood hunched and withered. The sketch was better in her memory, but the image it captured remained just as potent.

She'd paint this tonight. She didn't know yet how to best use it, but she knew she'd need it. This was *her* key: a glorious, momentary capture of the truth.

## Seventeen

Dradge woke her late that morning, with a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Lyara?”

Flinching, she sat up, drawing in a deep breath. The room was dark, her lantern long burned out, but sunlight streamed in down the stairs at her back. She shouldn’t have fallen asleep at the table; her arms made for a poor pillow, and she’d left an absolute mess of books and crumbled papers surrounding her. She’d cleaned up her painting and stashed it away, but had apparently nodded off before finishing the rest.

She offered him a sleepy smile and picked up the parchment with her final specifications for their instrument of heresy.

Dradge took it, glancing between the image and her face—should she be flattered or frustrated that she appeared to be more interesting? “Looks like a sword,” he said finally.

She chuckled. “I should think so.”

He returned her drawing to the table, pulling up a chair to sit beside her. He gave a lopsided grin and tried to brush something off her cheek with his thumb. “You’ve got paint on your face.”

Lyara halfheartedly smeared her sleeve across that cheek. She should probably just be grateful she hadn’t snoozed on top of her charcoal drawing and ended up with Gallian’s sigil plastered on her forehead. With a contented sigh, she shut her eyes and leaned forward to press her face against his chest. Only a thin nightshirt separated her from his skin.

This wasn’t particularly comfortable, either, but she could sleep easy here.

Dradge wrapped his arms around her, planting a kiss on her head, but she heard the slide of parchment against the table. He was looking at the drawing again.

“Why don’t you want the crown?” she murmured against his chest.

He laughed, uncomfortable, but tried to pass it as casual. “Can you seriously imagine *me* as *King*?”

“Yes.”

His arms around her stiffened, so she sat up to hold his gaze, serious as she’d ever been in her life. He released her and stared back—confused, surprised, and possibly even a little afraid.

“Why can’t you imagine it?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Gods Lyara, that’s a job for, I don’t know, a better man.”

“A better man, or a smarter man?”

“...that too.”

She smiled and took both his hands in hers, enticing him to look her in the eye again. “So who is this man? Seren? Has he got you so thoroughly duped with his superfluous vocabulary and his boorish tendency to dominate every conversation in which he deigns to participate?”

He did meet her gaze, tentatively.

“Does Seren have armies ready to *disobey their King* for him, at the asking?”

He offered the barest shake of his head.

“Does Seren earn the respect of every man he serves with, just by being who he is?”

Another shake, a bit more willing this time.

She grinned. “Did Seren win the affections of the smartest and most gorgeous woman in Edras?”

He returned the smile easily, then leaned in to kiss her. His lips were soft and warm, his beard prickly against her cheeks, and when he pulled away it wasn’t to go far. “I would certainly hope *not*.”

She placed her hand on his chest, over his heart. “Don’t you think for a minute that all their education means a *thing* without this. If they truly are smarter, then you’re wiser. They’ll sit at their desks and die old and grey, never accomplishing a thing, but you would light a fire that’d warm this whole world over if you’d just believe you could.”

That sparked something in his eyes this time, but he still hesitated. “...fires burn, too. Those who start them can’t always control them.”

She grinned, then buried her fingers in his beard, turning his cheek so she could kiss him again. “See, what did I say?” she whispered against his lips. “Wiser.”

## Eighteen

Eggs sizzled in a pan, and Lyara leaned over the fire to sprinkle diced jerky over top. She didn't have the leeway to burn these, as they were the last of what she'd brought with them. On the horizon, behind the short and wooded Saligen Mountains, the rising sun fought through the dreary grey cloud cover. It was technically morning.

She yawned, covering her mouth with her hastily bandaged hand. Was it beautiful? Light glistened in the sheen of frost that coated the open field where they'd set up camp, but instead of being drawn in by the colors, she just felt cold. The muse simply did not wake before noon.

No one else had been up—not even the sun—when she hauled herself out of bed at that godsforsaken hour, but a few other wives joined her when the very first rays of light beamed over the ridge. Perhaps she should have actually *practiced* this sort of cooking, instead of assuming she'd master the techniques just because she wanted to? That would have given her more time to sleep, at least.

Dradge rolled the flap door aside then crawled out of the tent, yawning himself and blinking bleary eyes. "You're up?"

Lyara nodded, straightening her shoulders. Gods, he wasn't even trying and he loomed over her, a specimen of physique his thin bedclothes couldn't hope to hide. "I've made you breakfast."

He grinned first at her, then at the eggs frying in the pan, and sat cross-legged beside the fire to watch them. "Smells good!"

Bracing herself, she prodded at the eggs with her fork—with her uninjured hand—to flip them. The congealed mass started to break, but she hurriedly forced it over and it turned without totally collapsing on itself, the oil flaring up again as the uncooked topside met the hot iron.

"What'd you do to your hand?" Dradge asked.

She shoved her bandaged fist into her dress pocket. "Burned it on the handle. I would appreciate if you didn't mention that. We're pretending I got everything right on my first try."

Dradge smiled. "Sorry."

Lyara let the eggs cook a moment longer, then left the fork in the pan to retrieve her cloak. She wrapped the thick wool around her hands, then gingerly picked the frying pan off the burning logs. The weight of it caught her off guard—again—but she held tight this time, arms trembling as she plunked it down in the grass at Dradge's feet.

"There," she said, tossing the cloak over her shoulder to place her hands on her hips. The stench of smoldering grass wafted over the fried egg. "Enjoy?"

Dradge gingerly picked up the fork, properly cautious of what might burn him. He eagerly hacked off a corner of the dish, then blew on it before eating the entire bite. He still had to chew with his mouth open to keep from burning his tongue. "Don't you want any?"

She heaved a sigh and flopped to a seat beside him. “It is *entirely* too early for that. I had a cup of tea.”

He studied her a moment, then shrugged and kept eating.

She laid back in the grass, ignoring the wet chill of frost against her neck and cheeks. “...does Seren still have the sword?”

Dradge nodded, not looking up from his food.

In three weeks’ time she hadn’t managed to swipe it from him. By the end of the first week he’d had it forged. He came knocking on her parent’s door in the dead of night, grey eyes gleaming until he could show off that creation under the deceitful light of her basement library.

It was beautiful. Even more than she’d imagined it would be.

Never before had one of her drawings come to life in such a tangible way. She almost wanted to believe in that Ìsendorál herself, even knowing the apostate who’d devised it. That terrified her, but the deed was already done. She’d tried to convince Seren to let her keep it safe, but he’d barely *listened* to the idea, much less considered it.

She’d have to try harder. And be a bit cleverer about it.

She wished she could have seen Hilderic’s face when he woke up at the beginning of this week to find every soldier in Edras and the nearby towns—aside from the wall guard—had abandoned their posts. She imagined it, his beady eyes squeezing shut as his leathery cheeks flushed red in anger. Had he become that goofy cartoon she’d drawn him as for years in her *Whisper*?

They were more than a thousand strong now, and they wouldn’t just defend Salkrov. They’d start here, then sweep across the western border, forcing the centaurs across the Everard Ravine and into the Wynshire Waste to die. All of Avaron would know who saved them, and it wouldn’t be their King.

On returning to Edras, they’d take his throne.

Lyara’s heart pounded in her chest as she peered up at the cloud-mottled sky. When the crown changed heads, her husband would wear it. Seren was supposed to be negotiating with the Fidelis order, convincing them to show on this battlefield today. Somewhere along the line she needed to figure a way to snatch Ìsendorál from him, and in the meantime she’d make sure Dradge was willing to carry it.

She thought he was. Maybe. She hadn’t met a single man in her entire life who was better suited for it, she couldn’t fathom how he didn’t see that.

Lyara glanced back at their tent, thinking of that oil painting she’d rolled up and hidden in her bag. When should she show him? The timing had to be right, otherwise he’d make it all about her brushstrokes and not about what the image *really said*.

A sharp horn blast sounded on the other side of the field. She sat up with a start, but Dradge just grinned and shoveled her egg dish into his mouth on double-time. She climbed to her feet and stood on her tip-toes to better peer over the rows of white tents.

A line of horses came to a halt at the edge of camp. These weren't soldiers. A few wore the crimson cloak, but most were dressed as they lived: farmers, scholars, laborers, merchants. There were men and women, young and old, skins of every shade and eyes of every shape, but they shared one thing: all of their irises were a deep, emerald green.

One man dismounted as the camp guard, already armored, ran out to meet him. Lyara recognized that face—she wouldn't ever forget it. Féderyc, the man who'd saved her husband's life. Seren sat on a white gelding beside him, leaning back in the saddle to conspire with a bulbous-faced man on a brown mare. That man nodded, then Seren nudged his horse to a trot, weaving between tents to reach theirs.

He wore chain-mail and a soldier's tunic and carried the sword on his hip, in an embossed leather hilt. She was disappointed to find it didn't look comically out of place.

Dradge laughed at him anyway. "You know reading Jonwarch doesn't qualify as training, right?"

Seren hesitated, but peered down from the saddle with the hint of a smile—and possibly an inkling of the proper humility. He dismounted and his gaze fixed on the ground as he stepped towards the fire, his hand drifting to the buckle on the belt of his scabbard.

Lyara drew in a breath. He'd *give* the sword away?

"Dradge, I think we are of one mind on the matter, but I have to, in good conscious—"

"Keep it."

Lyara's heart sank, but Dradge stared straight ahead, shoveling the last of his breakfast in his mouth while pointedly avoiding her gaze.

Seren hesitated again, still holding the belt. "I won't lie, this *is* what I want. But I don't..." Frustration flashed in his eyes and he looked away, with the slightest grimace. "I want to know you understand what you're doing."

Dradge stared at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing again. "I think that's both the kindest and the most insulting thing you've ever said to me."

Seren's eyes widened, and then his cheeks flushed a shade of red. He grumbled something and scratched angrily at the back of his head.

Dradge jerked his chin at the waiting cavalry of Fidelis. "They'll fight?"

Seren nodded. "They'll fight."

"Good. What's my approach?"

“Salkrov is overrun, so I’ll leave that up to your discretion. I’m concerned the populace is already dead. The centaurs have torn down the houses and restructured them into dwellings of their own design. They don’t have specific guards posted, far as we can tell, and they’ve not made any obvious or deliberate fortifications.”

“Numbers?”

“At least forty today. Yesterday’s reports counted over a dozen more, but they’re roaming, so that’s likely an underestimate. I think they’re alerted to our presence.”

Dradge grunted. “Can’t help that. Weather?”

“Overcast to sunny by afternoon, I expect. No rain for a day or two yet.”

“Cover?”

“Not much to speak of, beside the occasional small boulder. Terrain is about as flat as it can be. I’d rely on the cavalry’s momentum and keep the squads small and mobile.”

Lyara’s shoulders sank as she watched them talk, and she ended up huddled in the grass, her knees pulled against her chest. This was the utility she hadn’t seen, the bond that linked these two men together, and she *hated* that it made sense.

“Where do the Fidelis want to be?” Dradge asked.

Seren tilted his head. “They’re willing to act under your direction today.”

His eyebrows rose. “Really? How many are there, thirty-five or so?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“Then I want two per squad—one on offense, one on healing as circumstances permit. Assign them two spear-men each as cover.”

Seren nodded again, then turned on his heels—like a proper sergeant—and strode toward the nearest guard post.

Lyara grasped Dradge’s arm. “I thought—”

He placed a hand on her knee and smiled, but it was perhaps the first time the look carried something besides happiness. “Thank you. For seeing something like that in me. But I know my place.”

She stared into his eyes, heart aching, mind grasping for the words to persuade him. She didn’t find any, just her own exasperations. “You’d swear your oaths to that man?”

“Lyara, I’ve sworn oaths to sergeants and captains and generals and kings alike. Not because I ever believed in the *man*, but because I believed in the people of this country and the folks in the mud beside me. So, yes. If it meant I kept standing here, between Avaron and what would see her dead, yes I’d swear it.”



She didn't break from his gaze; she didn't want to. A smile crept across her face, but all the same she felt like crying. She shoved herself up and toward their tent. "Let me *show* you—"

A single horn blast carried across the camp, the note long and angry. Dradge scrambled to his feet, jaw set and eyes scanning the horizon; she knew that easily to be nervous.

Seren, who had been exchanging words with the nearby guard, jogged back to them. "Centaur, twenty or more. Minutes away."

Dradge fished a sheathed dagger from his pocket, shoved it in her open hands, then gently took her by the arms to plant a kiss on her forehead. "I'd thought up something better than this, but there it is."

Lyara's mouth fell open—she was still processing, she wanted to say *something*—but he'd already turned to place a hand on Seren's shoulder.

"Defend this camp."

That was a command, from officer to subordinate, and Seren knew it. He slowly turned from Dradge's face to hers, that vacant stare indicating he understood the weight her husband had placed on his shoulders as well.

Seren nodded, sharp and precise; he was grasping that sword hilt in a white-knuckled fist. "I will."

## Nineteen

Lyara huddled within the ring of wagons, pressed shoulder to shoulder with the other camp wives, unable to take her eyes off the blade in her hands. It shook, she couldn't force herself to stop trembling, but this dagger.... it was a work of art.

The handle was dark polished wood, comfortable in her small hands—unlike any other knife she'd ever held. The blade was long and lean, sharp on both edges, with a wicked point at the tip. But the metal mesmerized her. It gleamed in the sunlight, not silvery steel but a mottled, pebble-stone pattern of blues and purples. Like a colorful lake upon which rain fell gently, like the shell of a whimsically styled tortoise.

How could something meant to maim and kill be this beautiful? She felt as if another world had suddenly materialized before her eyes. Art had leapt beyond the canvas and onto something where it should have no right to belong.

Her oil painting had no right to sit squashed in her pocket, either, but even though both Dradge and Seren had tried to stop her from running back to the tent to fetch it, she'd done so anyway, covering herself by snatching up her entire satchel. She could pretend to know what to do with this dagger—she liked to pretend that, especially now—but that painting was the closest thing she had to a *real* weapon.

Someone shouted beyond the ring of wagons.

Maierva, at Lyara's side, flinched and pulled closer to her. Lyara awkwardly shoved the dagger back into its sheath, paranoid she'd accidentally stab someone with it. Still, she kept it gripped in her fists—one on the handle, one on the hilt—ready to draw it at a moment's notice.

Seren stood atop one wagon, back to them, surveying the field beyond. She'd yet to see him release the sword hilt. Dradge had left one squad behind—twenty-seven not counting Seren, with two Fidelis, to defend seven women. She almost wondered why he hadn't tried to stop her from coming on this trip in the first place, but right now Edras might be even more unsafe for her than this.

An eerie tune rose in the air. Guttural, musical, it was a cacophony of voices wailing and growling as one. It cut straight to her soul, searing the very idea of courage and pinning terror against her spine. Surely only monsters made that sound. Centaurs made that sound.

The ground itself rumbled, and then outside the wagons, a stretch of grass—a stone's throw circle around them—dropped out of sight, leaving a moat of stone spikes in its wake. Seren stumbled and ended up balanced on one knee above her.

The centaurs charged anyway.

Soldiers lined the field opposite the moat, but the beast-men leapt toward the wagons. The first fell, screaming as he impaled himself on the spikes, and writhed in his own blood and fury, refusing to die. Lyara clenched her eyes shut and clung more tightly to Maierva's arm than she meant to.

*Open your eyes!* Some treacherous voice shouted in the back of her head. *This is the life you wanted to live, open your eyes, damn you, and face it!*

Wood splintered, horses whinnied, and Lyara gasped as the wagon before her shattered under the monsters' weight. Two centaurs had crossed the moat of stone, treading across the bodies of their own people. Men in uniform littered the ground, a brown-cloaked Fidelis sprawled among them. She didn't know what had become of Seren.

The beasts' eyes gleamed with rage, their flanks splattered with blood, and the nearest jabbed the soiled blade of his pole-arm at Lyara's head.

She screamed, voice lost to the din, and curled into a ball on the ground as she unsheathed her dagger—incongruous actions, the brainless instincts of a terrified girl, but it was all she knew to do.

*Get up! Fight!*

Maierva's body slumped against her. The pike had caught her in the neck and collar bone, shattering it; the woman blinked, mouth open in silent terror as blood spurted from the wound. Lyara pulled her into her arms, that shock of anger and horror was just enough to smother her fear.

The centaur raised his pike again and she screamed at him, pointing her little dagger at his chest as she tried to drag Maierva away, somewhere safe—there were only wagons, there was nowhere to go.

"Stop it!" she shrieked, tears streaming down her cheeks. She met the monster's gaze, held it as her trembling hand clenched that beautiful dagger, blubbing like a witless fool but it was all she could say. "Stop it!"

The monster froze, blood-splattered face twisted into a snarl, his blade poised and ready to strike. He had an odd white stripe in his black head of hair. From her angle he loomed above, more monster than man, but that face—aside from the horse's ears and teeth—was human, with human eyes. She could read those same as she'd read anyone.

He'd thought about what he was doing. He'd hesitated.

Seren leapt down from the wagon above to land between her and the centaur, and with that fake Ìsendorál severed the pike in two. There, he wavered—his hands were trembling, too.

The centaur snarled, then drove the splintered remains of his weapon at Seren—the man leapt back, the shaft piercing through his leg to pin him to the ground. Seren screamed, but more screamed with him—a war cry. Soldiers, armed with swords and spears, climbed over the wagons, flanked by another Fidelis who threw a burst of fire at the beasts.

The centaurs called to one another—their language was so fluid, Lyara shockingly had to compare it to the one in which Féderyc had spoken to heal—but they turned and ran, back over the moat, treading the bridge crafted from bodies of their own kin.

She sagged against the ground, on her knees, tears still falling though she didn't quite know why, and she almost let herself grasp for a sense of relief. But Maierva lay beside her in a puddle of her own blood.

Choking on a sob, Lyara pulled the woman into her arms. She didn't move. She didn't blink. The stream of blood that had spurted from her neck with her heartbeat was now a trickle. Lyara embraced her anyway, heart too broken to accept there was nothing she could do.

This could have easily been her. Maybe it would have been her, if she were taller. In a just world it wouldn't have been either of them.

Slowly, her gaze lifted. More bodies than Maierva's lay in the grass. One woman was just as still, two others crawled weakly, the rest scrambled to help in whatever way they could. There were more alive than there were dead—is that what a soldier would see?

Behind her, Seren sputtered curses. He was trying to stop the blood gushing from his leg with his bare hands, but they trembled too much and the precious fluid oozed between his fingers.

Panic was in his eyes, raw pure panic.

Like a heartless monster, Lyara left Maierva's body on the ground and crawled to Seren's side. His gaze darted from her face to the wound.

"I can't do it, can I?" That was almost a whisper, he leaned against the wagon wheel at his back, his eyes unfocused as they drifted towards the grey sky. "We're a country of brutes... always have been... have always *had* to be... I—!"

She slapped him across the face. Mostly because she wanted to, but it snapped him out of it. "Tell me what you need me to get!"

He blinked. "Bandages. Ah, a tourniquet."

Lyara used her dagger to cut the hem off her sturdy working dress. She tied that tight around Seren's leg, above the wound, then cut some more cloth from her skirts to use as bandages. Her tall boots would keep her from being indecently exposed. She packed those around the pike shaft, stopping the flow of blood as best she could.

"...thank you," he said softly. She couldn't tell if it pained him to say that, or if he was simply in pain altogether.

She nodded, unable to hold his gaze. "Thank you as well. For charging a centaur for me."

He looked up, dazed, but had a ragged smile. "Can you imagine what Dradge would do if I let you die? I'd rather face the centaur."

Three short horn blasts carried over the field.

Lyara scrambled to her feet, hope and fear shooting through her at once. Dradge's company had returned, their numbers close enough to the same as when they left. She had to think they'd won. At least for now.

Dradge's stallion broke from the group, galloping towards their lump of wagons. His crimson cloak streamed from his shoulders, but he was too far away for her to read his expression. The dark whispers of her soul drew her gaze downwards, fixing it on the blade Seren had discarded in the grass.

His eyes were closed, his arms folded across his lap, his face betraying his relief.

Lyara snatched up the sword, squeezed between the wagons, then ran across the field—fake Ìsendorál in one hand, her dagger in the other—to meet her husband.

Dradge leapt from the saddle, his horse charged past riderless, and he ran to her and gently cupped her cheeks in his hands. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, tears welling up in her eyes no matter how hard she tried to hold them back, but he didn't believe her until he'd run his hands over her shoulders, her stomach, her sides.

Gods, she was covered in blood. Her cotton dress was stained with red, it caked her hands, surely it was on her face as well. *It's not mine.* She couldn't find the strength to say it out loud. *It's not mine.*

Finally, Dradge breathed a deep sigh and pulled her close. She sobbed against his armored chest, ashamed to do it, grateful to have the chance.

"I can't stay," he said softly into her hair. "The centaurs are regrouping, the men will lose confidence if I don't come back."

She drew in a snotty, shuddering breath and leaned out of his embrace.

He glanced at the sword in her hand. "Why do you have that?"

"Seren's hurt, he can't carry it any longer." An exaggeration. That man would find a way to get this back if he wanted it badly enough, even if he had a pole-arm rammed through his thigh. "But someone needs to."

He started to shake his head. "I'm not here to mess around with prophecy—"

She dropped her dagger and pulled her oil painting out of her pocket. It was crumbled now, an edge torn, and stained in Maierva's blood. She unfolded it anyway, holding it up between them, desperately blinking away her remaining tears to seem brave.

Dradge looked first at her, then the painting and his gaze lingered there. His eyes widened, slightly, and his hand drifted upwards to unfurl the curling end. Surely the canvas was too mangled for him to be distracted by her technique. "...this is what you see?"

"This is what *everyone* sees."

That spark of fear threatened to take hold of him again. "Gods Lyara, all this... it isn't the sort of thing a person should lie about, is it?"

She lifted Ìsendorál, blade pointed at the ground, and pressed the hilt against his chest. “I’m not asking you to lie. I’m asking you to carry this sword and be the man you’ve always been. What comes after... well, don’t think about it.”

He gazed into her eyes for a long moment then laughed, face alight. He wrapped his hands around the hilt—they enveloped hers where she still held it, and she let go. “For you,” he whispered, then leaned down to steal a kiss before charging back across the field, sword in hand.

She grinned, knees suddenly weak and wobbly, and let herself sink to the ground beside her dagger. That first step might have been for her, but the next was for his men and the rest were for his country. As it always had been, as it should be. It was an honor to rank so high among them.

In a matter of minutes he’d barked orders, restructured the fractured groups of wide-eyed soldiers, and led them back across the field. Centaurs waited in a dark mass on the opposite side of the plain—she couldn’t see them well and she didn’t want to. Instead she drew in a breath, placed her hands in the grass at her sides, and tried to pray.

The words were so hard to find.

*Protect him.* That was the most she could muster. The desperate plea of a bona fide heretic. *Protect him.*

## Twenty

Lyara sat, knees curled against her chest, in the dirt beside the wagons for hours. For most of that time she barely felt anything—not the passage of time, not the chill in the autumn air—but eventually a beam of warm sunlight broke through the cloud cover. She drew in a breath, craning her neck to peer at the sky.

How could the sun still shine the same?

She'd covered Maierva's body with a blanket. That wasn't much, but it was something, and the most she found the strength to do.

One Fidelis—a middle-aged woman Lyara had never met—poked around camp, mending wounds between furrowed glances at the battle beyond them. It was only after she bent down with a grunt to inspect her stained dress that Lyara realized they might really be the same age—her eyes were bright enough, anyway. Those wrinkles on her cheeks must be a testament to the life she'd lived.

The company returned at sunset, cheering.

Lyara pushed herself to stand, searching the crowd for her husband's face. She found him easily. He was smiling, surrounded by well-wishers. He scanned the camp for her gaze and found it in a second, before more hands and shouts pulled his attention away. Someone must have asked to see it because he drew that sword, the dwindling light reflecting gold off the blade.

She smiled, though she didn't deserve to feel it. They'd succeeded. She'd succeeded. That was worth something, possibly everything.

A heart-wrenching cry tore her from her thoughts. A soldier had removed the sheet and collapsed to his knees beside Maierva's body. Whispering her name, he pulled her limp form into his arms.

His wide eyes stared aimlessly into the distance, his mouth hung open but he didn't cry. He was stained with mud and blood but seemed uninjured, bodily. Cradling her forehead against his cheek, he rocked her gently as his dreadlock braids fell over his shoulders. He looked so young—she might as well, to older eyes, but compared to her he was a boy.

Lyara sank back to her knees. She had no right to watch, but she did—she deserved to know some semblance of that pain, at least. All of Edras—all of Avaron—deserved to know.

Her gut clenched at the thought, but her hands drifted to her satchel anyway, pulling out her sketchpad. She'd ask permission to print it, but for now she'd draw like the heathen she was. Perhaps this—however small, however heartless—was the way to be sure Maierva's death was remembered, to be sure those in safety understood the sacrifices made on their behalf.

Especially by those who hadn't really chosen to make them.

## Twenty-One

More than a thousand men left Edras for Salkrov, and seven hundred eighty returned to open gates and open arms.

Lyara clung to her husband's waist, bouncing behind him in the saddle, as he led the procession up the hill to Avtalyon. It was mostly a formality, the wall guards were loyal to him—the people raised mugs of beer and threw flowers in the streets. All that remained was Hilderic himself, barricaded behind the doors in his bedroom.

His soldiers had abandoned him. The council refused to defend him. That angry old man had succeeded in driving absolutely everyone away.

Dradge still carried the sword, strapped to his side. She knew he didn't like it, but he seemed to stand taller each time he'd drawn it as they'd swept across the western border. They'd slaughtered so many centaurs, left their bodies burning in heaps and pyres, she wasn't sure any remained to flee into the Waste.

They'd left *fields* of victory, although those words no longer sounded so sweet, and only made her think of smoke.

Seren nudged his gelding closer to them, once again eyeing the sword. He'd been quiet since recovering from his wound at Salkrov, but she still couldn't quite trust those steely eyes. Even if the man had done his best to save her life.

Dradge shot him a smile, eyebrows raised. "You finally going to ask for it back?"

Seren met his gaze—part guilty, part surprised. Still, he returned most of that look. "Transitions of power like these are always tenuous. The people will have to follow their Rebel King through to the end or they won't follow at all."

Dradge's shoulders hunched to hear that title, but he nodded in agreement.

*Rebel King.* Lyara smiled.

That was her flair—she knew he wouldn't like it, but Edras was her target audience anyway. The *fongyr* lie was for the Fidelis, both she and Dradge preferred not to keep telling it, and she figured the people of this city would be just as happy to celebrate a liberator of any sort. And it seemed, with the *Whisper* articles she'd sent ahead for Adela to print, she'd guessed correctly.

Hers was the only cheer they'd heard.

Dradge pulled his horse to a halt outside the castle tower, his company filing to a stop on either side of him. He dismounted, gathering the reigns to place them in Lyara's hands. "Wait for me."



Nodding, she scooted forward in the saddle to slip her feet in the stirrups—pretending she knew what she was doing. She couldn't help but notice this was an aging mare, not his typical stallion.

Dradge pointed to a couple of his men and they dismounted to follow him. Two threw their shoulders into the doors, bashing them open, then all drew their swords and charged up the stairs.

Lyara watched them disappear into the tower, wringing her hands, as she tried to convince herself there was no real need to be nervous. Hilderic had no family, no loyal guards left. The man hadn't even picked the most formidable or fortified tower; word was, he'd holed up here two days ago and was waiting to die. She almost pitied him.

She glanced sideways at Seren. "You didn't want to go with them?"

He laughed, under his breath. "I'm no soldier. You should know that."

She frowned at his uniform. He noticed, and pointed to the square patch on his shoulder.

"I'm a strategist. They won't even give me a rank. Dradge asked me to take the position about a year and a half ago after Hilderic kept saddling him with absolute imbeciles. That man would have seen your dear husband dead the simple way: with bad information."

"Hmm. So yours was an act of charity, for an old friend?"

"Hardly." He shifted, straightening in his seat. "Did you really think you were the only one in Edras unsatisfied with how things were? Some of us simply understand the virtue of *prudence* and prefer to consider the ramifications before, shall we say, scattering our opinions on the streets of the Outer Circle?"

She tried to hold back a smile, glancing down at her hands. "What ever does a man do with such virtue?"

"Write his dissertation. I should have graduated last month, joining the fine company of a mutual acquaintance of ours, Master Bontalenta."

Lyara snorted. "Fitting. Both your noses look best when thoroughly shoved in a book."

He inspected her with a smile through narrowed eyes. "I'll return to university when the time is right. Unlike some, I read books not to add to their numbers, but so I can put those already written to good use."

"Was this use acceptable?"

He peered up at the tower, the animosity fading as the smile remained. "Yes."

The clatter of metal shoes on stones announced the returning soldiers. Dradge trailed behind them, lingering in the bowels of the tower. But the others bore smiles, so Lyara took the chance—she half jumped, half stumbled from the saddle and ran through the busted doors to meet him.

He paused at the base of the stairs—light casting across part of his face, blood staining the fake Ísendorál's blade—as he peered down at the crown in his hand. It was a deceptively simple thing, a woven ring of silver wire styled after leafy ivy, with the colorful flash of precious jewels hidden in-between.

She placed her hand on his, gazing up at him with a hopeful smile, as she joined him in the shadows. “It’s done?”

He nodded, still staring at the crown. “...there is no honor in this,” he whispered, voice rough. “There is no honor in killing an old, unarmed man.”

She pulled herself close to him, hands on his hips, fighting for a sense of excitement but she didn’t find it.

He leaned into her embrace anyway, some of the tension melting from him. “You know what this makes *you* now, don’t you?”

Lyara drew in a breath. *Gods, I’m Queen.*

Dradge jammed the tip of that sword between the cobblestones and sank to one knee before her. With a lopsided grin, he placed the over-sized crown on her head. “You have to keep me honest. Swear to me you will. I killed an old man in cold blood today, and I believe it was *right*. I could become the tyrant he was and not even know—but you would. Swear it to me.”

Lyara smiled, a laugh and tears catching in the back of her throat. Why did he think *she* had the moral high ground? But there was that earnest conviction in his eyes, and his face was actually within her reach for once—a distraction, she so desperately wanted to kiss him. “I swear it.”

He nodded, like a soldier taking orders, brow creasing. “And I swear, to you, to all of Avaron. I won’t become the man I’ve overthrown.”

She pulled him close, bending down to press her lips to his cheek as she slipped the crown from her head to his. “I know you won’t.”

## Epilogue

Lyara closed the door as the last of their guests bid their goodbyes and stepped out in the night. Behind her, on the other side of the dining table, Dradge breathed a sigh and slumped in his chair. She had him dressed for the part—an embroidered green tunic with silver in the hem, a darker, regal shade that complimented his eyes—but with a moment's bad posture he could make the outfit look as out of place as it really was.

Some part of her loved him for it.

She strolled back to the table and started collecting the used dishes—Adela would be by later to clean, her self-started business served houses throughout Edras—but Lyara still felt some obligation to tidy up her own home. Even if that home were a castle.

Even if she'd spent the last seven years as Queen.

Seren sat against the far wall with his notes scattered before him across the floor. He typically preferred to usurp one of her tables, but tonight it was filled with those dishes, and so he made due with what was available.

Her son, Triston, crouched beside him, studying those papers with a deliberation she never expected to find in a five-year-old. She'd had a tunic made for him to match his father's; with his head of curling black hair he was a little mirror reflection. He really ought to be in bed at this hour, but he hated being left out and she didn't have the heart to send him away.

"Well," Dradge said, watching her. "How did I do?"

Seren piped up first. "I—"

Dradge pointed at him, gaze still fixed on her. "Wait your turn."

Lyara smiled, piling the dishes in the center of the table. "I thought you were wonderful."

"You always say that," Seren grumbled, not looking up from his notes, loud enough for them both to hear.

She ignored him. "You chuckled at one of Erryl's jokes."

"Even though they weren't funny," Dradge muttered.

"*Especially* since they weren't funny. And when Cynwrig tried to tell you where he wanted troops moved you frowned at your soup, like maybe it was the meal making you cross instead of him."

"Hmm. I don't think that was on purpose."

She grinned, then pulled a chair over to sit beside him. "Well, you didn't threaten to punch anyone."

He grinned back. "True. I have gotten better at that."

Seren heaved a sigh and looked up, shaking his head. “You do realize that is the absolute bare minimum of what it takes to make a civilized society?”

Dradge glanced at him. “I still haven’t asked you.”

Seren smiled to himself and returned to his parchments, marking something down on one page. He had a system, but to her eyes it looked like he was making a mess of her marble floors. “The Fidelis expected some kind of kick-back when they helped us get rid of Hilderic, you need to figure out what they want and what you’re willing to give them.”

Dradge chuckled. “That’s what you’re here for.”

Seren nodded, absently, chewing the end of his fountain pen as he re-read some of his own notes. Beside him, Triston leaned forward to place his hand on one of the pages with pictures. He tried to slide it closer.

“He—”

“No,” Seren said gently, pressing his own hand down on the paper to keep Triston from moving it. “They’re alphabetical, see? Cordella, Crinan, Cynwrig...” He pointed to each paper as he spoke.

Triston leaned back, still crouching, and placed his little hands on his knees. He hadn’t taken his eyes off the paper he wanted. “He was here tonight.”

Seren nodded. “That’s Cynwrig, Abbot Elect of the Fidelis order. A greedy man.”

Triston pointed at the collection of notes beneath the portrait. “He ate *two* bowls of soup when everyone else had one. I saw.”

Seren looked at the boy, a grin slowly spreading across his face. To her wonder, he actually leaned over and scratched a note on Cynwrig’s paper. “Good work.”

That was perhaps the singular greatest surprise she’d encountered in all her years as Queen. The rigid scholar from Edras had a soft spot in his heart for one bright-eyed child.

She saw so much of his father in Triston, although strangers said he had her face when she held him on her hip. All she’d agree to was their eyes matched—both light blue. He surveyed the world with her same, quiet intensity, but she didn’t know if he saw beauty. He saw details, picked them apart, constantly seeking not art but understanding.

She loved to make him smile. There was a certain challenge to it, as he seemed to withhold the expression for only the most worthy occasions. But—with a little prodding—she could usually drag one out of him. She saw his father in that look, too, but that might be because both their smiles warmed her heart the same.

“I swear he’s already smarter than me,” Dradge said. He was watching Triston, too, with a proud little smile of his own.

She grinned at him again and leaned against his shoulder. “Takes after his mother.”

Dradge laughed, but seemed to take her joke too seriously. “He does.”

Lyara watched Seren instruct Triston on how to properly clean up his notes for him and she shook her head. “Surely we could find a better babysitter *somewhere* in Edras?”

“Come on, Triston’s learning something. He’ll be King one day himself, right? Let’s start him off right.”

Lyara frowned, not sure she entirely agreed or disagreed with that logic. Would it help or hinder a boy to grow up influenced by these two starkly differing worldviews? “How did you two meet, anyway, you and Seren? It couldn’t have been the army.”

He tilted his head. “Seren!” When the man didn’t answer, Dradge picked up a leftover dinner roll from the table and chucked it at him.

It bounced off Seren’s face—he flailed his arms, attempting to block it entirely too late. Triston looked up from the bundle of notes, smiling.

“How did we meet?” Dradge asked.

Seren scowled, muttering to himself, as he climbed to his feet. “You don’t remember?”

“We were kids, it was some time after my father moved into the new house.”

Seren nodded, taking a seat in the chair across from them. “You and those two other boys from down the street were fighting with sticks. I’d just read Jonwarch for the first time and tried to critique your stances. The other boys already knew me and refused to acknowledge my assertions, but you argued back. I routed each of your propositions until you got so fed up you threw me in the drainage ditch.”

Dradge burst out laughing. “That is how it went, isn’t it?”

Lyara laid a hand on her husband’s knee. “And yet, that’s the start of the story, not the end?”

Seren quirked a smile. “I don’t like being bested.”

“It’s not *that*,” Dradge said. “You simply appreciate a contender, someone you can’t get to roll over on your first try.” He placed his hand on the back of Lyara’s head and pulled her close, to plant a kiss on her temple. “That’s why he respects you.”

“Oh?” She met Seren’s gaze with a taunting smile. “Is that so?”

The man shrugged and looked away, not denying a thing. From him that might as well have been a confession.

Triston carried the pile of notes to the table and slid them into the open space between Seren and Dradge, beside the dirty dishes. The parchments certainly didn’t appear to be organized to Seren’s liking, but they were probably tidy enough for a five-year-old and Seren

didn't complain. Silently, he rummaged through them, straightening pages so the ends would align.

Triston squeezed past his father's knees, then climbed into her lap. Lyara held him close as he yawned and rested his head on her shoulder.

It was very much past his bedtime.

She rose to her feet, shifting his weight so he stayed safely against her, and even then she barely managed. There would soon come a day she wouldn't be able to lift him at all, and she dreaded it. "You two keep working, we're heading to bed."

"No!" Triston tried to lean out of her grip.

She smiled and kissed his forehead. "Sweetheart, I'm tired, even if you're not."

Triston squirmed and she had to put him down, to keep from dropping him. He was, as a whole, an obedient child—more than she ever was at his age—but faced with the choice between going to bed or helping his father scheme? She couldn't fault him for making a fuss over that.

"Triston," Dradge said, very serious. He rose from his chair, then sunk to one knee before their son. "You remember the job I gave you, right?"

Of course, his 'job.' It felt a little like a lie, but she couldn't deny it motivated the boy in a way her gentle pleading and even strict consequences didn't.

Triston stared up at him. "Protect Mother from the shadows in the hall."

Dradge nodded. "That's right. You might not want to go to bed, but she does, and those hallways can be very dark."

Triston kept staring at him. "To protect, I need a sword."

Dradge grinned, big and stupid, then glanced—guiltily—in her direction. She laughed under her breath, shaking her head. Her husband had their son swinging swords before he could even crawl, and maybe she couldn't fault *him* for that, either. She knew she'd married a soldier.

"You have fists, too." Dradge socked him gently on the shoulder. "Use those."

Triston nodded, then tried to stifle another yawn.

"Come on," Lyara said, taking his hand. He followed her willingly this time as she crossed the room, making her way to the back stairs.

Triston pointed to the far wall. "What about that sword?"

She stopped, then had to chuckle to herself. After taking the crown, Dradge had wanted to destroy her fake Ísendorál. Some part of her welcomed that idea, but her heart screamed at the thought. That thing was as much a work of art as it was an instrument of heresy. The former of the two, at least, deserved commemoration. So, she'd had a placard made and hung it on display. For now it was in the dining room, but she might end up moving it again.

Seren tapped the bottom edges of his notes on the table, finally having settled them in a proper pile, and glanced at her. "I'm surprised you kept that."

Lyara lifted her chin. She had no need to explain her decorative tastes in her own home.

"Could at least melt it down for scrap," Dradge muttered, sinking back into his chair. "Those jewels look expensive."

"They were." Seren grinned. "Although, perhaps not quite as expensive as the *fonfyr* who came with it? I believe he cost me a kingdom."

Dradge laughed, but Lyara frowned at both of them. She grabbed her son by the armpits and, with some effort, hoisted him into her arms. "The *fonfyr* is real," she whispered to him as he laid his head on her shoulder again. "Your father fought in the memory of such things, and someday so will you."

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## About the Author

A goat farmer, engineering graduate, first degree black belt, and medical student, the one thing Lauren Buck always knew she wanted to be was an author. The first stories she ever wrote, as a grade-schooler, were about super heroes. But, raised on a steady diet of Lewis, Tolkien, and Sanderson, it was only a matter of time before she set her sights on epic fantasy.

When not writing, working, or studying, she enjoys drawing, playing the guitar, traveling, as well as outdoor activities such as hiking, fishing, and kayaking. Sometimes you can find her hanging out on Twitter, probably with a German shepherd or two sleeping at her side.

According to Myers-Briggs Lauren is an INTJ, and country roads will always take her home to wild and wonderful West Virginia.

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