



THE HEART OF THE LOST STAR

MEGAN DERR

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THE
HEART OF
THE LOST STAR

TALES OF THE HIGH COURT 3

MEGAN DERR

Kamir is on the verge of losing everything. Knowing full well he can't meet the ultimatum his parents have issued, he instead finally puts in motion his plans to live completely independent of them. His plans are interrupted, however, by the unexpected return of his despised ex-husband—and thrown even further into upheaval when he ends up comforting the man he's secretly loved for years.

Jader may not know where he comes from, but he knows where he belongs and what he wants—until he helps rescue some stranded Bentan travelers, one of whom looks almost exactly like Jader, throwing his life and everything he thought he knew into tumult. Scared and overwhelmed, Jader flees—and lands unexpectedly in the arms of a man he's always seen but never really noticed.

The Heart of the Lost Star

Tales of the High Court 3

By Megan Derr

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*To the abused, the overlooked, and everyone who's ever been told they
don't belong*

CHAPTER ONE

"Papa!" Chiri cried out, waving one arm enthusiastically.

Though Kamir still felt like crying as he left the bedroom, his mother's letter weighing heavily on his mind, he smiled to be greeted so warmly. Rare was the morning his daughter didn't happily greet him, and he dreaded the day she grew too old to be happy her father had entered the room. Chara, Chiri's twin brother, didn't react by more than glancing Kamir's way, but that was typical of him, so much more quiet and contained than his sister.

Reaching the breakfast table, Kamir kissed the top of Chiri's head, ruffled Chara's hair, and took his seat.

Velinabustled over and set down a plate heaped with food and the teapot. "Good morning, my lord."

"Good morning, Velina. Thank you. I hope the visit to your friend goes well. I appreciate you lingering long enough to watch over the children until I managed to drag myself out of bed." Or rather, sat in his room trying not to cry over the letter from his parents. Though he'd been expecting it for some time, finally reading the words had come as a blow.

She smiled, sympathetic and understanding. "Always a pleasure, my lord. I'll be back late tonight. I hope your day goes well."

"Thank you....." She bustled out the door, and Kamir poured himself a cup of fragrant jasmine tea, sipping it leisurely for a few minutes before he felt awake enough to start on his breakfast. Velina always gave him too much, insisting he needed more meat on his bones, but Kamir seldom had a large appetite. The only exception had been when he was pregnant.

He picked away at the spiced potatoes for a few minutes, smiling and murmuring dutifully as Chiri talked so quickly she tripped over her words, then switched to the flatbread and chutney.

By the time he'd finished a second cup of tea and half his plate, Chiri was winding down and actually eating her food, and Chara was waking up properly. Poor boy had inherited his sire's inability to function for the first couple of hours after waking, where Chiri had inherited Kamir's ability to

be wide-awake and ready to go almost immediately upon waking. In so many ways, it was obvious they were twins, but in many others...

Well, he hoped his children got along better than he ever had with his siblings. More importantly, he hoped they didn't turn out like him and not realize a bad decision until too late. If not for Velina, who'd been a friend and support when he'd most needed it, Kamir might still be in that mess, and his children with him.

Sometimes, it felt like he was still in it, given how much he was forced to live beneath the weight of his parents. But he'd come a long way from where he'd been. He had a job. His own income. Happy children. A good home for them and all the food they could need was available. He wasn't a failure anymore. Someday, maybe he'd believe that.

Pushing away the unhappy thoughts before they could further spoil his morning, Kamir glanced across the table at the clock on the bar against the wall. "Your tutor is going to be here soon, children. Run along and get dressed. Give me a kiss first." They kissed his cheeks, Chiri hugging him as well, before dashing into their bedroom to get dressed.

The bickering over who got to wear what started mere seconds later, but Kamir ignored it. Better to let them work the problem out themselves than get in the middle of it.

Ten minutes later, just as he was finishing his third cup of tea and forcing down a last few bites of food, the door opened and Bremm, the tutor, stepped inside. He bowed to Kamir. "Good morning, my lord."

"Good morning, Master Bremm. Would you care for breakfast? Tea?"

"No, but thank you, my lord. Anything particular on the schedule today?"

Kamir set down his teacup, wiped his mouth and folded the napkin on the table, and stood. "No, I leave them wholly in your capable hands. I will not be back until tonight, however. If you need to leave sooner than the closing bell, have Amaria summoned to tend them until I return."

"Of course. I hope you have a good day."

"Thank you. I hope the children behave. Do not hesitate to send for me if they prove unmanageable. I've left a note on the bar about the best places to send word."

Bremm laughed. "I can say with complete sincerity, my lord, that yours are the most pleasant children under my care."

"I'm flattered." Before he could say more, Chiri and Chara came charging out, and he only barely got farewell hugs from them between all their demands on what to do with their lessons for that day.

Once they were settled in the schoolroom—really meant to be an office or sitting room, but Kamir already had his workshop and didn't need an extra sitting room—he went into his bedroom to dress properly for the day.

The note from his parents had arrived right before he'd gone to bed. It still lay on his writing desk, smudged in spots from tears, wrinkled from when he'd gotten angry and crumpled it. He'd read at least a hundred other letters just like it, diatribes about his being a failure, letting the family down, how much it hurt them all to see what he'd done to himself, and them, with his choices and behavior, and if he'd only do what they said, everything would be so much better for all of them. Didn't he care about anyone but himself?

Sometimes he wanted to ask them if they appreciated the way they always reprimanded him for his selfishness and insisted he think about them, them, them. But the pleasure in asking that question was not worth the pain that would result.

Turning away from his writing desk, Kamir stepped into his dressing room and picked through his wardrobe for what to wear that day.

He caught his reflection in the mirror and paused to admire his hair: long, thick and heavy—and currently dyed a rich, dark violet, which was his only indulgence. Otherwise, he preferred to spend as little of his monthly allotment as possible, using what he must for the children and necessities but carefully and quietly funneling the rest away for the day he knew was coming. The day he'd always known would come, from the moment he'd defied his family to marry his true love.

And oh, how his family would never let him forget he'd been wrong about that and they'd been right. Like he was the first young fool to think love existed where it didn't, the first young fool to be manipulated and lied to and used.

If only his family had been as eager to help him out of his mess as they'd been to tell him *told you so*. Though he was also forced to concede he still

would not have listened. He'd found love and been determined to live his perfect, happy life with his beloved.

But it didn't matter. He'd been scared, poor, tending two children with only Velina—sweet, smart, kind, stubborn Velina, who'd had no reason to stick by him all these years but had anyway—but he'd escaped.

Then he'd defied his parents further by coming to live with them at court. They'd agreed quickly to let him have his own suite, well away from them, on the guise of giving him and the children their own space. It was about the only good thing they'd ever done, though he tried to remember they had raised him and even now gave him sufficient funds every month...

But they did all of that to save face. He was embarrassment enough as it was.

Although even that was not going to save him for much longer. Not with his latest failure on top of all the others: embarrassing first marriage, even more embarrassing divorce, and two children. And now the Duke of Fathoms Deep was married to a pantheon-forsaken *pirate*, a *nobody*, his parents wailed incessantly. If Lord Lesto had wanted to be eccentric and marry a nobody, they loved to rant, Kamir had been there the whole time.

Nevermind Lord Lesto had shown rare decency in speaking with Kamir politely and at length, and they'd both agreed they were ill-suited. But his parents hadn't wanted to hear that. All they saw was their eldest flourish as the heir, their middle child was a force to be reckoned with as Captain of Shadow Bell... and their youngest had made himself unappealing as a marriage prospect and was therefore useless.

Kamir could only be more of an embarrassment if he stripped off his clothes and ran through the palace naked until he passed out or was taken into custody.

Removing his dressing robe, he finally settled on black breeches, black shoes with gold flowers and heels, and a long jacket slit twice, front and back, straight up to his hips, with a translucent gold underjacket embroidered with violet flowers.

The outfit went stunningly with his violet hair and light brown skin. Hopelessly vain and ridiculous though his hair might be, it was the one small pleasure he granted himself. He hated the dull, mousy brown of his natural hair. Why settle for that when he could have blue, green, purple, or

one of a hundred other colors? One day, he wanted to do many colors all at once, turn his hair into a riot of them. But the cost of that, all the extra dye and time required, was well beyond the tiny budget he gave himself.

And after this, he would have to return to his mousy brown because his parents had finally decided they were better off without him. He'd expected the long tirade about how he was a failure. He had not expected the ultimatum, though only because he'd always thought they'd issue it in person for full dramatic effect: secure a marriage to someone who would do the family proud before the year was out, or he would be disowned. If he could not make himself useful and contribute properly to the family as he should, then he would cease to be their burden.

He'd have been angry, but this had been coming for a long time. Beyond that, anger was exhausting, and he had too much to do to waste strength on it. Better to focus on what he could control.

The first order of business was a new place to live. It would need to be quiet, secure, where he could trust the children would be safe, even if they were out of his sight or he had to leave for the day. Probably someplace outside of Harkensten, unless he got extremely lucky. There was no way he could afford to live in the city with the limited funds he would have. But it would still have to be close enough he could go into the city easily to drop off his completed pieces and pick up new commissions.

Renting was an option, but traveling all the way to Harkensten had put him off that. Some of their stops, they'd been able to stay at the special homes meant for people like him: penniless, recently come from bad marriages or homes, victims of abuse and worse. But the program, long ago started by High Consort Nyle and continued by the High King after his death, was far from complete. Too often they'd been forced to let rooms, rest for a few days, once for nearly two months while he and Valina recovered from being sick. Their landlord had been terrible, and reminded him too much of life with his parents, and life with Theoren. Never again would he live somewhere that wasn't one hundred percent *his*.

After he found a house, there would be making it habitable, hiring staff, a new tutor, possibly a nanny as he was going to have to work more to keep them in funds...

Tears stung his eyes as the list of what he needed to do threatened to overwhelm him, but Kamir drove them back. He had gotten this far more or

less alone, he would continue on the same just fine. And he did that by taking it one step at a time.

The end of the year was ten months away, which was more than enough time to set up a new life. He just had to focus. Take it step by step. The first step was the house. Everything else could wait. And no matter how difficult the next several months were going to be, being rid of his family once and for all was a good thing.

Most days, his current situation didn't bother him. He was used to being the Tesly embarrassment, the fool who'd married young and was now 'stuck' with two children. Everyone else might think him wasted potential and a disappointment, but whatever his mistakes, and despite his damnable family and ex-husband, he had managed to build a decent life for himself and his children.

But sometimes he wondered how different his life might be now if he hadn't defied his family to marry Theoren, if he hadn't thrown so much away for a man who'd been nothing but a bundle of lies in a pretty, charming package.

What bothered him most, though, was that everyone thought he didn't deserve to have that life now. The High King could marry, have kids, have his marriage fall apart, and end up in a happy second marriage with no one thinking that strange or unfair. With everyone thinking, in fact, that he deserved to remarry and be happy.

And he certainly did—but why couldn't Kamir have the same?

Instead he was consigned to a life of loneliness. His only friend was Velina, and that was no small thing, because without her, he would not have come this far. But he still sorely missed the days when he'd had more people to talk to, invitations to parties and outings. When he hadn't been completely outcast, even if he'd never been entirely happy either.

Perhaps once his new life was in place, and he was well away from his poisonous family, he could try again at making friends. And maybe, just maybe, a lover, even someone he loved enough to marry. The thought of attempting another relationship was terrifying, and who knew if he'd be any smarter the second time than the first... But he'd already lost too much of his life to being afraid, or being too stubborn about the wrong things. He'd been afraid of angering his parents, then determined to make his own

choices to the point of marrying Theoren. Then he'd been afraid of Theoren, and too scared and alone and self-doubting to figure out how to escape. Pantheon only knew what might have happened to his children.

He was eternally grateful he would never know.

But between his family and Theoren, a relationship wasn't something he'd ever considered. Not until an intriguing man had drawn his attention and stirred unexpected thoughts and wants, because if he was going to dream foolishly, he may as well be the biggest fool: Jader Star, High Commander of the Imperial Army. A man Kamir would never have, and maybe that was why the thoughts had felt free to burst to life. Daydreaming about the impossible was safe.

Daydreaming also made him wish for something real, though he had no idea how to go about it—especially when he was the court laughingstock, and especially now when he was months from being disowned.

He laughed, picturing his parents' faces if he did somehow manage to catch the eye of Commander Jader. He was the first lowborn to ever be named High Commander. Before it had always been held by a noble, and often an Arseni. But the High King and Lord Lesto were nothing if not unconventional, and High Consort Allen and Lord Shemal were proving to fit in quite well, as far as Kamir could tell. He wasn't exactly part of that inner circle. He was fairly certain that, apart from Lord Lesto, they didn't know he existed, and why should they? Tesly was a wealthy and moderately powerful title, but the Norring family had only held the title for a few generations, after the previous claimants died out and the most tenuous of family connections had legally shifted it to the Norring family. It was not something they'd ever expected, and just being handed a title for little to no reason was not enough to bring one into the inner circles of the High Court. Neither did overcompensating and trying too hard, but Kamir wasn't stupid enough to say that to his mother's face.

Thankfully, it would never be an issue. People like Jader didn't notice people like Kamir, and he'd rather die than drag someone into all his family drama and woes—pretending for a moment that anyone would remain after learning about Kamir's past and issues, which wasn't likely.

Nor did it matter for now. That could be dealt with after he and his family were settled in their new home, and his parents were once and for all

a thing of the past. Soon he would live apart, all on his own, just him and his children.

Thankfully Master Shiar had been willing to meet with him that morning and had a few prospects. Kamir just hoped he had sufficient funds to afford something at least moderately respectable. He also hoped he found something quickly, because the longer it took, the more likely his parents would notice.

Finished dressing, he packed away the few bits of work he had finished into a brown leather satchel, along with everything else he might possibly need for a long day in the city. He ducked into the schoolroom briefly, smiled fondly at his children, so intent on their lessons they didn't hear him. He waved farewell to Bremm and headed out.

The quickest route from his suite to the compass hall was by way of the back stairs and through the tax halls, then through the more public areas straight on to the front of the palace, but when he had the time, he preferred to wend through the private residence gardens and the hall behind the aviary. He didn't necessarily have the time right then, but he could use the pretty, cheering walk, and a few minutes of listening to birdsong.

Humming, he threaded his way through the palace, nodding and smiling politely whenever he accidentally caught someone's eye, trying not to be hurt that so many of them looked hastily away or pretended not to notice.

Kamir smiled as he reached the gardens. He lingered in his favorite, filled with honeysuckle, daisies, and more wildflowers than he could count, framing a fountain displaying a merperson combing their hair. It wasn't as refined and elegant as the other gardens—most preferred the roses and orchids—but it was beautiful all on its own.

He bent and retrieved a broken-off trio of yellow flowers, lifting them to his nose before reaching up to tuck them into the front of the braid he'd draped and pinned around the top of his head.

Smiling, he continued on, resuming his humming until he reached the end of the blue hall—and froze as he heard voices, one of them achingly familiar. Kamir swallowed, stepped carefully up to the corner, and peered around it.

High Commander Jader Star, beautiful and commanding in his uniform, which included the leather armor that most soldiers eschewed while in the

palace. He wore a sword at each hip, and his ink-black hair was cut so close to his head there wasn't even enough to hold.

Jader was beautiful no matter what he wore—or didn't wear, as Kamir had been fortunate to see on one occasion when he'd gone for a walk after a particularly upsetting argument with his parents. He'd come across Jader swimming in the pool that had been made from an old public path. Jader had been completely naked, long and lean, tattoos and everything else completely visible. Kamir had fled before Jader had seen him, but Pantheon, those images had a permanent place in his memories.

But he'd loved best the day he'd seen Jader dressed like the Islander he was—loose, knee-length pants; a baggy shirt opened to halfway down his chest, baring hints of his colorful tattoos; a vivid sash wrapped around his hips; feet bare save for jeweled gold anklets; and all sorts of piercings in his ears, including the large, intricate, jewel-laden dangling earrings Islanders favored. They'd jingled like delicate bells every time he'd moved his head.

He'd been sitting with other Islanders, celebrating some holiday Kamir had never figured out—something to do with fish and the time of year. It had clearly been a private matter, and he'd been careful to slip away before he'd interrupted them, but that image was as deeply engraved in his mind as his other rare encounters with Jader. Normally Jader dressed and behaved like he was Harken-born, which made sense, but Kamir always wondered if Jader missed being able to be himself more.

Kamir drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. He could do this. He passed people in the halls all the time, this was no different. No doubt they'd completely ignore him anyway. He reached up to touch the flowers in his hair, whispered a prayer to the goddess of luck, and headed down the hall, keeping his hands loosely at his sides no matter how badly he wanted to cling to his satchel strap for comfort.

One of the palace guards, a short, stocky man with pale hair and eyes, noticed him first. Kamir smiled. "Merry morning." His heart sped up again as Jader turned, and it was more gratifying than Kamir would ever admit that recognition filled his face. His smile widened as he met Jader's pretty brown eyes. "Merry—"

"Where did you get those flowers?" the pale-haired guard demanded.

Kamir stopped, eye snapping back to the guard. "What?"

"Those flowers in your hair are from the wild flower garden," said the second guard. "You're not allowed to pick them."

Kamir flushed. "I-I didn't. They were lying on the ground. The wind and passersby are always knocking some of the bunches loose."

"So everyone who steals them says."

"You have no proof he picked them," Jader said calmly. "Aren't you being unduly harsh?"

"The gardeners file complaints frequently about flowers being stolen, to the point of damaging the gardens and causing them hours of extra work. Permanent residents have been warned not to take them for any reason, and those caught doing so will have to pay a fine—by order of the Office of the High King."

Kamir's face burned. "They were lying on the ground. I've picked them up before. I didn't realize the rules regarding doing so had changed."

Jader frowned at the guards. "Is this really necessary?"

"Rules are rules, Commander." The pale-haired guard pulled a bundle of small slips of paper from a pouch at his hip, wrote on one, and held it out. He extended his other hand palm up, and after a beat, Kamir realized what he was waiting on.

He took the slip of paper and pulled the flowers from his hair. Setting them in the man's palm, he choked out a farewell and walked off down the hall. Damn it, he was not going to cry. So what if he'd just been completely and utterly humiliated in front of the man of his dreams?

Stupid guards. Kamir had seen their type before: they were more than happy to look the other way for those nobles who bribed them, but when it came to everyone else, they were heavy-handed and even occasionally mean. No doubt they'd also wanted to look tough and impressive in front of the High Commander.

Reaching the compass hall, Kamir finally looked at the reprimand: two sterling fine for vandalizing an imperial garden. Damn it. Two sterlings wasn't much, but it was still money he sorely needed, and for a spray of wildflowers nobody would have missed.

At least Jader had tried to defend him, even if he couldn't really side against fellow soldiers—not that soft palace guards handing out ticket for

stolen flowers were anything like the soldiers who broke and bled and died.

Kamir took a deep breath and let it out slowly, did it again and again until he finally felt calmer. There was too much to do. He didn't have time for anger or tears. He'd come up with the money. And probably never forget a single second of being reprimanded like a child in front of Jader, but there was no help for that.

Stepping out into the morning sunlight, he pulled up the wrap draped over his shoulders and wound it into a loose but secure hood around his head, hiding his purple hair and shading his face from the sun and other people. As badly as his morning had gone thus far, the day could only improve.

A horse would be faster, but he did not have the funds to keep his own horse, if he used the family horses his parents would find out and want to know what he was doing, and borrowing one of the palace horses was money best saved. So walking it would have to be. He hummed as he headed out, and switched to whistling as he walked along the wide road between the palace and the city. The road was as crowded and busy as ever, a mix of travelers, food hawkers, people running between the palace and city on business, and beggars. Kamir ignored it all, save to hand over a few coins to some of the homeless.

When he reached the city gates, he joined the line for those who lived in the city and palace, which tended to move much faster than the line for visitors, since they only had to display their citizenship medallion. Anyone without a medallion or suitable travel papers was not permitted in Harkenesten proper, a law that had not been overly enforced until Sarrica had come of age and started fixing that and many other problems, making Harkenesten a much safer city than it had been for decades—centuries, even.

Only a half hour of waiting and Kamir was through. The city thrummed with energy. Unlike the palace, where Kamir was acutely and painfully aware of how he went unnoticed save when the subject of malicious gossip, here he was just one more citizen trying to get on with his day. Nobody cared who he was, about his past, or his family.

Humming a festival tune that someone was playing in one of the public squares, enjoying a few hours to himself even if the reasons for it weren't ideal, he made his way quickly through the streets, past open markets,

bakers, leather shops, butchers, and artisans of all sorts until he at last reached the business district.

From there, it was only a few more minutes to Shiar's office. Opening the door, he stepped inside and unwound his scarf, but left it to drape about his shoulders.

A woman came bustling up—she was unfamiliar, so Shiar must have gotten a new office assistant. She looked him up and down politely, mind working behind her eyes. "Good morning, my lord. Master Shiar is waiting for you in his office. Shall I escort you?"

"I'll manage, thank you very much," Kamir replied with a smile.

She bowed and faded off, leaving Kamir to head down the dark, creaky hallway into the office he'd only visited once before when he'd first come to Shiar to discuss what he would eventually need. He'd tried a few other property dealers, but none had been willing to work with him, not when his situation was so peculiar and uncertain.

"Merry morning, Lord Kamir," Shiar greeted cheerfully. "I've had coffee and pastries brought. How are you today?" He sat back in his seat, one hand resting on his large stomach, the other thoughtfully stroking his long, puffy beard. "Not too well, I think."

Kamir mustered a smile as he took his own seat, settling back in the plush chair, hands resting easy in his lap. "Not the worst morning I've ever had, but I've also had better. How are you, Master Shiar? Are your children doing well?"

"Quite, quite. They're little terrors, to be sure. Let us focus on you, though, my lord. I admit I thought I would have more time to build you a longer list of possible homes, but I do have a few good ones—and one strong candidate, hmm? I've arranged for horses, as well."

"I'm immensely grateful for all your help."

"I know a bit about bad family and raising kids alone, eh? Sit and eat while I finish gathering all the paperwork."

Kamir obeyed, moving to the little table in the corner where the food and drink were set out. Coffee was not normally his preference, but it was strong and hot and went well with the sticky-sweet pastries. Mestan fare,

unsurprising with Shiar's strong Mestan accent, though his name was Harken in origin.

Half an hour later, they were on their way to the first house. It was, to Kamir's surprise, in the city, albeit at the very edge of a district that hovered between good and not.

It was a handsome house, built directly against the street but with a wall and gate that led into a private courtyard. The house formed a square around it. All one story, which would be good for the children while they were still small and clumsy. Plenty of space, and six bedrooms, more than enough for him, the children... and hopes and dreams for the future. Not that he really thought a spouse and more children were in his future, but hoping hadn't yet killed him.

There was a small lawn in the south, too, along with a stable for a couple of horses. No room for a carriage, but that was not something he was likely to ever buy. The lawn could be made into a garden someday, the kitchen and cellar were a goodly size should he ever host a party.

"It's beautiful," Kamir said. "I absolutely love it, but I can see it is probably outside of my price range, or so close to the edge I dare not risk it." Even though being in the city would make his life so much easier. He would stand a better chance of hiring good staff. The markets were close, and he wouldn't have to go far to deliver and retrieve work.

"It's a bit over what you want to pay," Shiar conceded, "but the house has languished for years. I think we could negotiate down to something manageable. I wouldn't waste your time if I wasn't absolutely certain of that. But come along, we have a few more to look at."

And so they did, all through the day, stopping only for a lunch that Kamir insisted on paying for. By the end of it all, with dusk teasing at the horizon, he still could not stop pining for that first house.

Shiar chuckled and draped an arm across his shoulders, giving him a loose, easy hug. "If that's what your heart wants, *kufta*, I will see you get it. You leave everything to me, and I'll contact you in a few days with good news." He bussed Kamir's cheeks and walked him to the door.

"Thank you, Shiar," Kamir said. "I can never repay you."

He scoffed. "I make money out of this, silly boy. Now go on home to your children, and I will go to mine, and in a few days, I'll have news to

make us both happy."

Kamir nodded, bid him goodnight, and began the long walk home.

It was well after dark when he finally returned, much later than he'd intended, but at least the day had ended promisingly. He didn't want to get his hopes up, but it was hard to resist spinning fantasies about all he could do with that house, how much the children would love it.

"Papa!" Chiri shrieked as she saw him and threw herself across the room and into his arms. "You're home, you're home!"

"I'm home," Kamir said, hugging her tightly and kissing the top of her head. He looked up as Chara approached more sedately. "Were you good while I was gone?"

They nodded, meeting his eyes instead of looking at the floor as they would if they were lying.

Whatever his mistakes, he couldn't regret they'd brought him his children. Identical twins, born in the earliest hours of the morning, named for minor demi-gods of hope and joy. They'd been four when Chiri had declared she was a girl, and Chara had announced a few months later he was a boy. His mother had not been entirely pleased as she'd been hoping for a 'proper' matched set, but it had been a rare instance of Kamir telling her to shut her damned mouth, it wasn't and would never be her decision. He'd gotten slapped for it, but she'd dropped the matter.

Kamir looked over their work for the day as they settled at the table for dinner, asking questions and listening as Chiri rambled on. He nibbled at his food, too tired to eat much just then. Once the children were in bed, he'd bathe and then eat properly.

Bedtime, for once, did not take the whole rest of the evening. Clearly Bremm had done his level best to wear them out. Kamir lingered briefly over the idea of asking Bremm to come with him when they moved, but Bremm had the best reputation and earned an impressive income tutoring various children in the palace. There was no chance he would surrender all of that to settle for exclusively tutoring the children of a man soon to be disowned, disgraced, and two steps from the poorhouse for an indeterminate length of time.

That, however, was a problem for another day. Closing the book he'd been reading to the children, he set it aside, kissed their foreheads, and

snuffed the light on his way out.

In his own room, he stripped off his clothes, sighing as his chest came free of the tight binder he'd wrapped around it. He didn't have an overly large chest, but he still preferred to make it even flatter most of the time.

Pregnancy had been tolerable on most things, but unbearable for that. Breastfeeding, he'd had mixed feelings about, but in the end, he had mostly enjoyed caring for his children. Even if at the time Theoren had been meaner than ever—when he bothered to be there at all, instead of out finding other people to fuck because he'd decided Kamir was completely useless on that front.

Kamir had never been as happy as he was on the day Theoren signed away all parental rights in the divorce. If he showed up tomorrow demanding his children, Kamir had all the authority of imperial law to tell him no and never. A generation or two ago, that wouldn't have meant much, but along with so many other improvements, the High King took the matter of children more seriously than any monarch Kamir had ever known or heard about. Once upon a time, Kamir probably would not have gotten sole custody. Now, not only did he have it, he could be reasonably certain the courts would back him up—especially there in Harkenesten, in the shadow of the High King himself.

Even without the court's support, Kamir would have died before he allowed Theoren anywhere near his children. Kamir had carried them, nurtured them, and fought for them in the divorce while Theoren had barely been able to remember their names.

But Theoren was gone, thank the Pantheon, and Kamir was the sole individual responsible for his children. He'd be happier if he had a spouse he could trust to take care of them should the worst happen, but he *did* trust Velina, and that was more than a little comforting.

He climbed into the steaming bath Velina had arranged while he put the children to sleep, groaning as he sank into the water and breathed in steam scented by honeysuckle oil.

Though thinking of honeysuckle reminded him of his humiliating morning. The perfect chance to actually speak with Jader and he was treated like a misbehaving child. Which reminded him he needed to go to court in the next few days to pay the fine, which would take at least all morning and

possibly part of the afternoon. Well, there was plenty of paperwork he could collect and start reading through—like disownment papers.

He lingered in the bath until the water grew tepid, then climbed out and shrugged into a dressing robe. Returning to the main room, he settled in to eat his dinner in peace and quiet, distracting himself from the loneliness of it by imagining all the ways he wished that encounter in the hallway could have gone.

CHAPTER TWO

"Captain Dennar, thank you for coming to see me so early," Jader said, setting aside the papers he'd been reading as he rose and moved around his enormous desk.

"I'm always happy to accommodate you, Commander," Dennar said, and limped over to a seat. "What's this about?"

Jader took the seat opposite. "Yesterday, I was speaking with a couple of your guards when I happened to pass them in the south-side aviary hall. Lord Kamir chanced by, and your guards took him brutally to task for wearing flowers in his hair." He explained the matter start to finish, still angry to see Lord Kamir treated so horribly. If it had been one of Kamir's siblings, Jader would not have been surprised. His sister was a hard-hearted woman, and his brother little better. Every time Jader interacted with them, it was hard to reconcile them with the sweet, shy Kamir. Why was it he knew the two unpleasant siblings, but not the pretty one with soft-looking skin who wore flowers in his long, thick hair?

Dennar's mouth flattened as Jader finished. "I apologize you had to see my guards behave so, Commander. It's true we've been instructed to be stricter about such things, but those rules are meant to curb regular abusers—those who steal the flowers in large bundles when they can damn well afford to buy proper bouquets. You know the sort: young ninnies who have all the money of kings but spend it in days or resent having to spend it at all, too used to being coddled by their absent parents."

"Yes, quite familiar," Jader said with a sigh. More than a few of them had tormented him through every step of his climb to High Commander, from his first difficult and humiliating days in Harken, throughout his military career, and even now there were some who smiled to his face and sneered behind his back. "I was reluctant to bring the matter up because you do not need me to tell you how to control your men—but I was not happy they were so needlessly malicious to someone as harmless as Lord Kamir."

"You're right to be concerned. I'll take care of the matter, and see that Lord Kamir is issued an apology. It may be too late to rescind the fine—"

"That's already been taken care of," Jader cut in. "You have my gratitude for attending to the rest of it."

"Of course, of course." Dennar smiled again, so brightly he looked much younger than his sixty-odd years for a moment. "High Commander you may be, but I still remember the reckless stripling knocking Mainland fools around my training yard."

Jader grinned. "You're the one who helped me improve instead of throwing me out as advised."

"And all rue that day except me and Lord Lesto," Dennar said with a cackle as he heaved to his feet. "I may be too old to administer discipline personally, but I can still bark at them. I'll send word round when it's done, Commander."

"Thank you, and fair winds, Captain." When he was gone, Jader returned to his desk and papers. Always there was paperwork. Sometimes, he almost missed the days when paperwork was something other people did. Most of the time, he was grateful for it because if he was stuck in his office fighting with paperwork then he wasn't on a battlefield killing people. It was a necessary part of almost every soldier's job, but he was just as happy for the army to forego it as much as possible.

At least the number of Islanders being killed had dropped significantly. It was one of the first things he'd noticed not long after he'd joined. People complained it was because the High King was fussy and weak and nothing like his steel-spined father and grandfather, but why should most of them care? Jader had spoken with every Islander soldier he'd crossed paths with, and nearly all of them had stories to tell of meeting Sarrica, or had a friend who'd met Sarrica, and how he and Lesto had no tolerance for the mistreatment of anyone.

Eventually, not long after meeting Lesto, he had witnessed it for himself—and been the one defended by Lesto and Sarrica over and over again, especially after his being named Deputy High Commander had caused an uproar amongst the nobility and officers. Fortunately, he'd always had almost complete support from the enlisted ranks, and combined with the weight of the High Throne, that went far.

Bit by bit, Islanders were carving out a place, despite their awkward position within the empire itself. Maybe someday he would see an entire

mercenary unit of Islanders formed. Fighting was something Islanders traditionally preferred to stay out of, but at least if they formed their own band they would have more authority and choice about who they fought for and how.

Of course, forming a mercenary band required things the Islanders didn't have and were reluctant to pursue, largely for good reason—nearly all of them political, and therefore something Jader preferred to stay out of. His unique history and position made him too biased to take part in the discussions, anyway.

Not to mention it would all bring him more Pantheon-cursed paperwork. He sighed at the stack directly in front of him: requisition forms, which normally would not be his problem, but these were unusual requests for dangerous supplies, some of them illegal in certain parts of the world, all of them highly regulated *everywhere* in the world. He and his deputy were the only ones who could approve such requests.

Unfortunately, even after two years of being High Commander, he didn't have a Deputy High Commander. No one fit, though he had looked and looked. Some had seemed promising... but he remembered everything Lesto had said and taught him. It wasn't a position to be granted lightly, and until he felt absolutely *this is the one*, the position would remain vacant. He didn't care how often and loudly the army and Sarrica grumbled at him.

Though he did hope he found someone soon so he could maybe get a few more hours of sleep.

He signed off on two of the requisitions because Penance Gate might earn their name, but they were always honest and clear and damned efficient, but set the other three aside and wrote a note to his head secretary that the Captains of Shadow Bell, Howl of the End, and Bone Taker needed to speak with him. Jader's lip curled at the thought of dealing with Shadow Bell.

By and large, people no longer cared he was an Islander, assuming most even knew, which many didn't. But there were always a few bad fish in the net, and Shadow Bell was firmly of the opinion that Islanders—*Farlander sluts*—were best used as fodder and the occasional easy fuck. Captain Menari Norring never tried especially hard to change their minds and shared the attitude more than she let on in front of those with the power to punish her for it.

His purple hair, at that. The last time Jader remembered seeing him, Kamir's hair had been a beautiful ocean green. He could not imagine the time required to dye and maintain such hair, but he certainly admired the results.

Pushing the meandering thoughts aside, Jader moved on to his next stack of paperwork, official reports one of his secretaries had written from his much messier drafts. He read them over, pleased only one needed to have corrections made. The rest he signed before melting wax and pressing his seal into them. Once the wax had dried, he set them in the box meant for things that would need to go to Sarrica's office, after official copies were made for the imperial archives.

He glanced at the clock on his desk, a beautiful glass piece with seashells and glass fish captured within, the timepiece in the center of the side facing him, the whole like someone had somehow turned a piece of the ocean into a glass cube. The timepiece itself was a work of art all its own: mother of pearl face, the numbers and hands in gold, and it was so well made that he wound it once in the morning and it kept time almost perfectly the whole day.

It had been delivered to him two days after he'd officially been declared High Commander, with nothing but an unsigned note congratulating him and explaining little details about the clock. Jader had traced it back to a prestigious shop in the city, but the proprietor refused to divulge who had purchased the clock, claiming the customer wanted absolute privacy.

Why they felt compelled to remain anonymous, Jader could not fathom, but he hoped whoever it was had been in his office, had seen that he liked his gift.

Giving up on paperwork since he clearly was not capable of focusing, Jader stood, lifted his sword belt from the back of his chair and buckled it back into place, and grabbed the papers for his secretaries on his way out. Leaving the papers in the appropriate box on his head secretary's desk, smiling at the reproving look Axis gave him, Jader headed off for the banquet hall anticipating lunch.

Halfway there, footsteps came pounding down the hallway, and Jader stifled a sigh at the lunch he would not be getting as someone called out, "High Commander!"

Jader turned, stared at the two soldiers in uniforms of the imperial army, the harbor bird patch on their right sleeve indicating they were assigned to the harbor garrison. "What's wrong?"

"A lifeboat's come into the harbor carrying Bentan citizens—nobility, we think, but when we left they were still looking for a silver tongue who could speak Bentan, and none of the Bentans seem to speak Harken. But from the state of them, they were lost at sea and we don't know what happened to the rest of the ship."

"Damn. Get my horse." Jader motioned to the second man as the first ran off to see to his horse. "Inform High Consort Allen at once. It's likely we'll need his golden tongue once we've returned to the palace. Return to me once you're finished."

"Yes, Commander!" The man snapped a salute, turned on his heel, and ran off.

Jader strode through the halls of the palace headed for the main courtyard. By the time he'd arrived, his horse was waiting, along with the first guard on a horse of his own. "Let's go."

They rode as quickly as the horses could safely manage, bypassing the public city gates for the private one reserved for the imperial family and the military. Once in the city, the man with him surged forward and started bellowing for people to move, clearing a path for Jader to travel unhindered. He clearly had experience at it, because he was loud and clear and unflinching, and people moved as quickly as their feet could obey.

That meant they reached the harbor garrison in record time. Though the palace wasn't far, the duties of the soldiers overseeing the immense, complex imperial harbors were so consuming and nonstop they required a garrison that paled every other garrison in the empire. It dwarfed even some of the warehouses, which was no mean feat.

Jader stopped in the middle of the main yard and dismounted smoothly, his belt and armor jangling.

Captain Tamith was waiting for him, and she turned sharply on her heel to lead the way inside the garrison as he reached her.

"Have you learned anything more?" Jader asked.

Tamith shook her head. "No, we're having a damnably frustrating time finding a silver tongue. Usually it's not a problem, the ports offer plenty of steady work, but Bentan..."

Jader nodded. Silver tongues who knew Bentan had been in high demand during the war, and there hadn't been all that many to begin with. Too many had wound up dead, or too injured to work much, and many of those who survived had turned to other occupations.

The number of total silver tongues was increasing, thanks to the presence of a High Consort who was the finest silver tongue in the empire, but it wasn't the kind of change that happened quickly. "The High Consort has been notified; if we must wait until we are at the palace to learn anything, we will do so."

"Yes, Commander." She stopped in front of a large set of double doors that led to a guest area, pulled out a heavy ring of keys, and unlocked the left-hand door.

Jader followed her inside, eyes sweeping the room, right hand resting lightly on the hilt of the sword on that hip. A woman and two men sat in a circle of chairs set near the middle of the large general gathering room. They looked up almost as one at the sound of footsteps—and the woman made a choked, scream-sob sound before covering her mouth with one hand.

One of the men leapt to his feet, and even at a distance Jader could see his hands trembling. The other man remained seated, but he stared at Jader like he'd seen a phantom.

Jader slowed his steps, frowned, and looked at Tamith. "What in the *Mother Ocean* is the matter with them?"

"I have no idea," Tamith said, staring bewildered between Jader and the Bentans. "Something about you alarms them, clearly, but I couldn't imagine what." She started to say more, but a pounding knock came at the door. Crossing the room, she yanked the door open—and a guard and a harried looking woman in the garb of a city clerk stumbled into the room.

"Silver tongue, Captain—Commander!" the guard added hastily as he saw Jader.

"Thank you, Myler," Tamith replied and dismissed him. She turned to the silver tongue. "Your Bentan is passible, I assume?"

The woman cast her a frosty look over the rim of her spectacles. "My Bentan is impeccable."

"Good," Tamith said, and dragged her across the room, all but throwing her toward the Bentans. "Start talking. I want to know why they came here in a lifeboat, if there are other people in need of rescue, and if we're about to have some international incident on our hands."

Casting Tamith a look that would have gotten her put in stocks if she'd been a soldier, the woman adjusted her spectacles and turned to the Bentans—who were all still staring at Jader as though afraid of him.

After a few minutes, the silver tongue turned to them and said, "This is Lord and Lady Beacher, and Lady Beacher's brother, Lord Harmony Stow. They were part of a diplomatic envoy to Illiar and were on their return voyage to Benta when a hurricane struck. Many of the crew and passengers were lost, and the ship is too damaged to move. They are keeping it afloat, but Lord Beacher fears soon that will be impossible. He and Lord Stow volunteered to come for help, since they have some sailing experience. They did not want the crew to leave, given they're all that keeps the ship floating."

"Get me Admiral Chief Mazen," Jader barked, and Tamith ran off without a word, yelling out orders as she reached the hallway.

Jader went to follow after her but was stopped as the silver tongue called out, "High Commander!"

He turned sharply back. "What? Time is of the essence."

"They know you. They say—"

"If it's not a matter of life and death, it will have to wait. Get all the information you can on where that ship might be and come find me in the yard." Jader didn't wait for her reply, but strode off back the way he'd come.

Tamith had already assembled soldiers and was handing out orders: soldiers to take the Bentans to the imperial palace, messengers who scattered in the next moment to locate Admiral Chief Mazen as she obviously was not in her office.

Jader mounted his horse. "When you find Mazen, send her to me at the *Temora*. I am going to have it ready to sail within the hour and I do not want less than Mazen herself commanding such a situation."

If he could go, he would, but as High Commander he was not allowed to go into such situations outside of wartime unless there was absolutely no other choice. The High Commander was far too valuable, though he still had a hard time reconciling that statement with himself. He'd earned his post, but occasionally he was still dumbfounded and awed he'd actually managed it.

He rode through the bustling harbor surrounded by half a dozen soldiers. Rare was the person stupid enough to attack the High Commander, but it had happened before—more than once. Lesto had gotten so fed up with it, he'd refused to go to the harbor unless Sarrica explicitly told him to go or else.

The imperial army retained three emergency imperial galleons, made by the finest ship builders in the empire and fit to travel as far away as Nemrith on a moment's notice. There were three full crews for each, rotated regularly so there was always a fit crew already aboard and ready to set sail.

He headed straight for the nearest of the three ships, and the one always put to sea first: the *Temora*, named for an Islander deity, the youngest daughter of Mother Ocean. Everyone's Harken accent usually had them saying it wrong, Tey-mora instead of Ta-mora, but Jader was long used to it. They'd said his name closer to Jee-der than Jay-der for months. Some still said it wrong.

Reaching the ship, he bellowed for the captain and officers. Once they were assembled, he gave a brief of the situation and sent them scurrying to make ready. By the time they were calling ready to sail, Admiral Chief Bella Mazen had arrived.

She saluted smartly as she reached him. "High Commander, I apologize for my late arrival."

He waved her off when she would have continued. "I'm sure you had excellent reason, Admiral. If you're ready to depart, your ship is waiting, and I appreciate the swift reaction times of you and your sailors. As commendable as always."

Mazen smiled. "Thank you, Commander. I'll send message by falcon once I have something to report. From what I've been told, the ship is stranded about three days out. We'll reduce that as much as we possibly can."

He clasped her hand and sent her on her way, watching until the ship was well out to sea.

Then he mounted again and returned to the palace. When he arrived, it was to find the pavilion had turned into chaos.

Thankfully, it didn't seem to involve their new guests. He looked over the mess again: an upturned carriage, a broken carriage and the ruined contents of at least five crates of military food supplies, roughly twenty angry guards and soldiers, a tall, thin man with an ugly goatee and mean tone of voice screaming at the servants and guards, a woman crying, a horse that looked like it would have to be put down, and those were merely the most obvious bits. Jader grabbed a nearby guard and shook him. "What in the *Mother* Ocean is going on here?"

"Master Theoren Masterow entered the pavilion going too fast and didn't slow down when ordered. He ran into Lady Vyna's horse, and when he tried to back away and go elsewhere, he hit a cart being pulled by the guards, which sent the contents of it scattering and destroyed at least half the food in them. I think someone went to find Captain Dennar."

"Go after them and tell Captain Dennar I have the matter well in hand."

"Y-yes, High Commander." The guard bolted off, clearly relieved he was not about to join everyone else in suffering the wrath of the High Commander. When Lesto had retired, they'd all made the mistake of thinking Jader would be softer, easier, without Lesto towering over him.

Nevermind Lesto had chosen him in part because he was just as ruthless and hard. There wasn't much softness left to be found in a man who had started life as a boy of approximately eight years, washed up on a beach with no memory of his previous life, not even his name. A boy with bone-white skin who'd been raised as an Islander but looked foreign and strange everywhere he went and had climbed all the way to the peak of the imperial army.

He charged through the chaos to what seemed to be the source of it: the man with the mean voice. Theoren Masterow, the soldier had said. "Enough!" Jader bellowed, making all of them startle and freeze.

Theoren whipped around, anger on his face—and snapped his mouth shut. The anger in his face smoothed into a smile the halfwit probably

thought was charming. "Merry day, High Commander. I'm so relieved you're here to—"

"Sort out this mess you're responsible for?" Jader cut in. "I want to know why you were driving recklessly, why you are disrupting order and destroying things, and why you have not moved this carriage. This pavilion is not the place to settle squabbles. Move your carriage *now* and then report to my office. Am I understood?"

"Yes, High Commander, of course," Theoren said with another of his simpering smile, but his eyes were hard and mean before he dropped his gaze.

Jader moved on to dealing with the guards, barking orders until the horse was taken away to be put down, the cart was hauled off, and gawkers were sent scattering. Once he saw the carriage being moved, he strode off into the palace.

Inside he commandeered a servant. "Tell my head secretary, Axis, that Master Theoren Masterow has been ordered to report to me. He's to be left stewing until I show up to deal with him."

"Yes, Commander!" The servant hurried off, his skirts flapping.

Jader continued on his way, veering down the hall that would take him to Sarrica and Allen's offices. When he arrived, the guards at the door pulled it open and nodded as he passed.

Inside, Jader drew up short. The Bentans were staring at him again, and even Allen and Sarrica looked unsettled. "Why do they keep looking at me like that?"

Allen rose from where he'd been sitting next to Lady Beacher, looking at Sarrica briefly. Most probably missed he was looking for reassurance and relaxed slightly when Sarrica smiled. Whatever he was about to say, Allen wasn't happy about it and didn't think Jader would be either. He rested a hand on Lady Beacher's shoulder. "This is Lady Beacher. She is close friends with another woman currently still trapped on the ship—Lady Krista von Terring, daughter and heir of the Duchess of Abernoth."

"Abernoth," Jader repeated slowly. That was one of the oldest and most powerful titles in Benta, the equivalent of Fathoms Deep in Harken. Unlike Fathoms Deep, however, they were a private, almost reclusive family, from

what he understood. They hadn't been present in the recent war, or any of the meetings the past couple of years. "What has that to do with me?"

Turning to the woman, Allen said something softly in Benta, then turned back to Jader. "The Duchess of Abernoth withdrew from society approximately twenty-two years ago, after her husband, brother, and youngest son were lost at sea. Her son had recently turned eight; it was his first voyage with his father and he'd been extremely proud to go. Watching him run up the gangplank was the last time anyone ever saw him. Until today."

Jader opened his mouth, closed it again. Blood pounded in his ears. "There must be..." He didn't bother to finish such a stupid sentence. No one knew his age, but his parents had estimated it as somewhere between eight and ten. His white skin was strange in Harken, but common in Benta. If he'd washed ashore on the Mainland, somebody might have figured out what language he'd been speaking. But twenty-odd years ago, tensions between Islanders and Mainlanders had been much, much worse than they were now. It would never have occurred to his family or community to go to the Mainland for help. Jader had never thought about that until he'd joined the army and realized just how easily he could have been taken to people who would have been able to help him. By that point, however, he'd forgotten his first language, and had been struggling to improve his limited Harken on top of having learned Islander at such a late age.

His chest felt tight and his stomach dangerously close to heaving up whatever remained of his long-ago breakfast. "I'm an *Islander*," he finally choked out.

"Yes, that is what we've said," Allen said softly, and turned to speak to Lady Beacher again.

Sarrica crossed the room and rested a hand on his shoulder, and Jader relaxed slightly, his military training falling over him like a familiar blanket. Sarrica and Lesto shared a storm tamer quality; he and Shemal had discussed it on several occasions. Jader wished he were half so stable, and kept hoping it would come with time.

"It's all right," Sarrica said gruffly, voice pitched low. "You're one of us, not some Benta halfwit. I don't care what they say or do or insist—and they're going to insist on a lot, make no mistake—I need my High

Commander more than they need somebody who's been dead to them for more than twenty years."

Jader managed a nod. "Thank you, Majesty." He shook himself. "I've sent Admiral Chief Mazen out on one of the galleons. The stranded ship is roughly three days out, so it will likely take anywhere from five to eight to bring them home, more if they run afoul of bad weather, but Mazen said they'd move as quickly as possible."

Sarrica nodded and looked to Allen, who immediately started translating. Looking back at Jader, he said, "You can leave if you want. We can handle them, and if they fuss, well, I'm the High King and I dismissed you to attend other matters. Unless you want to stay and talk to them?"

"No," Jader said, still feeling on the verge of throwing up. He was Jader shey Belarigo, and had the adoption papers to prove it. In the Harken Empire, he was also legally Jader Star. He knew maybe five words of Bentan, and while he didn't completely despise the country, he did not particularly like them either. He wasn't Bentan, he didn't want to be Bentan. He wished this whole moment had never happened. "Thank you."

Sarrica clasped his shoulder reassuringly one last time and nudged him toward the door. Jader made his escape, drawing a shuddery breath once he'd reached the hallway.

He'd have to deal with the woman on the ship when she arrived, but once they went home, that would be that. If they tried to take him to Benta or something equally mad, Sarrica and Allen would find themselves with an international incident to work out.

He slowed his steps as he reached his office, giving himself a few more seconds to regain his composure. By the time he stepped through the door, he was able to pointedly ignore Theoren as he crossed the antechamber and vanished into his office, grabbing the papers Axis held out for him.

Settling behind his desk after removing his sword belt, he quickly looked the papers over: a confirmation of appointments with the captains regarding questionable requisitions, the revised report, and a preliminary report on the incident from last night regarding the fire in the east barracks.

He went over the revised report and placed it in Axis's bin, finished up a couple of letters he was drafting, and reviewed the bulletin about the matters going before the council at the end of the month. One of them was

the practice of impressment. It had come up numerous times before, crowded in with several other matters regarding the Outlands and Farlands.

For years, Sarrica had been urging for the Islands to either become a proper part of the Outlands or to become their own kingdom under the empire. As they stood now, they were only a territory of Outland, which meant they were left alone except when someone found it convenient to abuse them—like the old practice of impressment.

But the trouble with becoming a full part of Outland or a kingdom in their own right was that the Harken Empire had been built around unifying various *kingdoms*. For all that Harken was an empire, the kingdoms were largely autonomous. There were laws the empire enforced across all of them, but mostly they were left to manage themselves. But many of those laws, and other imperial requirements, went directly against Island practices and traditions. The loose, casual cooperative of the Islands was directly at odds with many aspects of Harken, as Harken had never thought to account for such a thing back when it was forming, and had no need to as one kingdom after another joined.

Which meant that if the Islands were to join the empire, first they needed to work out how to accommodate both the Islands and the Empire's needs and laws without negatively affecting the Islands. The council, of course, thought the Islands should be made to fit, but with the High Throne, Fathoms Deep, and a handful of others protesting, that idea wasn't going anywhere. Which meant the whole matter was constantly at a standstill. It would help if the Islands would send their own emissaries, instead of everything resting on Shemal's shoulders, but so far the Islands wouldn't even do that much—though Shemal said he thought that would change soon.

It gave Jader a headache thinking of the upheaval that would ensue, whatever the Islands eventually decided and whatever agreements were made. They would be safer as a full, independent part of Harken instead of a fragile territory that would be easily overtaken and used as a launch point should Treya Mencee or anyone else decide to attack Harken, but Sarrica wasn't going to force the issue—the decision belonged to the Islands.

Jader was simply grateful his position precluded him becoming the spokesperson for the matter. That frustrating role was falling to Shemal,

who had swiftly joined Allen and Tara to become the terrifying triad that ruled the High Court.

Setting the bulletin aside, he finally called for Axis to send in Theoren.

When Theoren was standing in front of his desk, Jader sat back, settled his arms on the rests, and said, "Explain to me why you were driving a carriage at reckless speeds through the pavilion. As to that, why did you not have a driver?"

"My driver was dismissed part way through my journey here, and it was not worth the time it would take to find a replacement. I've driven more than one carriage in my time." Theoren once again offered that cringeworthy smile. Jader had seen men like him before: simpering, occasionally actually charming purely by accident, all smiles and affability to people of power, manipulative and dangerous to those he considered weaker. "I think my speeds have been overstated. You know how it is—"

"The results speak for themselves, I think, and I trust my people far more than I trust you," Jader said. "Why were you speeding through the pavilion when palace law explicitly states only walking is permitted. For precisely this reason."

Theoren's smile faltered briefly, then returned. "I meant no harm, Commander. I was tired, eager to be here, and did not realize quite how fast I was going."

"So you admit you *were* going fast, that you most definitely had not brought your horses to a walk?"

Giving a laugh as awful as his smile, Theoren said, "It was not done maliciously. My mind was elsewhere. As I said, Commander, I was eager to be here and overtired. It was a mistake, but no harm was intended. Surely you of all people know what it's like to be exhausted and eager to be home."

"What I of all people know has nothing to do with the matter. You were in the wrong. People and a valuable horse were hurt, not to mention all the wasted food, and you've admitted to your lax behavior." Jader called for Axis. "Master Theoren, you are fined one crown for reckless behavior, endangering others, and the needless slaughter of an animal. You will purchase Lady Vyna a new horse. You will submit proof of purchase to Captain Dennar before the end of the month. You are further fined *another*

crown for damaging one of my carts and at least two months' worth of food. And you will be grateful it was I who dealt with this matter."

Theoren showed some sense in clearly agreeing with that. People who caused that kind of trouble in front of the High King often found themselves fined hundreds, if not thousands, of crowns, instead of the usual range of one to two hundred, depending on the crime and the parties involved. "Yes, Commander."

"You're dismissed."

Theoren and Axis left. Jader could just hear the soft murmur of their voices as Axis took down necessary information to issue the fine and send a copy to the courts so Theoren could pay it in the next few days.

Jader shuffled his papers about, looking for work he could focus on that would not take him hours or require running around the palace, but try as he might, the unwelcome revelation of his lost past insisted on intruding.

Mother Ocean swallow them all. Jader closed his eyes. Maybe not the best expression to use under the circumstances, even if it was only in his thoughts.

Abandoning his desk, he buckled his sword belt back in place and left, locking the office door behind him. "Axis, have anything urgent sent to me at the pool for the next hour or so, and then to my private chambers. Otherwise, I'm not to be disturbed the rest of the day."

"Yes, Commander."

"Thank you." Jader strode off, sticking to smaller hallways in the hopes it would cut down on the number of people who would waylay him. A good hour of swimming should clear his head, and then maybe he'd finally get around to eating something. Hopefully at the end of all of that, he could stop worrying about Bentan visitors and a past he'd been perfectly happy without.

CHAPTER THREE

Kamir looked up from his book as he heard Chiri rushing over to him, and sighed at the bundle in her hands. "Chiri, you can't pick flowers."

"I didn't. They were on the ground," she said, and thrust them at him, forcing him to drop his book lest he drop the flowers. "For you, Papa."

He smiled and dutifully lifted the flowers to his nose to smell them. "Thank you, Chiri. They're beautiful." He hugged her tight and watched as she ran back across the courtyard to where Chara was playing with a skipping rope.

In a few more months they'd turn eight. He'd given birth to them just two months before he'd filed for divorce. Married at sixteen, a father, divorced at nineteen... and eight years later, nearly nine, he was on the verge of being disowned, with nothing of significance accomplished.

Well, that wasn't true. His children were happy and healthy and showed every sign of being smarter than him in making important decisions. If that was all he managed in life, he would—and did—count it a victory.

Assured they were still enjoying their play and behaving, Kamir bent to retrieve his book. He laid it in his lap and smoothed the creased pages. It was a cheap book, the kind sold from stalls at markets on paper that would begin to warp in mere months, and rarely sold for more than three pins, the most expensive being a mark, the equivalent of five pins.

Good books usually cost at least three marks, and the best books started at one sterling. He'd taken those books for granted growing up—he'd taken a lot of things for granted growing up, and probably still did.

He reached up to touch his hair, which he'd divided into six separate braids that he'd then woven together at the back of his head, decorating them with enamel flower hairpins.

Glancing up to watch his children play for a moment, he then went back to his book, smiling softly as he read. It was a silly tale, one of the adventure novels so many derided, but he enjoyed them immensely. They were positive and encouraging when so many things in his life were the precise opposite.

He was just getting to the best part when he registered the familiar jangle of a soldier and his children going silent. Looking up sharply, ready to tear apart whoever was bothering Chiri and Chara, Kamir froze in shock, then became tongue-tied from elation and mortification.

Snapping his book shut and shoving it into the satchel lying beside him on the stone bench, Kamir surged to his feet.

Jader hadn't noticed him yet, his eyes on Chiri and Chara. "What are you two doing here, then? I haven't seen a skipping rope in years. Didn't know what they were until I joined the army."

Chara froze, but Chiri immediately moved closer. "Are you a soldier? Why do you have two swords?"

"I am a soldier, and I wear two swords because that's how I learned to fight. It's a traditional way of fighting in Outland, where I trained," Jader said. "My name is Jader Star." He crouched down, resting his arms on his thighs. "Who are you then, little *shimi*?"

Chiri giggled. "What's a shee-mee?"

"I think the Harken word is guppy, but it's a version of that word used specifically for children. Kind of like saying 'darling baby fish'," Jader replied. "It's an Islander word."

"Oh! You're like Velina!" Chara said, shyness overcome by how much he loved their caretaker. "She's from Tashira!"

Jader broke into an absolutely beautiful smile. "Fire Island, that's the biggest one. I'm from one of the islands north of it, the one slightly bigger than the other if you look on a map. It's called Shahira, or Pearl Island."

"That's where they dive!" Chara said. "Velina told us about it. She said her brother's spouse dove all the way down to get him a pearl when she wanted to propose marriage."

Chuckling, Jader replied, "That is more or less the tradition. I was not a pearl diver, but I have four brothers and three sisters who are, and many more relatives besides."

"I've only got one sister," Chara said. "Papa says maybe we can have more siblings one day, but not yet."

Jader's smile softened. "Siblings are a joy, it's true. I have a lot of siblings back home. We drove our mother crazy when we were little."

"Do you miss them?" Chara asked.

"Very much, but I like being in the army."

"How come you don't look like Velina?" Chiri asked, reaching out to gently touch Jader's hand.

Mortification filled Kamir, but before he could reprimand her for asking such a rude question, Jader chuckled and said, "I am very pale, aren't I? It's because when I was little, about your age in fact, I was lost at sea. I washed up on the Islands, but couldn't remember anything. So they took me in and I grew up an Islander."

The twins stared at him wide-eyed. "Are you sad?" Chara finally asked.

"About forgetting?" Emotions flickered across Jader's face, anger and sadness among them, but were quickly replaced by another indulgent laugh. "No. It was a long time ago. I have new memories. I like being an Islander."

"I want to see the Islands," Chiri said. "Velina said she'd take us one day if Papa agrees. Can we dive for pearls?"

"Little shimi don't dive for pearls, but I can certainly teach you to dive like an Islander and one day, when you're big enough, you could dive for pearls if you wanted. I would vouch for you."

The twins cheered, and Kamir couldn't decide if he wanted to kiss Jader or strangle him.

"Papa! Papa!" Chiri screamed. "Can we go diving?" She ran toward him, and Jader watched her—and the look of pleased surprise on his face was almost gratifying enough for Kamir to leave off strangling him. "Can we, Papa?"

Kamir smiled. "Well, we can't go today, of course, but I promise I will tell you when we can go, all right?"

Chiri pouted, and even Chara looked a little disappointed, but they nodded and dutifully went back to playing when Kamir bid. Jader laughed as he stood. "There the whole time. Some alert High Commander I am." He crossed the courtyard and gave a small, playful bow. "The children are as beautiful as the father, Lord Kamir."

"Thank you, Commander," Kamir said, grateful he managed to get the words out without stuttering or stumbling over them. "It means a lot you think so." It meant more than he seemed to like children. The few times

Kamir had seen Theoren around children, he had treated them like pests to be driven away. Kamir's parents firmly believed children were meant to be silent and obedient—and out of sight when not required. Kamir had always wished for someone who loved children as he did.

As wary as he was of letting *anyone* near Chiri and Chara, it was reassuring to see that Jader genuinely liked children.

Jader laughed again. "You would be the only one pleased to hear my opinion on anything today, my lord." He winked, but then turned more serious. "I hope no further guards have troubled you. I did speak with Captain Dennar to ensure such unreasonable behavior did not continue."

Kamir's eyes widened. "You—you did not have to do that, Commander." He ducked his head, worrying at his bottom lip, then made himself look up again. "They had every right—"

"They had no right," Jader cut in. "But think no more of it. The matter has been addressed and closed."

Except for the fine Kamir still needed to pay, but one thing after another had required his attention the past two days. Hopefully he'd be able to deal with it in the next few days. "I appreciate it," he murmured, and scrambled for something else to say. "What brings you to this part of the palace?"

Jader hesitated, then with a sheepish, slightly pained smile said, "Hiding, to be honest. There are some special guests in residence and they make me uncomfortable."

"The Bentans?" Kamir asked. Why would Jader be uncomfortable around Bentans? Well, nobody particularly cared for them, but to be fair, most Bentans probably had no love of Harken. But he didn't think that was why. "I'm sorry they're troubling you. Do feel free to hide here, though you may be coaxed into storytelling or skipping rope."

"I can think of worse ways to spend an afternoon," Jader said with another smile, and to Kamir's complete shock, he gave another playful bow and returned to the children. Kamir retreated to his bench, content to watch Jader and his children interact and commit every single second of it to memory, firmly stamping on the anxiety that always rose up whenever anyone outside his tiny circle of trusted persons got too close. Even being half in love with Jader didn't make it easy to relax—but the smiles on his

children's faces, how vibrant Jader was talking to them, how right and perfect and too good to be true it looked, certainly helped.

"Tell us an Island story!" Chara said.

Kamir gave him a look. "Chara."

"Please," Chara added dutifully.

Snickering, Jader sat on the ground and loosely folded his legs. "I'm not sure I know any your Miss Velina has not already told you. What about the Cold Fire Festival?"

"Fire can't be cold," Chiri said, frowning and folding her arms across her chest.

"That's not why it's called the Cold Fire Festival. Once a long, long time ago, Mother Ocean was so grief-stricken by the death of her youngest daughter that she fell into a deep sleep, and without her to guide the oceans, the world grew dark and cold, far darker and colder than it had ever been. For the first time, the Islands experienced ice and snow, which left them cold, hungry and afraid, for the Islands do not experience winter the way many other parts of the world do."

"Snow? I've never seen snow either, except in books," Chiri said. "It is really cold?"

"Cold enough to freeze off your ears and nose," Jader replied. "I've never seen it either, but then, I'm from the Islands. Since that one time, snow has never fallen—because the Islanders back then gathered together and formulated a plan to drive back the cold and wake Mother Ocean. They collected all the wood they could find, even that which built their houses and fishing boats. They carried it all to the biggest island and arranged it into a hundred great big fires. So great were these fires they drove back the cold and the dark, and the warmth of them was so marvelous that Mother Ocean woke from her grief to investigate the source—and was dismayed to see what had happened while she was sleeping. She immediately banished the cold and dark from the islands, restored all the Islanders had sacrificed to build the fires, and promised never again would she allow them to suffer so. Now, every year when the weather cools, the Islanders light great big fires to remind the cold it is not welcome on the Islands, and they keep smaller fires burning constantly until Mother Ocean once more wakes and the warm months return.

"It is also a tradition during the Cold Fire Festival to throw on the fires tokens representing those who died during the year, so they might join Mother Ocean in her rest and wake to start the year over with her when the warmth returns."

"Like we burn people so they can move to the Divine Fields," Chara said.

Jader bowed his head. "Yes, precisely like that."

"Tell us another!" Chiri said, throwing up her hands.

"Chiri!"

Giving Kamir the look of the long suffering and aggrieved, Chiri turned back to Jader and said, "Please."

Kamir buried his face in his hands. "I'm so sorry, High Commander. I swear they're normally better behaved than this."

"They seem well-behaved to me," Jader said, chuckling. "Far be it for me to complain about people *demanding* I talk to them. I've had soldiers running away from me all day." He winked, then turned to the children and said, "You seemed interested in the pearl diving. Would you like to hear a story about the woman who fell in love with a man who was half fish?"

The children cheered loudly, and Jader began the tale. Half-listening, Kamir reached into his satchel to fetch the children's snacks—but stopped when Velina came rushing in, her hair messier than she usually permitted when not in their suite, an angry, distraught look on her face.

Abandoning his satchel, Kamir stood and met her halfway, catching her flailing hands. "Velina, what's wrong?"

She muttered something in Islander, cast a look at the children, then said in low tones, "Lord Kamir, *he's* here. He came to the suite and requested to see you and the children. I told him you were out, but he wouldn't believe me at first. It was only when I shouted for guards that he left."

Kamir was going to throw up. "Theoren?" he whispered, and dropped his hands as she nodded.

He was supposed to be *gone*. Theoren hated Harken, especially Harkenesten—both the palace and the city. It was why they hadn't gone with Kamir's parents when they'd moved there, though at the time Kamir

had also thought his family would have refused them. By the end, when he had no other choices, that hadn't mattered.

"D-did he say why?" Kamir asked, and fought back the tears and panic that wanted out. His children couldn't see him falling apart, and he definitely didn't want to look pathetic a second time in front of Jader. Mostly, though, he didn't want his children to grow up as weak and useless as their father.

And he would be *damned* before he allowed Theoren close enough for them to even see him.

Velina shook his head. "He wouldn't tell me anything." She frowned, looking torn and unhappy. "He did leave a note."

"Marvelous."

"Is everything all right?" Jader asked.

Kamir looked past him, relieved to see the children were immersed in playing their little pebble game. "No, but it's nothing I can't handle."

"I thought you said Master Theoren, and worried he was harassing more people," Jader said. "After his unseemly arrival and the altercation he caused in the banquet hall last night, I was hoping to have a good excuse to lock him up for a few days."

Kamir let out a sharp, startled laugh. "I would gladly give you a reason if I had one, Commander, but unfortunately it's not against the law for a man to want to see his ex-husband. Though I would greatly prefer never to see him again." His hand shook as Velina pulled an envelope from her apron and handed it over.

"*Theoren* is your ex-husband?" Jader asked. "Who was cruel enough to inflict that bastard on you?"

"A much younger, stupider me," Kamir said, mouth twisting. "I cannot be entirely sorry, for I do love my children, but I will be the first to say that I should have waited a few more months before dashing to the temple."

"I'm glad it's a situation you got yourself out of. If he acts untoward, let me know, and I'll level more fines on him—and there's always the stocks and the prison."

Kamir wanted to kiss him. Not lasciviously, though he was always open to the idea of wet and filthy kisses from Jader, just... soft and lingering in

heartfelt gratitude. "Thank you, Commander. No one has ever offered to throw someone in stocks for me. It's quite sweet of you, if unorthodox."

Jader grinned, bright and mischievous. "If you want unortho—"

"High Commander! Here you are!"

Lifting his gaze to the sky, Jader then turned around and regarded the soldier pelting toward them. The man barely stopped in time to avoid crashing into Jader. "Yes, Cadet?"

"The High Consort requires your presence in Executioner's Court."

"Very well. Escort Lord Kamir, his children, and their caretaker back to their suite. If you encounter Master Theoren and he does anything to make them uncomfortable, drag him away immediately and see he does not return to further harass them. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Commander!" The cadet snapped an enthusiastic salute. If he found the orders strange, he gave no sign of it, merely smiled cheerfully as he gave Kamir a hasty bow.

Jader turned back to Kamir. "Thank you for allowing me to spend time with you and your children, Lord Kamir. I hope the rest of your day is pleasant." He turned to Velina, said something to her in Islander and winked. Velina looked briefly flustered, but rallied and said something in reply that made Jader grin.

Biting back his curiosity, Kamir said, "Fair winds, Commander, and we were honored you would grace us with your time." He bowed his head, and Jader did the same before turning sharply on his heel and striding off in that way all soldiers seemed to possess. Like something bad would happen if they didn't charge about, jangling loudly with every step.

Velina cast him Kamir a look.

"What?"

"Nothing," she said with a faint smile. "Nothing at all."

"Somehow I don't believe you. What did he say?"

Velina laughed. "That he's heard much about me from the little *shimi*, and I seem remarkably well-behaved for someone from Fire Island. Did you want to read that note, or should I just burn it?"

Kamir made a face. "I should probably know what to expect so we can prepare."

"I think you should just smile at the High Commander some more and ask for that *kekti* to be thrown in the stocks."

Kamir snorted at the idea of his smiles convincing Jader to do anything. He broke the wax on the envelope, pulled out the piece of paper inside, and read the brief message. "He wants to have dinner, says, *It's been a long time, and there is much that needs to be said*, and he'd be grateful if I would give him a chance to say it."

Velina sneered. "So he's broke again."

She'd been their once-a-week maid, hired several months after they'd first moved in to their little house, after much careful pleading on Kamir's part. Kamir had been so proud of that house. It had been small, shabby, but *his. Theirs*. A whole house for just him and the love of his life. He'd been trained to run a household, as it was always the duty of the youngest to marry well, usually to someone for whom they'd take on the day to day running of a household and estate. He'd only been sixteen, though, and his training far from complete. He'd learned the hard way that for every one thing he knew, there were twenty things he didn't know.

Theoren had finally allowed him to hire a maid, and having not much else to do, Kamir had thrown himself into learning everything Velina could teach him.

By the end, he'd been more distraught about losing the house than his husband.

"Very likely," he said. "Broke or looking to get out of some other bit of trouble. It'll be easier if I meet with him and get it over with. I'll pen a letter to be sent to him through the palace post, and I definitely will not be inviting him to our suite for dinner. In fact, if you don't mind, run to the banquet hall offices and see about renting a private room. I don't care when. If he's as desperate for something as we think, he won't have any choice but to meet when I say, and I'm not giving him the leverage of eating somewhere more public than that. I'll take the children back to our rooms."

Velina nodded, squeezed his hand, and bustled off.

"Come along, children," Kamir said brightly. "We never got around to snack time and now it's nearly lunch, so let's go home."

The children agreed cheerfully and gathered up all their toys, putting them in the little satchels he'd bought them, both bright pink as requested, but each decorated by its respective owner and vastly different: Chiri with fish and cats and birds; Chara with butterflies and flowers and frogs.

Slinging his own satchel across his chest, he took Chiri's hand and let Chara walk ahead of them as he preferred to. The whole time, Kamir's stomach was in knots, certain they would cross paths with Theoren.

He barely managed not to slump in relief when they made it to the suite without incident. Thanking the cadet for his help and sending him on his way, Kamir dropped the letter on the pile of recently delivered mail, and then shuffled the kids off to get cleaned up for lunch. Once they were tended and at the table drinking juice while waiting for food to arrive, he went into his own room to freshen up—but started with dropping onto the bed and burying his face in his trembling hands.

Theoren. Who'd left years ago to 'find someone less slutty and stupid' in Gearth or Tricemore or wherever it was he'd flounced off to. Why was he here, of all places, nearly ten years after their divorce? Theoren hated Kamir, and he hated Harkenesten more.

Was he after the children for some reason? Kamir started crying then, from the utter relief of knowing that Theoren legally had no standing, and the High King was particularly opinionated on such matters. He did not tolerate the mistreatment of children, and the courts did what kept the High King happy and out of their way.

Hearing Amaria's voice as she arrived with lunch, Kamir hastily stood and went to clean his face before changing into a fresh jacket that was not covered in dirt and grass from Chiri coming to see him every few minutes with a rock or flowers or feathers.

Checking his face in the mirror one last time, he returned to the main room and took his place at the table. Chiri smiled at him, and even Chara stirred enough to offer one of his soft, little smiles. Kamir returned them full measure and ruffled their hair before picking up his spoon and starting on the creamy, spicy soup that was one of his favorites.

When lunch was done, he sent the children off to play in their room. Technically their room was the master suite, but he hardly needed all that space, and it meant they had plenty of room for sleeping and playing.

The suite was comprised of six rooms: his room, the children's room, another bedroom for Velina, the schoolroom, main room, and a little office he'd turned into his workshop.

His clockwork had begun as a hobby, something he taught himself after he'd broken his watch and, rather than tell his parents, had decided to try and fix it himself. That first attempt had evolved into an interest, and later when he'd had no friends, nothing to do beyond take care of his little house while his true love revealed he was truly a monster, he'd buried himself in clockwork.

Eventually that had turned into a way to earn coin that he'd carefully saved to pay for the divorce and moving himself and his children to Harkenesten. Currently, it supplemented the money from his parents that he was tucking away for the move and living independently. He should probably feel bad about sort of stealing money from his parents... but no, he really did not feel bad about taking anything from parents who hadn't been much better than the man he'd run away with. Though he'd long ago conceded he probably wouldn't have listened to them, even if they'd been the epitome of good parents, that didn't absolve them of being bad parents either.

Sitting at his table, he slid on his special glasses and picked up the piece he was working on. The woman he worked for specialized in artistic clocks and watches, especially clocks that could be put on shelves, desks, and the like. She purchased or commissioned various pieces of art from glassmakers, sculptors, and the like around the city and had Kamir and her other contracted makers insert the timepieces.

She'd been so pleased with the oceanic one he'd commissioned and done himself for Jader that she had wheedled him into doing similar pieces for her to sell—and so far they sold almost faster than Kamir and the glassmaker could create them.

His mind drifted helplessly to the clock he'd made for Jader, the kind of clock that normally would sell for half a crown at least. He'd spent far too much money on the glasswork and clockwork pieces, but he hadn't been able to resist doing *something*, even if Jader would never know it was him. Even if he hadn't been half in love with Jader, he would have done it just for the happiness Jader's promotion brought to Velina and the few other Islanders Kamir knew.

Shaking himself, he focused on his work, carefully bringing together all the wheels, bridges, springs and more. His watches were accurate to within ten minutes, and he was always keeping abreast of improvements. There were larger clocks that were accurate to within one minute, and he was waiting eagerly for that to be achieved in smaller clocks.

He took a break when his latest piece finally reached the halfway point, working on kinks in his neck, back, and arms as he admired his progress. This was a commissioned piece, worth two full crowns, set with sapphires in place of the numbers, the hands made of white gold, the timepiece set in a sculpture of two women holding each other. It was meant to be an anniversary gift from a woman to her spouse; they'd been married for twenty-five years.

How would it feel to be with someone for that long? His strongest, longest relationship was the one with his children. That wasn't really the same thing.

Considering everyone seemed to agree with his parents that he was used goods, he doubted he'd ever know the feeling. But oh, he could dream.

Though dreaming would have to wait for a bit. He paused to drink some tea then settled back to work.

He was nearly done when someone knocked on his door—Velina, and the pattern of her knocks dropped a sack of stones into his stomach. His mother had come to see him. What in the Pantheon did she want?

But it wasn't hard to guess. He had never bothered to reply, in writing or person, to the ultimatum his parents had issued. He hadn't thought a reply necessary, but he should have known his mother would think otherwise.

He stalled for a few minutes by putting everything away and tidying up, but if he took too long, his mother would either storm into the workshop or make Velina miserable pestering her, so with a last steadying breath he went to see her.

His mother was as beautiful at fifty-one as she'd been when he was a boy, though she detested the wrinkles in her face and the silver threaded heavily through her ink-dark hair. She was dressed in the height of fashion, though he knew she secretly hated the bright colors and elaborate flower embroidery that High Consort Allen had made fashionable simply by wearing it. Until the High Consort's arrival, fashion had been dictated by a

handful of nobles, and his mother had been well-acquainted with enough of them to convince herself she held influence. Allen and his fast friendship with Lord Tara had turned everything upside down, and even three years later the High Court still was not certain how to handle the High Consort and his so-called peculiar choice in friends. Kamir thought Lord Shemal and Lord Tara infinitely better choices in friends than anyone else in court; if he dreamed of Jader being his lover, he dreamed of having friends very much like those two.

"Good afternoon, Mother." He clasped his hands behind his back so he wouldn't fidget or otherwise give away discomfiture. "What brings you to see me?"

"Did you receive our letter?" she asked. His father would dither and drag and work slowly around a point, be it good or bad. His mother had always been far more direct and ruthless, especially when doing so would cause the greatest hurt.

Once, it had made him cower and cry. He would never be bright and bold and brave, but he was no longer completely a coward either. Not always, at least. Divorce and children had changed him in many ways. "The one where you told me to secure a marriage in ten months or else you were tossing me and my children out on the street? Yes, I received it."

Her mouth pinched. "No one is tossing you out on the street except you."

"I didn't write the ultimatum, Mother."

"No, you just continue to use us to fund your empty, wasted life and do nothing to return our generosity."

Kamir didn't flinch at the words, but only barely. "I am hardly a drain on *family* funds, Mother. I earn my keep, in more ways than one. I have children to raise and doing so takes all my time and attention. Surely you recall how exhausting it was raising three children."

"I made a good marriage and managed a full manor house and an estate while raising three children. You sit around here tinkering, acting like a common artisan. I'm not certain you're *fit* to raise your children, honestly."

Kamir dropped his hands, fingers curling into fists as he closed the distance between them. "Touch my children in any way and you will regret it. If you only came here to threaten me, then get out. I received your ultimatum."

She smoothed non-existent wrinkles from the front of her gown, keeping her eyes down—but not remotely downcast—as she replied, "I heard a rumor you were seen spending time in the east courtyard with High Commander Jader."

"He chanced by and talked to the children for a little while; they were enamored to learn he's Islander like their caretaker. Since when do you care if I talk to High Commander Jader? I believe your exact words on him were *filthy Farlander with no pedigree, no title, and a laughable concept of wealth*. Did I leave anything out? Oh, yes, you actually said *filthy Farlander whor*—" Kamir grunted as she slapped him.

"You were more tolerable, Kamir, when you at least knew how to keep a respectful silence."

"I will not keep giving respect that is never given me." Kamir pulled out a handkerchief to dab at the blood on his lips.

"You will be given respect when you have earned it."

"The same goes for you," Kamir replied, quiet and level.

She narrowed her eyes, and she would probably slap him one more time before she left, but for the moment she left off. "I admit the High Commander is not the finest choice, but he is a Farlander and would not expect the same things as a true Harken citizen."

"You mean you think he's brutish and uncivilized enough he might be convinced to marry the worthless son you're ashamed of for daring to be young and stupid—"

And there was the second slap.

"I can see you still need to think about your options," she replied, drawing herself up. "Let me make things clearer for you: if you don't find someone to marry, you'll have nowhere to go, and do you really think the imperial courts will let you keep children for whom you can't provide?"

Kamir almost hit her. He'd never punched or slapped anyone in his life, but he almost went for her damned nose right then. "Threaten my children again, Mother, and I will kill you," he said, and took some satisfaction in the barely-audible gasp she couldn't entirely smother. "Get out."

She went, though she blustered a bit to make it seem as though she was the one choosing to leave. When she was finally gone, Kamir dropped into

his seat at the dining table and balled his shaking hands in his lap. He wouldn't cry again, damn it.

Nope, he was definitely going to cry. Kamir fled to his bedroom so his children wouldn't see him if they came out of their bedroom. Closing the door, he sat on his bed and finally let the tears out.

It wasn't fair. Not that fair had ever mattered, but how could his mother come and threaten his children? And why did she have to hear so quickly about his conversation with Jader? Couldn't he have one thing all to himself, without his family or his past ruining it?

Did she really think Jader would ever consider marrying someone like Kamir? Maybe everyone else thought that because he was an Islander he had limited choices, but Jader had risen from practically nothing to being close friends with the most powerful people in the empire. He could have anyone, even if he didn't have a title or a pedigree that met the standards of the High Court. He could so very easily marry into a title and lineage, assuming the High King didn't simply grant him a title at some point.

Which meant he was as unreachable as the stars he was named after. Not that he hadn't been already.

But Kamir had gotten to spend a couple of hours with him, and most of that time had been spent watching Jader charm his children, which was the best possible daydream to have come true. If he never spoke to Jader again, he had that memory.

And if his mother thought he would not fight as viciously as a Carthian for his children, she knew even less about him than he already assumed.

Right, then. He wouldn't accomplish anything by hiding and crying. Time to gather himself and get back to work.

Standing, he went into the dressing room to wash his face and straighten his hair. When he was once more back together, he returned to the main room. The children would be re-emerging for dinner soon, so no point in going back to work.

Instead he gathered up the day's mail and carried it to the table.

The first interesting piece was a letter from Shiar. Kamir's heart jumped into his throat as he picked up his letter opener and slit the wax. He gave a shaky, disbelieving laugh as he read that Shiar had negotiated the house

Kamir wanted down to a price he could manage. It was still slightly higher than he'd budgeted, but he could make it work. That house would be worth the extra cost.

He wrote a reply confirming the meeting in three days, fetched his day book to note the appointment, and returned to the mail. Bills, various palace notices, payment for the work he'd recently turned in, and a reminder from his mother that he'd agreed to join them for dinner the day after tomorrow. Ugh, nothing was worse than dining in the public banquet hall with his parents. Well, not much was worse.

The next piece of mail was a small, thick envelope, with the military's seal pressed into the wax. Something from Jader? Heart speeding up, Kamir opened the envelope and pulled out the card inside—and tried to tamp down his disappointment when he saw it was from Captain Dennar of the Imperial Guard. Why would Captain Dennar be writing him? Kamir finally actually read the brief letter. He nearly dropped it when he'd read the apology for the behavior of his guards for levying a fine they should not have.

Kamir stared at the words. Why would Captain Dennar go out of his way to write an apology to a nobody over a matter of a one sterling fine? Bemused, he tucked it away and continued on.

The last piece of mail was from the lower court, which among other things handled the fines that were the favored form of punishment in the imperial palace, and by far the most effective, especially when the High King's patience wore out and he levied the punishment personally.

Probably a reminder. He hadn't had time to pay his fine, but he still had a few days left in the grace period, which was ten days for small fines. Breaking the cheap seal, Kamir pulled out the single sheet of paper inside.

His eyes widened. It was a receipt for a paid fine, covered on his behalf by an anonymous benefactor.

Who in the Pantheon would have paid...

Jader. There was no else who could have. Kamir hadn't told anyone about it, not even Velina. The only ones who knew were him, the soldiers, and Jader—well, and Captain Dennar. That certainly explained the apology.

Warmth spread through his chest, a smile overtaking his face as he gently touched the receipt. There was nothing at all of Jader in the small

slip of paper that looked like ten thousand others, but it was suddenly precious all the same. He carefully folded the paper and slipped it back into the envelope, and tucked it into his day book to put in his memory chest later.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jader threw himself off his horse as they reached the military pavilion that stood in the center of the primary barracks, which were used by the core of the imperial army, with a handful of buildings devoted to officer quarters and family suites.

"Line them up," he roared, drawing the attention of soldiers milling about and making those who had returned with him cringe anew.

Four officers went to the cart that had come in behind him and dragged out eleven soldiers: five officers and six enlisted, all of whom would be lucky if they didn't end the day dead—and they would definitely end it wishing they were.

A crowd gathered around the edges of the pavilion, everyone whispering and pointing as the eleven men were arranged in two lines: officers first, and then he'd deal with enlisted.

When they were lined up and left standing there until their anger turned into uncertainty and, in a couple of the moderately smarter ones, fear, Jader finally stepped forward. He took position in the middle of the pavilion, roughly three paces from the arrayed men. "You are officers in the Harken Imperial Army. Do you want to tell me what the *fuck* you were doing behaving like monsters? Your job is to protect people, not to go about robbing and *raping*."

"We didn't—"

Jader backhanded the man, who dropped to his knees with a pained cry as the strike did no favors to his already broken nose. "I saw the results, and I memorized every single word spoken to me by the victim and those who witnessed your abhorrent behavior. The only reason you're not already dead is that you haven't suffered enough first." He reached down and hauled the man to his feet, then rounded on the other officers. "You knew what he was about but did nothing to stop it, too busy behaving like greedy thieves. Our job was to save Harken citizens, not imitate the Carthians tormenting them. You have one chance, and once chance only, to try and justify to me why your behavior shouldn't see you executed."

"You can't—"

"I can uphold the law," Jader cut in, voice soft but razor sharp as he got in the man's face. "I overlook trivialities in the army every day, Lieutenant. What you and your peers did was not a triviality, and you will suffer the full weight of imperial law for your transgressions. Do you understand me?"

The man's mouth flattened.

Jader backhanded him too, and when the man was done spitting out blood, repeated, "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, High Commander," the man bit out.

Jader turned away to motion the nearby waiting soldiers forward when someone muttered, "Fucking floater."

Everyone who heard him swore or gasped, and the crowd at the edges of the pavilion all backed up a step.

Jader slowly turned back around and looked over the men. He knew precisely who'd spoken, knew all their voices well enough by now to identify them blindfolded, but let the fool think he'd gotten away with it for the moment. "I may be a floater, but I am also High Commander and the one who will be deciding whether you suffer punishment or execution. Who said that?"

None of them spoke.

"This is your last chance to tell me who spoke. I won't lose sleep over ordering the execution of people who think rape is acceptable behavior, and there are plenty of people waiting for a promotion they will serve better than you."

It was Penth, the youngest and weakest of the lot, who broke first. "Kasher said it."

"Yes, he did," Jader said, then surged forward and slammed a fist into Kasher's face, staring dispassionately as he dropped to the ground and fumbled uselessly to staunch the blood from his broken nose. "The next time you feel compelled to use a slur against Islanders, remember what it earned you. I don't expect anyone to like me, but you'll respect me and my people." Turning sharply around, he returned to his position and bellowed, "Strip them!"

The four officers from before surged past him in brisk strides, their faces grim but set as they roughly stripped the five officers of all but their drawers.

When they were finished, Jader motioned to the first man. "Secure him."

Two of the officers grabbed him and hauled him out of the line, knocked him to his knees and held fast to his arms. Jader drew the dagger at his belt and stood in front of the man. "You have committed a capital crime under imperial law, and as a lieutenant in the imperial army, you fall under my jurisdiction. Five officers agreed you are guilty, and I uphold their decision. Those convicted of capital crimes are automatically sentenced to execution. Any last words, Lieutenant?"

The man said something in low, rough Gearthish.

Jader moved to stand behind him, grabbed his hair and yanked his head back, and slit his throat in a quick, smooth move. He and the officers stepped back, and moments later the man was dead.

Stepping through the blood spilling across the pavilion stones, Jader said into the sudden silence, "Clap the rest of them in chains and remand them to the care of Admiral Chief Mazen, to serve ten years apiece on the brig of her choice. Bring the enlisted forward."

When the officers were gone, and most of the enlisted were crying, Jader finally turned his attention to them. "Like your officers, you ignored the actions of fellow soldiers that were within your power to stop. At the very least, you could have sought help from other officers. Yet you did nothing, and accepted the goods given to you by those officers."

"We were scared what they'd do to us," one of the men blurted, crying hard, his eyes flitting between Jader and the body lying a few paces behind him. "They've been nasty before to anyone who doesn't fall in."

Jader's mouth tightened. No army was perfect, and problems slipped past him despite his best efforts, but something like this incident should not have happened and it was largely his fault. A deputy high commander would better be able to oversee such things while Jader handled other matters. Lesto had noticed him for a similar reason.

"You should have come to me, if you trusted no one else," Jader said. He motioned sharply. "Put them in stocks for three days, then put them on shit duty for three months. When their punishment is complete, I want them and

full reports from supervising officers in my office at first bell. Am I understood?"

A chorus of "Yes, High Commander" echoed through the pavilion. Jader turned and strode off into the palace.

He stopped short to see the man standing just inside the doors, leaning against the wall dressed in clothes finer than even Sarrica's. "Lesto."

Lesto pushed off the wall. "Looks like you're having quite the day. I'm sorry about the execution."

"I'm sorry I didn't notice the problem before such an awful thing happened," Jader said bitterly, and fell into step alongside him as they walked through the halls. "What brings you to Harkenesten?"

"Sarrica wanted me near to hand when the rest of that Bentan ship arrives, which should be any time now. Shemal said to tell you hello and that he hoped to see you at supper."

Some of Jader's misery faded at the mention of Shemal, probably his only other real friend after Lesto, Sarrica, and Allen.

His thoughts flitted briefly to Kamir, sweet and beautiful and captivating, but a couple of brief encounters did not a friend make. But the thought they could be friends someday was nice, now he'd properly met and spoken with Kamir. He was more baffled than ever that he was related to such unpleasant, tiresome people.

"Your presence would be welcome and appreciated," Jader said with a sigh. "Did Sarrica tell you..."

"That you are the long-lost son of the Duchess of Abernoth? Yes. I think in your position I would not be terribly pleased by the news either."

More of Jader's tension eased to hear those words. "Thank you."

Lesto smiled and briefly gripped his arm. "Go clean up. And get something to eat. You're going to need it when the Bentans arrive, especially given how long your day has already been. Did you at least deal with the Carthians?"

"Yes. Why they decided to invade Harken to steal foodstuffs and supplies when most of the border towns and villages will trade with them, I have no idea. But the problem has been assigned to others and hopefully will not further require me."

"Still have not settled on a deputy?"

Jader shook his head. "No, though not for lack of trying."

"If you are open to suggestions..."

Jader laughed. "I would be a fool to ignore your advice. Who do you suggest?"

"Captain Rega Halon. She was not an officer I ever met while High Commander, but I heard good things about her from time to time. She was promoted to Captain of the Valforin garrison only a couple of months ago."

"I remember hearing or reading of it, but Valforin is one of the few places on this Pantheon-forsaken continent that can actually manage without whining to me every month or two," Jader replied.

"I met her when we traveled through Valforin last month to attend a festival in Raal. She's wasted babysitting a garrison. Have her brought here and see what you think."

Jader nodded. "You still make this job look easier than I ever seem to manage."

Lesto laughed and lifted one shoulder in a shrug. "I did it far longer than you have. Go, make your retreat before someone finds you. There should be a bath waiting for you. Oh, and leave off the uniform. You're off duty the rest of the night, by order of the High King."

"As His Majesty Commands." Jader clapped Lesto's shoulder and fled to his room.

Ordering the guard stationed there that he was not to be disturbed except for emergencies, he went into his room and locked the door, then just leaned against it for a moment. Exhaustion hit him like slamming into a wall—the long ride to and from Bein, the brutal fight against the Carthians only to find his own fucking men *acting* like Carthians. Administering harsh punishment.

Executing a man and having to make a spectacle—a point—of it.

It wasn't the first time he'd had to execute someone, but he always hoped each one would be the last. And it would do morale no favors, or win the filthy floater new supporters. There were many things that Lesto had done that had been taken as a matter of course, but when Jader did them, he was

a Farlander taking advantage and getting too full of himself and a hundred other things he was damned tired of hearing.

That and the mention of a festival reminded him of the coming Cold Fire Festival. He and many of the other Islanders in the palace always got together on the beach to light a fire. They could not keep it lit the whole season the way they would back home, but it was enough to wear their own clothes and be completely and wholly themselves for one night. Even if dressing as an Islander always brought him grief from two directions: Harkens who hated Islanders and weren't afraid to show it, and Islanders new enough they did not know who Jader was and assumed he was a Harken treating Islanders' ways as something to amuse himself with.

But thoughts of the festival brought Kamir and his children back to mind. How he hadn't known they were Kamir's immediately, Jader didn't know. They looked just like him, right down to his lovely smile, though the children were open where Kamir always seemed wary and like he was holding back. It was unfortunate that someone as sweet as Kamir had learned to be so cautious. No doubt his family and ex-husband had everything to do with that. Jader didn't have much experience with abuse, but he had some—hard not to come across it when dealing with an army, and all the different kinds of people, good and bad, who comprised it.

Finally pushing away from the door, he strode across the suite to his bedroom. He stripped off his filthy armor and uniform and left them to be cleaned, and put the rest of his clothes in a different basket for the general laundry to take care of. His sword belt he left on its hook near his armor stand.

Naked, Jader headed for the bath that was waiting for him, immensely grateful Lesto had arranged it for him.

He sank into the tub with a long groan. The water was almost hotter than he could stand, but it was already working wonders on his aching muscles. Someone had drizzled oil in the water that filled the air with the scent of hibiscus, making him homesick on top of everything else.

Eventually he sat up and scrubbed himself clean, rinsing away all the dirt and sweat and grime of the day. Standing, he dumped a bucket of clean water over him to sluice the last of the soap away and then climbed out. He shrugged into a dressing robe and wandered into the main room to rest by the fire with a cup of wine for a little while.

The first thing he'd really, truly loved about the Mainland was wine. Islanders stuck with beer, which they imported from Outland, and a liquor made from a local flower. Islanders simply called it nectar, but they occasionally sold it in Outland, where it was called Tears of the Moon and sold for a sum that made Islanders laugh hysterically.

Wine, however, especially a good Coresta, was not something he'd had until his first tentative friend in the army had shared a bottle gifted to her by her sister.

After that, Jader has swiftly become an enthusiast. He spent more of his paychecks than he'd ever admit stocking the private cellar he kept in the palace, renting the space out in three year increments—or had, until Sarrica had given him the space permanently as a gift on his promotion. Allen had then bestowed him with three barrels of wine and two casks of brandy, all of it from Gaulden.

When he'd finished one cup, he forced himself to his feet and returned to his room to dress.

He would feel infinitely better wearing his uniform and armor—and swords—but orders were orders, and he wasn't wholly sorry to be ordered off duty the rest of the night. Even if it was only because he was going to be meeting someone he had no desire to even glimpse.

Discarding his robe, he finally pulled on snug, dark teal breeches and white stockings, pulling on his dress boots because he would never feel comfortable in the pretty shoes Allen and most courtiers wore around the palace. Next he pulled on a white undershirt embroidered with colorful hibiscus and gold swirls, which matched the same embroidery along the edges of his sleeveless knee-length jacket. Rather than the front, it buttoned along his sides from just under the arm down to the hips, where it stopped to show his breeches on either side.

The collar was military, short and stiff, the opening pinned shut with a seashell made of gold and mother of pearl.

Choosing his earrings was the hard part. Once earrings had been a rigid tradition on the Islands. Different people wore different types, and wearing certain earrings without permission could get an Islander beaten or even banished from their home. If they were lucky, another Island would take them in, but often they vanished to the Mainland or the ocean.

Those traditions had mostly faded, and outside of a small set of styles that belonged to honored positions, anyone could wear any type of earrings. They'd become an element all their own, and uniquely Islander, no matter how often the Pantheon-damned Outlanders tried to turn the tradition to their own profit.

He opened his various jewelry cases and weighed his options, picked out a few pairs and carried them over to the large mirror hung at the back of his dressing room.

Instead of earrings, though, he wound up frowning at his own reflection. No matter what he did, his skin remained white—bone white, people liked to say, a play on *floater* that was itself a twist on both a Harken word that meant shit, and a Gearthish word that meant corpse, both of which sounded passingly similar to the word Islander to an unpracticed ear. It was also a reference to the Islander practice of polyamory and open relationships, the way they floated from one person to another.

Bone-white skin, night-black hair, eyes the color of dirt. He'd been called a monster and a freak at least as often as he'd been called a floater. He certainly didn't look like an Islander, and he didn't look like he belonged anywhere in Harken either, really. Most assumed Gaulden or Rilien, but even that was a stretch. He'd always assumed—and so had many others—that he had originally hailed from Treya Mencee or one of its neighbors.

Being from Benta wasn't much better.

He *wasn't* from Benta. He was an Islander, the beached fish from the Belarigo family, part of the Relara community on Pearl Island.

Why did he have to do this?

But why didn't matter. He *did* have to do it, and acting like a child about it would do more harm than good.

Shoving his fears aside, he finally focused on the earrings, trying out nearly ten pairs before he stopped fussing and settled on the gold double hoops that dripped teardrop opals, pink sapphire, and teal topaz. When those were in place, he picked out the rest of his piercings to match, until both ears were covered and he had a small gold hoop in his nose.

As ready as he would ever be, Jader abandoned his room and made his way through the palace to the offices of the High King and Consort.

The guards opened the doors as he reached them, and nodded as they always did, but they had a dazed look to their eyes that only tightened the knots in Jader's stomach. "G-good evening, Commander."

"Good evening." Jader strode through the antechamber without pausing to greet anyone, avoiding even the guards when they greeted him much like the first set.

The office had been emptied of the many secretaries that helped to keep it running, even Myra, the lead secretary for both Sarrica and Allen.

Across the room in the seating area used for important guests or discussions that took a great deal of time, sat Sarrica, Allen, the Bentan delegates Jader had met a few days ago... and four new faces, including a woman who could have almost been Jader's twin.

He was going to throw up.

"Trevin!" the woman screamed, then slapped her hands over her mouth and started crying.

Jader took half a step back as she suddenly barreled toward him, then made himself hold still. Reaching him, the woman threw her arms around him and sobbed uncontrollably. "Trevin, Trevin..." The top of her head didn't quite reach his shoulders, and even though he was possibly even skinnier than her, she still felt fragile in his arms.

His sister. His *Bentan* sister. He had nine Islander sisters and twelve brothers, and so many nieces and nephews he'd lost count. But he had no idea what to do with this woman who looked like him.

He looked up, desperate for help or an escape.

The woman from before, Lady Beacher, slowly walked over to them and pulled the crying woman away, speaking to her in low tones and wiping her face with a handkerchief until she calmed down.

Sniffling, the woman turned back to Jader and looked up at him with eyes that were the same unremarkable brown as his own. The hair, the skin, all of it. She was roughly ten years his senior, if he had to guess, but otherwise they really were so alike in appearance they could have nearly passed for twins.

"My name is Krista von Terring, and I apologize for my histrionics," she said in Harken, her Bentan accent faint. "It is like seeing a ghost. We never

knew, you see. I was fifteen at the time; you were my adoring and much adored baby brother. Then we received word the ship had been lost, and they never found the wreckage. We even contacted Harken hoping they might have found something, and their navy kindly helped us look... Nothing was ever found. We had no bodies to bury. Now here you are, all these years later, our little Trevin." She sniffled again and smiled sadly. "Though I am told that is not your name anymore. Jader Star, that is your name now. That is not even a Harken name, if I am not mistaken."

Jader stiffened. "No, it's not. My proper name is Jader shey Belarigo, and I'm an Islander from Shahira." When she frowned, he said, "Pearl Island, one of the smaller Islands."

"Oh," she said, frowning slightly. "You mean the Farlands?"

"We call ourselves Islanders."

She nodded. "Of course, I'm sorry, I meant no offense. I was making certain I knew what you were talking about. No wonder we never found you, if you somehow traveled that far. We never thought that possible." She started crying again. "If only someone had thought to try anyway..." She pulled out a handkerchief of her own and dabbed at her eyes. "But I am above all happy that you are alive and doing so well, even if you were raised far from your proper family." She peered up at him, brown eyes dark and wet. "Do you remember me at all?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't," Jader replied, truly hating to hurt her. "All my memories were lost. I couldn't even remember my name, and no one else on Shahira spoke Bentan, so after a time, I couldn't even remember my first language."

"I understand," Krista replied, mustering a wobbly smile. "I am grateful to have you at all. I wish Mother could see you." She reached out to pet his arm, looking close to tears again.

Jader could have wept with relief himself when Lady Beacher coaxed her away and led her back to her seat.

"Shall we to dinner?" Allen asked. "I think it would help everyone immensely." But even he looked somewhat scattered by events, as did Sarrica. But no doubt like him they'd believed, or hoped, it was all a misunderstanding, that Jader merely bore some strong resemblance.

He nodded, as did everyone else. Dinner would be long and tedious, but it provided a stable, predictable format they could all follow, which would steady them as little else could or would right then.

"I'll join you momentarily," Jader said. "I need a moment, please."

"Of course," Sarrica said gruffly before anyone else could speak. "We'll see you in the banquet hall. Might be easier if you arrive separately anyway. Join us at your leisure."

Jader nodded and fled, striding blindly through the halls until he reached a hall that was largely overlooked because it was built in a place that had no interesting views or easy access to the rest of the palace. He threw open the door of the first salon, closed it sharply behind him, and leaned against the door, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes.

A tear-soaked, but slightly teasing voice said softly, "I found this place first, Commander. You can't just go stealing another person's hiding spot."

Dropping his hands, Jader looked across the room to where Kamir was curled up in a faded blue chair. He smiled faintly. "Apologies, my lord. I did not know this one was taken."

"Well, you're here now, you may as well share it."

Jader crossed the room to take the seat close to Kamir's, coughing briefly at the dust that billowed up. "What forces you..." he drifted off as he saw the bruise on Kamir's left cheek, anger coiling through him, hot and sharp. If Theoren had done that, Jader would shove his face into the nearest wall. "Who did that to you?"

Flinching, looking at his hands knotted in his lap, Kamir shrugged in that way only people long used to such atrocities could. Jader wanted to pull him close and hug him, fend off anyone who wanted to cause such a sweet, good person any harm.

"Is that why you're hiding?"

Kamir laughed, a fragile, shaky laugh that made Jader want to hold him more. Or maybe he just wanted a good reason to avoid whatever had upset him. "No, I am avoiding my problems for a bit, even if that does nothing to solve them."

"Well, you'll get no judgement from me as I am doing the very same thing." Jader hesitated, then asked, "Was it Theoren who hurt you? Is he

what you're avoiding? You seem wholly capable of solving your own problems, my lord, but I'm still happy to throw him in the stocks and spare you the trouble."

"You're kind for offering, Commander, but I can manage him. If I change my mind, however, I'll certainly let you know." He smiled more genuinely then, sweet and soft and pretty. It might just be the desperate need for a distraction still talking, but Jader suddenly wanted badly to kiss him. "What provokes the High Commander to seek out a hiding spot?"

Jader drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I prefer not to think about it, but I'm sure in a few more minutes it will be all over the palace. I'm hiding from my sister," he said, and haltingly told Kamir all that had happened from the moment he'd first gone to see Lady Beacher and the others, right up to the moment he'd fled Sarrica's office.

He startled slightly when Kamir's hand covered his, fingers long and thin, calloused in the way of people who worked with their hands—jewelers, crafters, artists, and the like. "I'm so very sorry. That is quite the revelation to be dumped on you in such fashion. I have nothing but respect for the High King and High Consort, but I wish the matter could have been handled more quietly—privately. Are you expected to go to Benta now?"

"*Mother* Ocean, I certainly hope not. I am thirty years old, an Islander and citizen of the Empire. I don't speak a word of Bantan, and I have all the same reasons to dislike them as the rest of Harken. I'll keep them company while they're here and entertain them as they request, and then gladly see them to their ship when it's time for them to leave." He smiled, covered Kamir's hand with his free hand. "I just needed a moment to catch my breath. It's been a long, unhappy day and this was not the way I wanted to end it."

Something flashed in Kamir's eyes, hot and yearning, and then was gone—but it had been enough to make Jader's own breath catch. He'd been teased in his early days in the army for being oblivious when people flirted with him, and more for so seldom showing an interest in anyone. When he did show an interest, it burned hot, but he was just as content without the heat.

This was not the right time or place to realize his new interest in Kamir was more than he'd thought, but now the awareness was there, it was hard not to think about it. "Lord Kamir—" Jader broke off and cleared his throat.

"I-if y-you're g-going to look at me like that, Commander, I-I think you c-can leave off the 'lord'." Kamir's eyes widened, mouth hanging open slightly, like he couldn't believe his own bold words.

Jader might not often be amorously inclined, but when he wanted, he *wanted*. He surged out of his seat and knelt in front of Kamir's. Reaching up, he threaded his hand through the long, unusually loose fall of Kamir's heavy hair and pulled him into a kiss.

He was not remotely surprised that Kamir tasted as sweet as he looked, like he'd indulged in some piece of candy probably meant for his children. His lips were soft, his movements hesitant, like someone who hadn't been kissed much, or perhaps not for a very long time.

Which, given his contemptible ex-husband, wasn't remotely surprising.

Not that it mattered. Banishing his rambling thoughts, Jader climbed to his feet and dragged Kamir with him before bending to claim that sweet, earnest mouth again, humming soft approval at the arms that curled around his neck.

Kamir fit nicely in his arms, and Jader wouldn't mind finding out how much better they'd fit together naked in bed. As shy and quiet as Kamir seemed to be, he probably came alive once he was comfortable. Jader wanted to see his face fill with pleasure, wanted to hear every unguarded noise he made.

And he should probably stop before he used that dark, dusty room to find out and showed up looking messy and well-fucked to the dinner he was meant to be having with a woman he wished he'd never met.

Pulling back, he struggled for a moment to breathe properly, then said, "As much as I would love to continue this, I really should stop playing the coward and go dine with Lady Krista. I do not suppose, however, that we could arrange something for a later date?"

"I—" Kamir swallowed visibly. "I have to go into the city tomorrow. I have an appointment at half past midday. It should not take more than two hours. We could meet somewhere at the closing bell?"

Jader ran swiftly through his mental list of important appointments and such, but found nothing that couldn't be shuffled—one of the few perks of being High Commander was that everyone else waited for him, save the High King and Consort. "Yes, that can be done, barring an order from the

High Throne, of course, in which case I'll send word. Do you know The Faded Moon?

Kamir's eyes widened again. "Yes, I know it."

"Meet me there, then."

"As you wish."

Jader bent to kiss him one last time, wanting a pleasant memory to take with him to dinner. "I'll see you tomorrow, then, my lord."

"Tomorrow, Commander," Kamir replied, and Jader very much liked how breathless he sounded.

"Thank you for listening and helping me." Feeling a little more capable of facing dinner, Jader departed, looking back briefly to smile, further heartened by the sun-bright smile Kamir gave him in return.

CHAPTER FIVE

Even the fact he was going into the city to purchase a house was not enough to outstrip the single happy thought filling Kamir's head like a net filled with butterflies: he was hours away from an assignation with Jader.

He was going to have dinner, and much much more, with *Jader*. Well, he hoped much more. Those kisses, the heated looks Jader had given him, seemed to promise such.

It had taken him forever last night to settle down enough to fall sleep—even after Chiri and Chara had insisted on being brats about going to bed, even with the laborious process of touching up his hair. Money and time better spent elsewhere, but damn it, this was as close to making dreams a reality as he was ever going to get. He hadn't had a lover since his last attempt four years ago. Was it really so wrong he wanted to spoil himself a bit? That he wanted to look and feel as good as possible for dinner with the man he'd pined after for years?

No, no it wasn't. He was buying his family a good house, bringing himself that much closer to standing on his own once and for all, and then he was going to enjoy dinner and bed with Jader, and nothing and no one was going to ruin this day for him.

He sat at his dressing table to work on his hair, pleased to see he'd done a fine job touching up the purple dye. Hmm, something pretty, but easy to undo if Jader wanted to see him with his hair down. It had been down in that dusty old sitting room, but the room had been dark.

Settling on a simple twist, he secured it with a gold comb decorated with amber and amethyst butterflies that went nicely with his outfit of various shades of purple trimmed in dark gold. The last touch was a pair of dangling amethyst earrings—nothing half as amazing as the earrings Jader wore, but Velina had declared them suitable.

Gathering up a lightweight cloak to keep the dust of the city off his clothes, he finally headed out, kissing his children in parting and thanking Velina again for being willing to watch them more often lately. He would definitely use some of his saved money to see she received a generous

bonus. She'd stuck by him for a long time; he could never repay all she had done for him and the children, the friendship she had offered, but hopefully the money would be *something*.

Kamir hummed as he wended through the palace and outside. A stable hand approached him leading a handsome roan. "Lord Kamir?"

"Yes, thank you," Kamir said, pulling on his cloak and draping a wrap over his head and shoulders before accepting the reins of the horse. He gave the stable hand a couple of pin, swung into the saddle, and rode off.

He reached Shiar's office in less than an hour, even with the wait time at the gates. Shiar and Kamir's solicitor, Miliana, were already waiting. After they'd poured drinks and exchanged pleasantries, they sat down to go through the signing process.

The last time he'd bought a house, Theoren had taken care of everything, but Kamir had been curious and read through all the paperwork one night when Theoren was out. Later he'd bought some cheap used books with damaged and missing pages to learn as much as he could.

He was far from an expert on such matters, but at least familiar enough not to be so overwhelmed, though Harkenesten laws varied slightly from the rest of the empire.

Still, they finished in just under two hours, leaving him with roughly an hour and a half before he met Jader for dinner.

Shiar slid the key across the table and smiled as Kamir took it. "Congratulations, my lord. I'm so very happy for you."

"I'm eternally grateful," Kamir said. "Without you, I would not have this house for my children. I thought this would take much longer than it has, and I'm all the more grateful for that."

Waving the words aside, Shiar said, "I remember what it was like to be in your position. I am happy to have helped. Go and enjoy your new home. We'll have the paperwork filed and send copies on to you in the next few weeks. The courts can take forever sometimes, but at in the meantime you can start moving in." He walked Kamir to the door, hugged him briefly, and waved farewell as Kamir rode off.

Kamir rode through the city to his new home, and only the fact he didn't want to show up to dinner with a splotchy face kept him from crying as he

unlocked the gate and led the horse into the courtyard.

His. This house was his. The down payment and first six months of the mortgage had been paid. He'd depleted most of his savings doing it, but he had another four months of payments saved and plenty of time to replenish his accounts, and still funds set aside to finish the rest of the moving process.

Leaving the horse to wander the courtyard as it liked, since there was nowhere else it could go, Kamir unlocked the main entrance and stepped into his house—soon to be his *home*.

This time when he walked through the house, he allowed himself to daydream all the things he could do with it—in the near and distant future. There was so much *room*. The children would have plenty of space to play and grow. Velina would adore the kitchen, and have a whole room of her own, the yard for a garden, and she would love being in the city closer to her lovers.

Kamir could have a proper workshop and an office and a bedroom. Eventually he could hire painters to replace all the plain walls with more vibrant colors. The cellar had plenty of room for foodstuffs and wine and beer.

He finally came to a halt back in the main room, immediately past the entry hall. The whole back wall was made of alternating panels of clear and stained glass, casting light and colorful shadows across the dark wooden floor. On either side, shelves and cupboards were built into the walls, along with decoratively carved panels, one which was a door that led to more private parts of the house, and the other which was on the surface just a panel to match the other but was really a door to a secret room. Such rooms were meant for storage, or places to keep private collections, libraries, or a discreet office. But more often they were called love nests. Stories abounded in Harken culture of people inviting over lovers only for a spouse or some other figure to show up unexpectedly. Sometimes it was a servant who was the lover, other times a mortal enemy or a thief who snuck into the house and became trapped... and eventually found themselves coming back again and again for completely different reasons.

The first time they'd gone through the house, he hadn't bothered to examine the love nest. The papers said it was empty and had not been used

by the previous owner, and the owner before that had only used it for storage.

He pulled out the papers and rifled through them until he found the instructions. Going to the west door, he found the songbird with a berry clutched in its beak. He pressed on the berry, and with a soft click, the door released and gaped open slightly. Laughing softly, he pulled the door open and stepped into the love nest.

As stated, the room contained only dust. But he could see the bare traces of where a bed had stood so long the wood everywhere else had discolored but not that one spot. There were sconces still covered in colored glass to add intimate lighting.

Kamir stood in the middle of the room and laughed. He would have to see what he could do about recreating a classic love nest. The temptation was too great. It would probably never see use as such, but it would be a nice place to slip away for a few minutes when the children drove him mad or he needed privacy he wouldn't get even in his own bedroom.

He returned to the courtyard and fetched the horse that had found a patch of grass. The first thing Kamir would do when he had such funds again would be to repair the courtyard; it was more mud and grass than smooth stone.

For the present, he had an assignation. Humming a favorite travel song, he headed off.

The Faded Moon was a tavern in one of the more expensive districts of the city, almost as well known for the food served as for the wines offered, which nearly rivaled the imperial cellars. Kamir had visited it twice in his life, both occasions when his brother was visiting and their parents wanted to spoil him and show off. On the rare occasion his sister held still long enough to visit their parents, they took her to a different showy place.

Kamir had never been a good enough child to warrant taking somewhere special to show off. The last time his parents had been proud of him for anything, he'd gotten a perfect score on his final exams—almost one year precisely before he fell in love and ran away to get married. All he'd gotten for that perfect score was a new jacket.

His wedding celebration had been in a noisy, overcrowded tavern on their way back from the only temple that would marry them, the only

revelry from a group of traveling musicians who had, looking back, felt bad for the poor, scared boy in over his head.

If only he'd listened to his own doubts—but he'd been too in love with the idea of romance and running away and defying the family that hated him. Too lonely and infatuated and angry.

And he was probably being equally stupid now, entering into a dalliance with a man who would probably never see him as more, a man who clearly just needed a distraction from his own upturned life. But Kamir wasn't stubbornly blind and reckless this time. He knew what the reality was, he knew it would hurt when it ended, and most importantly, he knew he'd survive and be all right. He didn't need Jader to build a good life the way he'd once believed he needed Theoren; he was nearly there all on his own.

Reaching the Moon, he dismounted and handed the horse off to the woman in sharp green livery who came rushing up. "Would you see the horse is returned to the palace for me? Thank you." Climbing the steps up into the beautiful pink stone building that looked more like a home or a library than a tavern, he was greeted by another person in green who took his cloak and head wrap. "You are Lord Kamir?"

"Yes, I am."

The woman smiled and motioned toward the door with her head. "If you'll follow me, your companion is here and has arranged a table for you."

"Thank you."

The tavern had changed slightly since his previous visit, the furniture redone in dark, dusty reds that looked all the richer against the dark-stained wood. The lighting was low, giving the whole place an intimate, at home feel rather than being yet another unremarkable tavern for alcohol that ranged from alarming to magnificent in quality and sometimes came with passable food. Places like the Moon were appearing more and more in the larger cities, though they were still a long way off from being a common practice.

He had thought Jader would opt for a private dining room, of which the Moon had several, or one of the semi-private nooks that lined two walls of the dining hall.

Instead, Jader sat at a table almost right in the center. He stood as he saw Kamir and stepped forward to greet him, offering both his hands. Kamir

placed his own in them and hated his stupid face for turning hot as Jader dusted the barest kiss across his knuckles. "Good evening, my lord."

Kamir tried to quell his rapidly returning nerves and smiled in return. "I believe I gave you leave to abandon formalities, Commander."

Jader grinned. "Then you should do the same. Sit, please. I did not know what sort of wine you favored, or if you favored wine at all, so I requested a selection."

"I enjoy wine, as anyone who dwells in the palace for long must if they hope to last," Kamir said with a faint laugh. "I do admit a weakness for the sweeter wines, though it makes everyone around me despair."

"All wines have their place," Jader said, and turned his head slightly as he saw a server approaching them. Candlelight caught in his earrings, which were flat silver diamond-shaped frames with long strings of jewel beads hanging far enough down to nearly touch his shoulders. They shifted from white diamonds at the top, fading through gray to black diamonds at the bottom, all the more stark against his unusual complexion. The rest of his ears were filled with piercings as well—hoops along the edges, a silver bar that cut across the top curve, even a small diamond on the inner flap.

There was also a small diamond in his nose that Kamir hadn't noticed before.

The server set a narrow silver tray containing six small gold and silver wine cups, each containing a different wine. There was also soft bread and oil and vinegar to dip it in, and a plate of cheese, olives, and grapes.

Kamir smiled and lifted the first cup. "Thank you for the invitation to dine."

"Thank you for accepting."

"I hope this did not cause problems with your... guests?" Kamir asked, and regretted the question at the shadows that passed over Jader's face.

Jader took a sip of wine, and Kamir almost laughed at the look that put on his face. He'd heard the occasional rumor that Jader was a wine snob, but he could not imagine Jader being a snob about anything—it was one of the many, many things that drew him to Jader despite all the caution, anxiety, and doubts that held him back. Jader was loved, respected, and everyone who hated him sounded either jealous or resentful. He always seemed

friendly and good with people, but with none of the oily charm that put Kamir off so many people in Harkenesten. That Jader was a snob about anything seemed laughable.

Of course, he'd once had the same fawning thoughts about Theoren, and look where that had ended. It was hard to believe he was making that mistake again, but even more difficult to believe Jader had invited him to dinner simply for the pleasure of it.

Sipping the same one Jader had chosen from his own tray, he did not feel quite as enthusiastic, but it wasn't terrible.

Finally Jader said, "I spent most of the day with them, despite having roughly a thousand more important things to do. They were not happy I insisted on being elsewhere tonight, but they had little choice, especially since I think they are pushing to take me to Benta."

Kamir wanted to hug him, the way he hugged Chiri and Chara when they had nightmares or got sick. "You're the High Commander, though. You cannot simply gallivant off—and to Benta no less."

Jader nodded unhappily and took a sip of a different wine. "That was what I said, and Sarrica does not seem pleased. But what the empire needs prevails over what any of us wants. I am still hoping it will not come to pass. You should try the pale pink wine there."

"What? Oh." Kamir dutifully picked up the wine and tried a sip, smiling at the sweet, faintly flowery taste that filled his mouth. "This is delicious."

"That's a Gaulden Crown Wine, called Crown in honor of the princess who funded the women responsible for the original winery, who crafted that specific wine to the princess's tastes. It's not as famous as some other wines from Gaulden, but it's nothing to scoff at either."

Kamir took another sip and smiled. "I think our High Commander might have a weakness for wine."

Jader laughed. "That's a polite way to put it. I was always something of a family disgrace for not preferring to drink nectar or settle for beer, which is the only acceptable substitute. Wine is a Mainlander failing."

"Aren't Mainlanders one big failing as a whole?" Kamir asked.

"Many Islanders would say yes." Jader winked. "I like to go on a person by person basis."

Kamir hoped he didn't look like a hopelessly infatuated halfwit. He had expected a private dinner just long enough to be polite followed by an evening largely spent naked in bed—and had been plenty happy with that.

Instead, this was feeling more and more like a courtship. Anyone else there who recognized them would waste no time in scurrying back to be the first to spread the gossip: Commander Jader had been seen dining with the Tesly embarrassment—what in the Pantheon would have forced the poor Commander to do that?

He had no doubt they'd come up with plenty of guesses, each more awful than the last. None of them would be right, and however much he hated gossip and rumors, he'd rather listen to them all be horribly wrong and never know the truth.

Never know what it was like to be trusted and confided in, or to be kissed so suddenly, breathlessly, in a dark and dusty room where they never should have crossed paths. They'd never know that Jader had been the one to kiss him, the one to ask him to dinner, without any reason at all but want.

Let the palace have their rumors.

"Velina talks about you to anyone who will hold still long enough, and she's always writing letters home. The Islands must love you or hate you by this point."

"Oh, I'm sure it's hate," Jader said with a bright laugh. "I was a troublemaker from the day I washed up on the beach. My mother sends me letters sometimes, when she can find the time to have someone write them for her. I generally get letters twenty pages long four to six times a year. I feel bad for the people who sit there and write and write and write while she rambles, though I love the letters. Most of my family still doesn't understand why I wanted to come here, and why I'm doing something as stupid as leading an army." He shrugged, smiled softly. "But they're my family. They put up with me."

Kamir was envious, so envious it hurt for a moment. "They sound like a good family to have." He finished off the rose-colored wine and tried the dark violet one. He hated it exactly as much as he'd expected, a hate that had gotten him sighs of disappointment and sneering, tittering giggles from his family and the other courtiers.

Jader grinned and reached out, took the dark wine from it and swapped it with his own rose. "No point in wasting a good Coresta on making you miserable."

"That does seem a shame." Kamir wanted to kiss him. Strip him and bed him and keep him. He was kind and friendly and so easy about everything, like it really didn't matter that Kamir hated Coresta wine. Why couldn't his parents be like that? His siblings? Sometimes he understood why his parents were so unforgiving. It was his siblings who'd always left him the most baffled and hurt. When they were little they'd gotten along, at least reasonably well. But as they got older, his siblings turned more and more into his parents, and the only two people who had once stood with him, played with him and shared sweets and toys, had turned into strangers. Kamir had never understood it, and the one time he'd tried to ask, his sister had said only that they'd grown up while he had not, and she didn't have time to waste on a perpetual child. Sometimes he wondered if maybe he wasn't the only one his parents had broken. Mostly he tried not to think about it at all. "Thank you."

Please, please let Jader be as wonderful as he seemed. Let Kamir not be making yet another stupid mistake. Why could he be so confident about his clocks and watches, so capable of buying houses and making budgets and other such tasks, but he couldn't go out for a simple dinner with a handsome man without his mind turning against him?

"This is my favorite wine, so don't think I'm being gracious or anything." Jader winked and bit into an olive.

He was doing *nothing* to curb Kamir's need to kiss him.

Jader finished the olive and chased it with a sip of wine, then murmured, "If you keep looking at me like that, we're not going to make it all the way through our meal and this is the first time I've enjoyed going to dinner for months."

He made flirting seem so easy, but every time Kamir tried, he felt hopelessly awkward and silly. "You are the one who keeps provoking the way I look at you, so if you want me to stop, you must cease encouraging it."

Oh, awkward and silly or not, that got him a look that *burned*. Maybe he wasn't awful at flirting after all. "Sound reasoning, but I enjoy the looks too

much to make them stop, so I suppose I'll simply have to suffer." Jader popped a grape in his mouth.

Kamir looked away before he did something unseemly. The whole evening felt like a dream, and the last thing he wanted to do was hurry it along. He reached out and took a piece of bread, catching a stray drop of oil before it hit the table and licking it from his finger before eating the bread. He glanced up—and swallowed. "Now you need to stop with those sorts of looks."

"I believe you have only yourself to blame," Jader replied, and finished his wine.

Another half hour or so passed before they'd finished the first course. Servers whisked it all away and set down the second course: a fragrant, spicy soup that made Kamir's eyes water just smelling it. There was nothing better than spicy food.

From the way he devoured it, Jader seemed to agree, which just made Kamir happier. His family was of mixed opinions, and Theoren had despised spicy food. His children couldn't handle it yet, save in incremental amounts, but Chara at least was already showing signs of tending toward it as he got older.

"So I'm certain you get this question all the time, but tell me why an Islander decided to be High Commander of the Imperial Army."

Oh, he did love when he got that pleased look, like he'd done something unexpected and especially good. "Most ask how I managed to get it, not why I wanted it. Shemal and I share a restlessness that most Islanders look down on, which is hilarious given that the rest of the world thinks all Islanders are aimless and incapable of staying in one place. There aren't many good options for Islanders on the Mainland; most jobs would have had me as stuck in place as the Islands. That left three options: join a merchant company, join the army, or take up piracy or some other form of criminal activity. His Grace fell into pirating. I decided on the general army because they're moderately kinder and more fair to Islanders than the mercenary bands. I was fortunate to fall under the command of someone supportive of Islanders, who stood up for me even when my comrades and other officers gave me trouble. That eventually led me to a posting that brought me to the attention of Lesto, who offered me the very last job I ever expected." He winked. "And here I am."

"And here you are," Kamir echoed, desperately trying to rein himself in before he fell further into a pit of trouble he'd probably never climb out of. "Thank you again for spending time chatting with my children, by the way. They love Velina, and all her stories of home. Sometimes I worry I'll wake up to find a note informing me they've run away to dive for pearls and swim with fish." He laughed a bit sourly. "Not the worst reason to run away."

"I would imagine that if they wanted to visit the Islands, they'd be very insistent on taking along their much adored father. As close a friend as Velina clearly is, I'm sure you'll visit eventually."

Kamir laughed more genuinely then. "I would be completely out of my depth, but I'm certain Chiri and Chara would love it. Especially since a certain commander said he would teach them how to dive."

"I would gladly do so," Jader said. "I miss diving and swimming. But you'll probably go to the Islands long before I find any sort of free time. I was lucky enough to manage this." He took another sip of wine. "If you do travel to the Islands, definitely go in the early summer. That's when the Festival of Children takes place. That was one of the hardest things to get used to in Harken, the way children are not all about everywhere, nearly running amuck, eating and sleeping wherever they happen to be at the time. I barely see children around the palace, and only in certain parts of the city on the rare occasion I'm there. You don't see a lot of elders, either. I understand the cultural differences better now, but someday it's still baffling." Jader traced the rim of his glass with one finger. "Midsummer is a good time to go as well. That's when we have the Celebration of Mothers. All mothers are treated with respect, so you'd welcome you."

"I'm not a mother though," Kamir replied, head tilting.

Jader sipped more wine then leaned back in his seat. "Mother is a much more complicated term in Islander, since it's always mothers who are in charge. But where on the Mainland the word is linked to gender, on the Islands it's not. You *are* a mother in a sense that you're a child-bearer and a caretaker and the head of your household." He smiled. "If you were an Islander, I also think you would be in charge of your clan. It would suit you. I hope I am explaining well. It can be difficult, when Mainlanders think of the words in such a different way than us. They can be hard to translate. Here, you're a father, but back home, if an Islander called you a father instead of a mother, it would be highly insulting—the same level of insulting

as misgendering someone the way Triumvirate and some Bentan citizens are always doing."

"I think I understand," Kamir said, heart trip-trapping. "That's... I can see it would be quite the honor, and I *am* honored." If Jader got any sweeter or more endearing, Kamir was going to lose all ability to resist acting stupid or getting more hopelessly enamored of him than he already was.

Thankfully, conversation then shifted to Harken festivals, especially a smaller, local one taking place in a few months that always left most of the city drunk for three days and hungover for six. Kamir didn't even really know what it was for, past ostensibly celebrating the anniversary of some victory over a place that didn't even exist anymore. Mostly it just seemed to be an excuse for half the palace to go slumming.

By the time they got to the last course, as delicious as the food was, they were barely paying it attention anymore. As the servers took away the last of the dishes, Jader rose and offered a hand. "Shall we?"

"We haven't paid."

Jader waved his other hand in the air. "I arranged and paid for everything ahead of time." When Kamir frowned, he added, "Please, you are the one indulging me. The least I can do is pay for my brattiness."

The man was a fool if he thought he was being *bratty*. Kamir had four relatives and two children who could teach him all the myriad meanings of that word. But he only nodded slightly and finally took Jader's hand—and drew a sharp breath as Jader reeled him in close and brushed the barest kiss across his mouth.

"Shall we go enjoy the rest of our night?" Jader asked softly.

Kamir's damned nerves took that moment to come rushing back, but he stubbornly ignored them and nodded. "Lead the way."

Jader held fast to his hand the whole time, which did nothing to ease the ache in Kamir's chest or the nerves fluttering through. Theoren had never held his hand. He'd been more than happy to get his hands on Kamir when they were alone—or rather, happy to have Kamir touch him—but in public he'd always kept slightly apart. Looking back, it was just one of many warning signs.

He had expected Jader to be much more discreet and quiet, but instead it was like Jader didn't know how to carry out a discreet affair—or simply did not care about discretion... Which, now he was thinking properly, made sense. He was an Islander through and through, and they were not nearly so strict and ridiculous about such matters.

So this really was an affair, a single night of fun, no matter how much it felt like a courtship. He hadn't realized just how much he'd stupidly let himself hope until, as usual, reality came crashing back down on his head.

Still, an assignation was what he'd expected from the evening to begin with. There was no reason not to continue on as he'd meant all along. Probably for the better, too, given the upheaval in his life at present.

He touched his jacket where he could feel the small flask tucked into a hidden pocket. He'd been drinking astiri tea from the moment Jader has asked him to dinner, but he'd brought some with him as well, cold and stale but still effective. As much as he would love to have more children someday, he would prefer to control the matter.

And he could only imagine how displeased Jader would be—and how eager Kamir's family would be to manipulate the situation.

They didn't travel far, just out a back door and across a covered walkway framed on either side with rose-covered trellises, into a building that smelled of roses and honeysuckle and lingering traces of expensive perfumes.

Still holding fast to his hand, Jader led him up a short flight of stairs and down the hall to a purple-painted door. Unlocking it with a key he pulled from his jacket, he pushed the door open and dragged Kamir inside. The door closed and locked with soft, muted clicks, and was followed by the rattle-clink of Jader dropping the key on the nearby bureau.

"What is this place?" Kamir asked, but almost lost interest in the answer as Jader undid the silver buttons on his short black jacket, baring a clinging, shimmery white shirt that almost faded into his skin. Kamir had always felt small, but even he had more meat on his bones than the tall, spindly Jader. Though he still had no doubt that Jader had all the strength and skill required for his position.

Jader reached back and undid the clasps on the shirt, pulled it off and cast it to the floor with his jacket. He removed his earrings and shoes, then

prowled toward Kamir. "A place I've used before for such things, though not in a long time and never with such anticipation. It's called the House of Endless Color."

"I see," Kamir replied right before Jader swept him up and kissed him. Oh, yes, there was more strength in that bony body than he'd remembered. But he hadn't forgotten even a little bit how nice it felt to press up against Jader and wrap arms around him like that would somehow keep Jader close to him forever.

Jader tasted like the coffee and brandy they'd finished their meal with, warm and heady, his hands almost hot as he pushed Kamir to the bed and somehow slipped hands beneath all the layers of his clothes. Kamir whined when the hands withdrew but consoled himself by spanning his own hands along Jader's chest, dazzled by the colorful spray of flowers inked across it. "These are beautiful."

"Hibiscus, the flower of the Islands."

"This must have hurt. And taken hours."

"Yes. Days, actually. But I'm vain and like pretty things, especially pretty things on me," Jader said with a grin. "Though right now the only pretty I care about is you." He made swift work of the buttons of Kamir's jacket and shirt, lifting him up just long enough to strip the clothes completely off and cast them aside. He knelt and removed Kamir's shoes, then his stockings and breeches. Kamir sat up, but forgot what he'd meant to say or do as Jader kissed the top of his foot, then his calf before standing and once more capturing his mouth for a long, deep kiss that left Kamir hungry and aching.

"I like these," Jader murmured against his mouth, nibbling playfully along his jaw and neck as he cupped Kamir through the fine silk panties he'd chosen to wear. His fingers rubbed and teased and pressed at the damp silk.

Kamir smiled and did some kissing of his own, nerves fading a bit more at the hard to miss the *interest* pressing against him. He spread his legs wider, curved his hands around and down, pushing beneath the fabric of Jader's clingy black drawers to cup his ass.

That move was certainly approved of, if the sharp, biting kiss was anything to go by.

Jader drew back and shifted them properly onto the bed, then discarded the last of their clothes, his fingers dancing lightly over Kamir's bared chest, eyes burning as the nipples firmed under his touch. He bent his head, mouth hovering. "May I?"

"Do, please," Kamir said hoarsely, hand skimming along whatever of Jader's body he could reach, lingering on his ass again, though he almost forgot what he was doing as Jader proved to possess skill and enthusiasm when it came to chests.

The last time Kamir had let someone that close to him, the idiot had been overeager and selfish, and reminded him far too much of Theoren in that regard—and Pantheon, it had taken Kamir far too long to realize he was not the problem in the bedroom. By that point, he'd figured out Theoren was the source of a lot of problems.

Jader shifted, which meant his ass was now out of reach, but Kamir's thoughts spun away as Jader slowly worked his way down Kamir's body, kissing softly in one spot, teeth nipping in another, tongue returning to drag over the marks before he resumed his downward trail.

He wrapped his arms around Kamir's thighs, paused to look up with hot, hungry eyes that made Kamir shiver—and then he lowered his head and put his lips and tongue where no one had ever bothered to before. Kamir pressed the back of his hand to his mouth to cut off the surprised, needy wail that wanted out.

But the shuddering was beyond his control, and eventually the noises got the better of him too, as Jader sucked and rubbed at his clit before pushing his tongue inside Kamir's wet heat. Kamir clung to the sheets with one hand, fingers running over Jader's too-short hair a couple of times before he gave up and simply held fast to the bedding with both hands, panting and gasping and finally moaning Jader's name as a climax shuddered through him.

Jader rose up and sat back on his heels, and Kamir shuddered and shivered again to see him sweaty and disheveled, lips swollen, his chin and throat wet from his efforts. Kamir got his limbs working again and rose to his own knees, reaching up with one hand to draw Jader into a kiss, the other sliding down to wrap around his cock.

He moaned at tasting himself in Jader's mouth, shivered at the calloused hands that ran over his body before Jader loosely wrapped arms around him. Kamir drew back slightly. "What would you like from me?"

"Anything," Jader said, even as his hips moved to work his cock in Kamir's fist.

Kamir swallowed. Oh, to have days enough for every thought in his head. He nibbled on Jader's lips. "I can't decide if I want to suck you or be fucked more."

Jader moaned, cock twitching in Kamir's fingers. "Both would be magnificent, but I think I'm slightly more inclined to fuck you."

"Then do it," Kamir whispered, refusing to let his nervousness return. He knew what it was like to be fucked by a selfish husband, an impatient stranger, and by one bold woman passing the time while they waited in a travel station. He wanted to know what it was like to be fucked by someone he cared about, and who at least cared enough to see to Kamir's pleasure as much as his own. Someone who was in it for the mutual pleasure and fun.

Pushing him back gently on the bedding, Jader kissed him again, then pressed another to the space between his breasts, which seemed somehow more intimate than some of the other things he'd done. No, it felt *affectionate*, and that was infinitely worse because Kamir knew it wasn't, he just wished.

Fingers teased and pressed gently, but Jader's enthusiasm and need had rekindled his own. "I think your mouth more than did the job of getting me ready, Commander. Let's see what else you can do."

That got him one of those sharp, bitey kisses, then Jader was drawing back and lining up his cock. Kamir moaned, head falling back as Jader worked himself in slowly—too slowly. Kamir might not have always enjoyed the process, but he *knew* the process. Kamir rolled his hips, taking Jader deeper, almost giddy at the noises that earned him. He drew Jader in close, kissed him wet and messy, and clung to those thin but strong shoulders as Jader finally began to fuck him.

He thought it would be over in moments, but instead Jader kept up a steady, deep and driving pace, mouth moving Kamir's skin, lingering to suck at his throat and lap the mark with his tongue. Only when Kamir screamed and came a second time did Jader draw back and pound into him

with a last few thrusts before sinking in deep and clinging tightly to Kamir as he came.

They collapsed in a sweaty tangle on top of the bed sheets, lethargy washing over Kamir in the wake of such a fine finish to a wonderfully tumultuous day. There were going to be a hundred miserable days in his near future; it would be nice to have this memory to hold onto throughout.

Jader pulled away after a few minutes, and Kamir's stomach clenched as he walked to his clothes—and continued past them to the wash basin in the corner. Resignation turned to fluttering warmth as Kamir watched Jader bring back a warm, damp rag. Jader cleaned Kamir up gently, drawing away with a soft kiss. He cleaned himself at the basin and returned to the bed, tugging the blankets back and settling them in place as he climbed in.

Kamir's heart was going to pop.

"What time do you need to be home?" Jader asked around a yawn, sliding up close, chest pressed to Kamir's back, one arm wrapping around him as he nuzzled Kamir's hair.

"I said I'd return late in the morning."

"Jealous," Jader replied sleepily. "I'll probably be hunted down and dragged away to resolve some crisis well before that. So if I'm gone when you wake up, that's why."

Kamir smiled. "I understand. Thank you for tonight."

Jader snorted softly, but his reply was mumbled and lost as he finally succumbed to sleep.

Once he was certain Jader would stay asleep, Kamir gingerly pulled free and climbed out of bed. He pissed in the chamber pot and washed up, then fetched his flask and quickly drank the astiri tea. That taken care of, he reclaimed his warm spot in bed, smiling happily into sleep as Jader immediately wrapped around him again.

CHAPTER SIX

"What now?" Jader asked with a sigh, nearly pitching the cup of wine he'd just picked up across the room. It was too good a wine to waste, however, so he set the cup down again. Honestly, all he wanted was one hour to enjoy a cup of wine and memories of his night with Kamir. Which had been even more wonderful and engaging and satisfying than he'd hoped—and his hopes had been very high. He was so rarely interested in anyone, he could not remember the last time he'd enjoyed himself so much he lingered over the night.

Or resented people interrupting him.

Axis looked apologetic as he said, "The High Consort has sent for you."

Which meant Jader was definitely going to be sent to Benta to make nice with the family he wished he'd never met. If they'd opted not to send him, nobody would be bothering him—least of all the man in charge of political maneuverings. So much for Sarrica saying that would never happen. Mother Ocean drown them all.

"I guess I'd better go, then." Jader sighed again. "Enjoy my lunch if you want. I doubt I'll be coming back here any time soon."

"Are they really going to send you up north? For how long?"

Jader shrugged as he stood and strapped his sword belt in place. "Hopefully only a matter of weeks, at worst months, though who I'm going to get to manage this place in my absence, I don't know. Guess I'll figure that out soon. If I don't see you again, have a good day, Axis. I'm sorry you're going to have to shuffle my entire schedule again."

"It's what I'm paid to do," Axis said with a laugh, and sorted through Jader's desk, lifting a hand to bid him farewell.

Walking through the halls, ignoring everyone around him, Jader quietly tried to quell the panic that was bubbling up. He didn't speak Bantan; his knowledge of Bantan culture was sufficient to go to war with the motherfuckers and avoid insulting guests. And however much of a bottom feeder it made him, he did not care about his "family" past maybe finally having an answer to a question that, quite frankly, he'd stopped asking a

long time ago. He'd spent years as a child crying and wondering and feeling hopelessly lost. But it was hard to cling to something he did not remember—would likely never remember.

Giving up, he turned his mind to distraction instead, which predictably led to one thought: Kamir.

Whenever he stopped focusing on work or Lady Krista, it was Kamir's face that rose up. His shy smiles, the way he laughed like he didn't do it enough, his hesitant flirting and how pleased he'd looked when he realized it had worked. How surprised he'd seemed by the things they'd done in bed—and against the wall before Jader had finally been forced to leave the morning after their dinner.

Usually that was where Jader's interest would have ended. Normally his interest waned after a night of fun. He was too busy as High Commander to have the time to devote to a relationship.

But Kamir was sweet, and clearly had been neglected, mistreated, and overlooked his whole life. Jader wasn't going to be one more person on a long list who treated Kamir like a thing to be used. He was an ass, but he tried not to be completely reprehensible.

So he'd put more effort into the evening than he usually would, and had hoped that making a show of it would do something to bolster Kamir and his standing in the High Court. Dirty Islander Jader might be, but nobody would refuse an invitation to dine with him, or be anything but jealous and curious of those who were.

Still, that should have been the end of the matter. There was no reason whatsoever he should be thinking about doing it again. He was the last person anyone with sense would choose to get involved with anyway, given he never knew where he would be in the next five minutes. He'd watched Lesto fail over and over again in his time as High Commander.

Thoughts of Benta came crashing back to the fore as he reached Allen's office. The antechamber was practically empty, which was unusual for that time of day. When he stepped into the office itself, Myra and a couple of undersecretaries were busily working, but instead of sitting at his own desk, Allen was over in the sitting area—with platters of food and carafes of wine. He should have known Allen would be prepared. Even being raised to

be High King often left Sarrica in the dust when it came to Allen and running the empire.

He bowed as he reached Allen. "Your Majesty."

"High Commander," Allen said, looking amused at the formality. "Sit. Stop being stubborn."

"I'm paid to be stubborn," Jader groused. "I'm not paid to make useless trips to Benta to spend time with people I don't care about."

Allen chuckled and poured them both wine—a Zamar, by the tart smell and the fresh-spilled-blood color. "You would be surprised how accurately that describes most diplomatic trips." He handed Jader a cup and sat back in his chair holding another. "But for what it's worth, we don't send you lightly or simply to sit around holding stilted conversations through silver tongues."

Faint curiosity tugged at Jader, but unhappiness still trumped it. "I'm fairly certain that's what all my conversations will be regardless."

"I'm sending the finest silver tongue for Bentan in the empire with you, and recalling her from her current duties has been no easy task."

Jader's mouth tipped up at one corner. "I thought you were the finest Bentan silver tongue in the empire."

"I think being High Consort makes people think so," Allen replied with a small laugh. "She will be arriving at the end of the week, and right now it's looking as though you will be setting sail for Benta at the beginning of next month. The Bentans wanted to return sooner, but there was no way that could be managed alongside recalling Lady Seredia, securing a suitable secretary to accompany you, and all that you must do to ready the palace and army for your absence. Which reminds me: the imperial army is not allowed to enter Bentan territory. That was part of the peace negotiations. We've obtained special dispensation for you, but no one else can go. That being said, the mercenaries are not part of the army and were not part of the agreement. So you will be taking twenty-five mercenaries with you as escort and protection. Do you have a preference on which mercenary group will provide them?"

Jader frowned, his brow drawing down. Unlike Lesto and a great many other soldiers, he'd never served with a mercenary group. Many people were fostered with mercenaries as youths, usually between the ages of five

and ten, and raised within the chosen mercenary group. The practice made for excellent lifelong soldiers and forged ties of loyalty and familiarity that little other training could. Rene, Lesto's brother, had been fostered at the age of five to his uncle's group before transferring when he was older to the Three-headed Dragons.

But Jader had struggled enough just making his way through the imperial army. He hadn't been willing to deal with the mercenaries, most of which were known to treat Islanders poorly—even brutally.

"Not Shadow Bell or Penance Gate." If he could get rid of Shadow Bell, he gladly would. As useful as they were, sometimes their methods were closer to crossing unforgivable lines than Jader preferred—but they hadn't yet done anything to give him grounds for disbanding them. Penance Gate was another matter: brutal in their methods, but not unreasonably so, and damned good at what they did. There was very little they could not accomplish, and there were many things they were better at than anyone else. But they were also terrifying to a lot of people, in their spiked armor and blood red tunics, so not an ideal group to act as his honor guard.

Allen laughed. "Certainly not. I ask because I received a request this morning. Captain Tsarana tel Mendi was waiting for me before the offices even opened and petitioned handsomely to serve as your escort."

"Shattered Wind *asked* to be my escort?" Jader had no idea what to say to that, or even to think.

Mercenary groups varied greatly in size, depending on their purpose. Some, like Penance Gate and Shadow Bell, numbered in the thousands. Most, like Winter Dark and Howl of the End, numbered in the hundreds. Seven had less than a hundred members; of those, three had less than fifty. They were meant for covert matters, or problems in areas where a large force would do more harm than good.

Shattered Wind had just thirty-eight members, and had only recently returned from being loaned out to an ally to help find and rescue some kidnapped nobles in the territory of a mutual enemy—Trea Mencee, specifically.

Jader kept abreast of their activities the same he did all the mercenaries, but he had no special relationship with any of them. Why in the world

would Shattered Wind step forward to volunteer themselves for something even Jader had only just heard about?

"Rumors have been circling," Allen replied. "Captain tel Mendi approached me this morning on the hopes the rumors were true and no one had yet been picked for the duty. I told him the decision was yours and you'd be deciding this week, and his petition would be mentioned to you. He seemed eager and sincere. Tel Mendi is an old Rilien name. I believe they held a title once, but lost it when they decided to try assassinating a queen." Allen's mouth quirked. "I have no doubt Captain tel Mendi is hoping this will help to restore some of his family's honor, but I sense that was an ancillary perk. Something else motivates Captain tel Mendi and his soldiers, but I could not work out what."

"I'll figure it out," Jader replied. Probably by asking tel Mendi directly, a method that rarely occurred to people like Allen. "I'll speak with him today, but barring some unpleasant revelation, they'll work as well as anyone else."

Allen nodded. "Very well." He picked up a pen and stack of papers on the edge of the table and made a note. "Ostensibly you will be going to visit your lost family, but the truth of the matter is that von Terring has been closed off from most of the world for more than two decades. Lady Krista does what she can, but with her mother still alive and far from mentally incapable, there is not much she can do. If you can convince Lady von Terring to stop hiding, or to cede the title to her daughter, you will be doing Benta an enormous favor." Allen smiled his High Consort smile. "Which will put them in our debt."

"Which is exactly where you like everyone," Jader said dryly. "Here I am struggling with an emotionally and mentally exhausting family reunion, and you want to use it wheedle something out of King Desmond."

Spreading his hands in acknowledgement and apology, Allen said, "Essentially."

Jader sighed. "I'm no politician, and this sounds like it requires someone of your acumen."

"You are the long lost favorite child of a heartbroken old woman. You already have an edge I could never hope to equal. You'll be fine, and your silver tongue, Lady Seredia, finds life in Harkenesten relaxing, so she will

have no trouble assisting you in negotiating the more delicate parts of your visit."

"Relaxing?" Jader shuddered. "I'm officially terrified of this woman."

"Her father is Tricemorien nobility and her mother ran away from Cartha. You should be."

Jader laughed. "Sounds like the perfect ally to have in Benta while facing a stubborn duchess I don't remember, and all the other Bentan nobles I'll no doubt meet." And in that completely civilian setting he would be the only one without a title. Normally that didn't bother him, even if he was long past tired of the court's snide comments about his 'commoner' status, but the Bentans already thought less of him—and pitied him—for thinking of himself as an Islander. To be Islander, military, and commoner when he should be their noble, civilian son? Lady Krista was doing such a poor job of hiding her disappointment and offense, he could only imagine how much more scathing Her Grace was going to be.

The more he thought about the trip, the more he hated it.

Allen's mouth quirked. "All of which brings me to the last matter that needs addressing, but Sarrica wanted to be here for that, so it will have to wait." Jader's brows rose, but Allen only kept smiling in that *I have a secret* way of his and refilled their cups. "So we'll discuss another matter: I dislike not being well ahead of the court on gossip, Commander, so tell me true what is going on between you and Lord Kamir."

"Nothing," Jader said. "I expected the rest of the court to stick their faces into my personal life, but not you. Since when do you care who I bed?"

"Lord Kamir isn't the sort of person you typically choose," Allen said in that slow, thoughtful way of his, face giving nothing away but his eyes seeing more than anyone ever wanted. "That's why I wanted to know. If it was just one of your usual one-night affairs, he'll be left in peace. But if you are more serious about him, then once you're gone, I fear the High Court will come down on him—not to mention his family and that ex-husband of his."

Jader stifled a sigh. "I thought spending time with me would *help* him, not hurt. *Mother* Ocean, this is why I shouldn't be trusted with politics and court games. I am sorry. I did not mean to bring him and his children further

harm; I know he's already got plenty of that on his table. Is he all right? Are the children well?"

"Yes, I believe so, though trouble continues to... what is that apt phrase you use so often? Circle like a shark that's tasted blood in the water?" Allen's eyes narrowed like he was recalling something unpleasant, and Jader recalled a snippet of gossip about how Theoren had drawn Allen's ire the previous day. He'd been curious, but too busy to ask for more details about the matter.

"I'm assuming from your face that Master Theoren continues to charm his way through the High Court. What is he even doing here?"

"Money," Allen replied. "Court gossip is quite brisk, but the truth was easy enough to uncover. He won't last much longer, especially once Sarrica finds out about his poor choice of words when we spoke briefly in the banquet hall the other day."

Jader's brows shot up. "What in the world would a cretin like that have to say to you?"

"He got over confident and implied in the course of a clumsy discussion of tax law that Sarrica married me solely for my pretty face. I ignored him, but he won't be that lucky should Sarrica find out." And though he tried, the one thing Allen was not good at hiding was how much he loved Sarrica and the fuss that Sarrica constantly made about him.

It reminded Jader of how surprised Kamir had been over the slightest things—the long, elaborate dinner, the way Jader ate him out in bed later, even all the kisses had seemed to astonish Kamir. Just how in the Penance Realms had everyone else treated him that being treated well was a surprise?

Allen's chuckles recalled him. "What thoughts pulled you away from me?"

"Nothing," Jader said gruffly. "What were we discussing?"

Allen's blue eyes gleamed, but he was polite enough not to press the matter. "Lord Kamir. If you are courting him your absence will leave him at the mercy of the court. I wanted to know if you wanted me to look out for him while you were gone. He has seldom crossed my path, and always at a distance, but he's always struck me as kind and sincere. His family is unpleasant, but they have a good lineage and impressive wealth. They've

only held the Tesly title for a few generations, but the Norring family was wealthy and well-known in Tricemore long before they became nobility."

"Most of their wealth is blood money," Jader said flatly. "I want nothing to do with his family. As to Lord Kamir himself..." He sighed and gave up. The fact he was thinking this hard about the matter was all the proof needed to say that Kamir was not as simple as a one-night affair. What he was, Jader didn't know, but all day Kamir had filled his thoughts, distracted him from the five hundred things he should have been focusing on. He'd made a production of their evening to spoil and help a sweet, lonely man, but had enjoyed the evening more than he could remember enjoying anything else for a long time. "I don't know. I enjoyed his company. I haven't had time or opportunity to ponder the matter further. I certainly am not considering marriage or courting. I would appreciate all the same if you'd keep watch over him. I don't want him hurt because I'm a fool who doesn't know how to play all these intricate games. I'd be in your debt, Majesty."

Making a dismissive noise, Allen picked up a bit of pastry stuffed with cheese and spinach and bit into it. "You're my friend, or so I like to think, though we're not as close as you are to Sarrica and Lesto."

Jader smiled. "Of course we're friends—even when you're being nosy and scheming."

Allen grinned a little then and finished his pastry, chasing it with more wine. "Lord Kamir would be a good match for you."

"I think you're getting ahead of yourself," Jader said. "I know you can't help it, but you could *try* to stay out of it."

Allen shrugged. "I'll try."

Jader didn't roll his eyes, but only barely.

Thankfully, before Allen could press further, the door flew open and Sarrica blew into the room like a hurricane. Jader had rarely seen him enter a room any other way—and Lesto wasn't much different, though he'd calmed slightly since resigning from the military. He stopped at Myra's desk and immediately started rattling off requests and questions, interspersed between a rant about whatever meeting he'd just come out of.

On the other side of the table, Allen lit up like a struck match. "You're late."

Sarrica immediately forgot about his conversation with Myra. He strode over to Allen and bent to kiss him. "Apologies. Some halfwits decided they were in the mood to lose a thousand crowns apiece today."

Jader winced.

"Remind me to ask later," Allen replied. "For now, sit down so we can share the news."

"I'm not sure I want to hear the news," Jader said, and poured himself more wine, drinking more at once than was judicious because he had the feeling he was going to need the buffer. "What have you done?"

Sarrica helped himself to wine, reclined back in his seat, and said, "It's not public knowledge yet, and won't be for some time—not that it'll stop everyone from knowing anyway—but the Marquis of Kyrmine and his family have defected to Demergo. We've been trying to change their minds for some time, but they've made their decision. We have seized their holdings, minus the money and belongings they were permitted to retain. That leaves us with a powerful swath of land unattended, and while there are plenty of worthy candidates to hand it to, under the circumstances, it seems best to give it to you."

Jader groaned. "You cannot be serious."

"You were always going to get a title and you know it," Sarrica said, rolling his eyes. "Stop acting like a child."

"I know nothing—"

"You lead my army, you can handle one little estate," Sarrica snapped. "From what I understand, it practically runs itself anyway. It would have to if that worthless Marquis and his family were too busy betraying me and the empire this whole time to run it properly."

Allen briefly cast Sarrica an amused look but said only, "I know you have more than enough to deal with right now, Commander, but it would be a good fit for you. Are you familiar with Kyrmine?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"It's only a few generations old, created when Kyrminara was split in two by a civil war—"

Sarrica nudged Allen's ankle. "History lesson later."

Flushing slightly, Allen continued. "It's a coastal property, a few days' travel southeast. You probably know Nara's Point."

"Oh, that place." Jader's interest piqued despite himself. Nara's Point was beautiful. He'd only been once, when he was much younger and put on duty at the light tower there, years before he'd risen enough in rank to be visible to the terrifying High Commander. It could be a dangerous area for ships, and the light tower was crucial to keeping the number of wrecks to a minimum. "I never bothered to learn who was responsible for it, too young the one time I was there, and too busy since."

"It falls under control of Kyrmine, which makes the title all the more a fit for you," Sarrica said.

Allen added, "They also do quite a brisk business in fishing, trade, and rice." He cast Jader a sly look. "Always pay their taxes correctly and on time—often ahead of time."

Jader snorted. "That was before the Marquis was also High Commander. You'd better hope this staff I've never met is as good as promised because you'll get no such efficiency out of me." He narrowed his eyes as the discussion of Kamir, and everything Allen had said, came back. "You're a conniving, scheming brat."

"The finest in Harken," Sarrica said, and Allen didn't bother to try hiding his preening that time. Jader would have rolled his eyes if they were not so endearing. He'd never noticed just how miserable Sarrica truly was until Allen had made him happy.

"How long am I going to be gone?"

"Ideally, only a few months. We need you here, but we need this leverage in Benta more. That being said, if it takes longer than the end of the year, we'll pull you out. "

Jader nodded. "I still need to find someone to manage my duties."

"Lesto has said he's willing to step back into the role while you're gone," Sarrica said.

"No, absolutely not," Jader snapped. "He's retired; I'm not letting anyone, least of all me, drag him back for any reason. I'll punch even you if you let him."

Sarrica grinned lazily. "That is more or less what I said, though I threatened to punch him."

Jader grumbled and drank more wine. "I'll find someone, though I'll need all the time we can muster."

"You will also need someone to tend your new estate while you're gone," Allen said. "The people and staff largely run themselves, but there will be matters requiring your authority to resolve—or someone you've authorized to speak for you." Eyes taking on a sly cast again, he added, "If you are still... weighing certain matters... Lord Kamir is capable of overseeing the estate in your absence. He has been trained for precisely such duties. Most youngest sons are. It would give him weight and power, as well, which means he'll be that much safer from the machinations of the High Court."

Sarrica snorted. "Trained to rule, is that what you said?"

Allen shot him a small, smirking grin.

"I'll consider your suggestion," Jader said, not admitting he actually rather liked it—more than he would have expected, given he and Kamir did not know each other all that well, not really, though he'd spent more time talking to Kamir last night than he normally bothered with assignations. "I'll need time to arrange that and my fill-in for High Commander."

"You have most of a month. That will have to suffice," Sarrica said. "The paperwork should be ready in a few days; we'll send word round. We'll spare the formal announcement of your title until your return, but expect everybody to know by dinner tomorrow."

Lifting his eyes to the ceiling, Jader said, "They'll probably know by dinner tonight."

"They'd better not, or I'll be terminating some secretaries."

Myra snorted from his desk. "No, you won't because if it's any of mine, they'll be taken care of by me long before you reach them, Majesty."

Sarrica grinned.

Jader finished his wine and stood. "If that's all, Your Majesties, I should get on with my day and the very long list of duties that must be tended before I leave in less than a month."

Allen nodded, and Sarrica lazily waved him off.

Back in the hall, however, Jader found himself headed not back to his office, but to the opposite end of the palace, where the family suites for the wealthy but not titled were located. Peculiar place for Kamir to be, but then again, perhaps not if his only other choice was to live with or close to his family.

There was no reason to visit, not really. Allen's idea could be executed through messages, or he could send a note to arrange a meeting to discuss it. He had no good reason to go immediately see Kamir, to put a hundred more important matters on hold.

But now that he'd been given an excuse to see Kamir, he found he badly wanted to take it.

Jader knocked on the door and smiled at Velina.

She gaped at him in surprise, then smiled politely and even a little shyly. "Good evening, Commander."

Jader was having none of that. *"Greetings, my fine lady. It's good to see your lovely face again."*

Velina rolled her eyes as the hesitancy vanished from her demeanor. *"None of your charm, fish bait. That stopped working on me a long time ago. I'm too old for your tricks."*

Grinning, Jader replied, *"You're half my age, if you're a day."*

"You're as smooth as sand caught in the underclothes, Belarigo."

"And yet it still gets me out of trouble more often than not," Jader said with a laugh. Switching to Harken, he said, "I am sorry to arrive unexpectedly, but I was hoping to speak briefly with Lord Kamir, if he has the time and inclination to see me."

Velina opened the door to let him inside. "He's currently in his office, but I'll go see if he's available to speak, Commander." She bowed and smiled, then darted off and vanished through a door on the far side of the suite.

Jader looked idly around. It was painted the usual medium blue of most such suites, accented in white and green, but Kamir had hung some beautiful paintings and a large clock with a glass face that showed the gears behind it. There were books on the window sill behind the large dining table, more in the little sitting area, and a few toys scattered about. There was a small bookcase in the sitting area, though instead of the books he

would have expected, it was crammed full instead with old textbooks and cheap pin books.

Disappointingly, the children were not around. Though he was here to see Kamir, Jader would not have minded spending more time with Chiri and Chara. They'd been sweet, engaging, so eager to learn and talk, so unlike the more petulant and sullen children he came across in the palace.

The door across the room opened, and a flustered-looking Kamir appeared. His hair was loosely braided, and spectacles were perched on his nose. The sleeves of his dark green shirt were rolled up to his elbows, both the shirt and his skin stained with something that reminded Jader of grease.

Jader smiled and sketched a slight bow. "I am sorry to arrive uninvited and without warning."

Kamir shook his head, blinked a few times, then flushed and yanked off the spectacles. He tucked them into the front pocket of his shirt and crossed the room. "No need to apologize, Commander. What brings you to my humble home?"

"I wanted to speak more on a matter I mentioned briefly over dinner, but it will take a bit of time. Are you free to speak tonight or tomorrow? If you do not mind, of course."

"Why would I mind?" Kamir asked, the flush to his cheeks darkening.

Velina's laughter prevented whatever else either of them might have said then. "I'll go find Bremm and the children, my lord, and we'll have dinner in the banquet hall. I'll tell them you're working. We'll be back in..." She glanced up at the clock. "Two hours? I could probably push it to two and a half."

Kamir's flustered, but pleased expression made Jader *really* want to kiss him. "You've been far too gracious to me, Velina. I will never be able to repay you. That would be appreciated, thank you."

"I'll extract payment eventually, never fear, my lord." With a wink, she gathered her things and left, the door closing softly behind her.

Kamir's face turned redder. "I think it is my turn to apologize. I did not mean for her to make such an assumption—"

He tasted even sweeter than Jader remembered, and he'd thought about it every spare moment he had and many he didn't. He slid his fingers into the

hair at Kamir's nape and deepened the kiss, his other hand coming up to cradle the side of Kamir's face, thumb brushing over his cheek.

That earned him some soft, startled but hungry noises, and hesitant fingers clung to his sides right above the swords.

Drawing back slightly, looping his arm around Kamir's shoulders to keep him as close as swords and armor permitted, Jader said, "I think I am outstripping you on presumptions."

"I do not feel presumed upon, Commander," Kamir said, voice a bit breathless.

Jader kissed him again, long and lingering, determined to savor as much as he could get, committing every taste and touch, every scent and sound, to memory for his wretched trip to Benta. "I swear I really did come here to talk, but you are devastatingly distracting."

"Well, we can certainly talk," Kamir replied, and Jader should not enjoy how shy and hesitant he was, but there was something hopelessly endearing and enthralling about the way he dipped his eyes before slowly looking up again, the determined tilt to his chin that contrasted so sharply with his flushed cheeks. "Will it take you two and a half hours to say what you need?"

And didn't that occasional display of boldness make everything so much headier. "The real question, *sunshine*, is whether two and a half hours is going to be enough time to do everything I want."

Kamir smiled, soft and shy, but some of his eagerness shone through. "That is not a question I can answer, but if you need help figuring it out, I'm happy to lend my assistance."

Jader kissed him again, hard and hungry, his cock twitching at the disheveled state the kisses left Kamir in. He should always look mussed and flushed and happy. "It would take a stronger person than me to refuse such an offer. Where is your bedroom?"

Smiling, tucking a loose strand of hair behind his ear, Kamir led the way to his bedroom. Jader made quick work of their clothes, but lingered as Kamir climbed into bed to search through the pile of fabric.

Kamir frowned at him. "What are you doing?"

Finding what he sought, Jader carried them to the bed and held them out. "Wear them?"

Kamir blinked at him, but laughed as Jader grinned, and put the spectacles on.

Making a soft, pleased noise, Jader pushed him down on the bed and showed Kamir just how thorough and creative he could be with an hour and a half.

By the time they were cleaned and dressed again, only half an hour remained. He followed Kamir back out into the main room, where someone had come with wine and food.

Instead of sitting, however, Kamir went to a small table in the corner and fixed himself a cup of tea. Astiri, by the bitter smell of it.

Jader poured himself some wine and dished out a bowl of the soup—a fish chowder that wasn't his favorite, though it was at least spicy.

Sitting down, Kamir smiled. "So what did you want to talk about?"

"I am being sent to Benta for at least a few months, possibly through the end of the year, though I hope not. I'll be leaving the beginning of next month."

"I hope it goes well," Kamir said softly. "I—" He cupped his hands around his teacup. "I will miss you." He looked up. "I mean, I presume nothing, but I have enjoyed—"

Jader rested a hand on his forearm. "I think it's clear we've both enjoyed our time together." He smiled, and Kamir returned it. "There was something else I wanted to tell you—ask you, rather, and it *is* an imposition."

"I'll decide that, Commander. What is it?"

Jader drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, and took another sip of wine before he finally explained the matter of the title abruptly thrust upon him. "I do not have time to deal with it, and frankly, neither does anyone else I know. I would not presume to say that you do, but I thought you would have experience in such matters, and I trust you not to play the thief or wreak havoc. Would you be willing to serve as guardian of my estate in my absence? I would pay you for the trouble, generously, and honestly I do not think it will cause you much trouble. I am told the estate largely runs

itself, being used to doing so under the lack of caring displayed by the previous Marquis."

Kamir's mouth dropped open. "You—you want *me* to supervise your estate in your absence? You've only just—"

Jader tightened his grip. "You come highly recommended, and I think we are at least friends by this point, in some fashion."

"In some fashion," Kamir echoed faintly. He swallowed, hands trembling faintly as he picked up his tea and drained the cup. "Very well, Commander. I would be happy to serve as guardian of your estate. I assume you'll attend the paperwork?"

"Yes, and I'll send word when it's ready for signing. You promise this will not cause you any trouble? High Consort Allen informed me that dallying with me may have caused you and yours some difficulty—"

"While I appreciate His Majesty's concern, I can see to myself and made the decision to go to dinner with you fully aware of any and all possible consequences. I'm fine. My children and Velina are fine. Please, do not worry upon it. I am used to the court, and can take care of myself."

Jader smiled and reached out to tuck a loose strand of hair back. "I've never for a moment doubted that. I have high-ranking officers who are not half as fierce and self-sufficient as you. But if there is anything you need from me, now or after I'm gone, do not hesitate to ask for it. That is the very least I can do. I appreciate that you're willing to do this for me. Thank you, very much. You may name your fee."

Kamir scoffed. "If we are friends, there should not be a fee."

"Preposterous. I will attend it." Jader finished his soup and wine and pushed the dishes away. "For now, I am afraid I must go. I am certain your children would like your attention back. They are doing well? I confess I was a little sad not to see them again. I greatly enjoyed speaking with them in the gardens."

"Very well, thank you. They ask for more stories all the time, so you may get your chance." Kamir rose to walk him to the door, and Jader could not resist pushing him gently up against the wall and stealing a searing kiss. "Goodnight, my lord," Kamir replied, smiling mischievously when Jader stared in confusion.

Huffing as he belatedly understood the teasing, Jader stole another quick kiss then finally made himself let go. "Goodnight, my lord. I will see you later." He opened the door and left, though the back of his neck itched with the urge to turn around one last time—but if he did that, he'd go back, though Pantheon alone knew why Kamir was turning from a momentary pleasure to a growing obsession.

Back in the main parts of the palace, he put his mind back on the work he needed to be doing and swept off through the halls to his office.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Kamir braided his hair slowly, less out of a desire to make his hair look nice and more out of a need to delay the inevitable.

He'd dressed as *I have no interest in being anywhere near you* as he possibly could, but Theoren had never been very good at seeing the obvious, let alone the subtle.

Tucking the end out of sight and securing it with plain pins, he then added a few simple silver flower pins for decoration, matching them with dangling silver flower earrings studded with diamonds. His clothes were just as plain, dark hunter green with minimal black and silver touches.

He examined his appearance critically, and after a couple of minutes, nodded and stood. He was suitably dressed for dinner in the High Court, but coldly formal and stiff. If he dressed in such fashion to dine at the table of higher ranking nobles, it would rightfully be taken as an insult.

If only Theoren would take it thusly and they could forgo the rest of their meal.

But stalling further would only drag the matter on, and the sooner Kamir got this confrontation over with, the better. Then he could go back to thinking about his new house, his moving plans... and Jader, of course, as well as the responsibilities unexpectedly thrust upon him. Responsibilities he would be formally assuming in a few days; he still could not think about the sum proposed as payment without wanting to laugh or cry.

"Are you certain you don't want something to slip into his food?" Velina asked as he stepped into the main room. "I have two or three substances that people would be more than happy to accept as a weak heart."

Kamir smiled faintly. "Better not to risk it, but the thought is more pleasant than it probably should be. Thank you for watching the children. I am sorry I've been thrusting them upon you more than usual."

Velina scoffed as she fussed with the yarn she was pulling out to work on her latest knitting project. "This is the first time in years you've taken time for yourself that wasn't an afternoon to dye your hair." She looked up through her lashes as she settled her knitting in place. "I like seeing you

with the High Commander. He suits you. He's always been a bit of a—" She narrowed her eyes as she thought. "*Rushta* is the word; I cannot think of it in Harken. He likes to flit from pretty to pretty, like a *rushta*, a type of... octopus, that is the word. Loves to play, but never with one thing for very long. The only exception is during mating season." Another sly look. "They are fiercely loyal to their mate and offspring. It's a term we use for young people, mostly, but also those who do not settle easily. It's a playful... no, affectionate, that's better. It's an affectionate word, not like the way Mainlanders think of us."

Floater was the word she wasn't saying. Kamir smiled. "So *rushta* is what I should be calling you?"

She gave him a little grin. "No, I have a set circle of lovers. If you were being polite, you would admire my prowess and maturity. If you were being naughty, you'd call me a port."

Kamir stared a moment, then half-heartedly covered his mouth as he burst into giggles. "I see."

"Get along to your dinner with that bottom-feeder," Velina said, looking pleased with herself.

"Goodnight, Velina."

Doubts and pessimism tried to crowd his thoughts as he wended through the palace, but Kamir kept the negativity at bay by replaying the previous evening with Jader. He'd thought, after their night in the city, that would be the last he saw of Jader beyond occasionally crossing paths in the hall. Only in his wildest, most private imaginings had he ever thought Jader would show up impulsively and drag him to bed.

And he hadn't yet decided if he loved or hated that Jader was very, very good in bed.

Even worse, he was wonderful outside of bed, had even mentioned Kamir's children with genuine interest. No one had ever spoken in such away about his children. Kamir had never been allowed to forget they were one of the reasons everyone considered him ruined and not worth marrying. People in power wanted their own children, not the leavings of a first marriage that had ended in a shameful divorce. Never mind all the adoptions and sires and dames—but it wasn't a day if there wasn't some hypocrisy.

Kamir kept trying to remember to go slow, be careful, look for all the signs of trouble. But in all the years he'd watched Jader, he'd never seen the things he had come to notice about Theoren. The sorts of things he saw in his parents, in other people around the palace—in his sister, and she and her Shadow Bell mercenaries did not have a shining reputation by any definition.

Jader had never shown any of that, and the more Kamir got to know him, the better he seemed. Hopefully he wasn't setting himself up to be a damned fool yet again.

As he neared the banquet hall, he finally switched his thoughts to Theoren and the miserable dinner he would have to slog through for at least the next two hours. The idea of a private dinner with Theoren was unbearable, but in public Theoren was much, much worse because he could put on a show and expect manners and society to chain Kamir in place. Kamir had watched in miserable, wretched silence on more occasions than he could count as Theoren charmed the people around them, or otherwise dissuaded them from helping Kamir. Back then, Kamir hadn't been willing to challenge him publicly. Theoren wasn't the kind to hurt him over every slight, but he could still be nasty once he reached a certain point—and he reached that point a lot faster if humiliated in public.

So while facing him in private wasn't ideal, it was better than enduring him in public.

The large double doors of the public banquet hall were wide open, and he could tell from the amount of noise that the High King and Consort were dining that night. Mostly because of High Consort Allen, who did his best work at such gatherings. Anyone who wanted to garner his attention, this was one of the best times and places to do it.

Thankfully, Kamir did not have to deal with the public hall, though for once that might have been preferable. Instead, he stepped past the main doors and through a side door that led down a long hall of rooms that were for private dining.

A servant stood outside the room marked with a songbird, and she bowed as Kamir reached her. "Good evening, my lord. I'll bring wine straight away. Your usual?"

The palace staff had noted his usual? Since when? Well, that was stupid. Since rumors had spread about him and Jader. "Uh. Yes, please, that would be appreciated. Thank you." She walked off down the hall and Kamir took one last moment to brace himself before grasping the handle and pulling the door open.

He'd been so studiously avoiding Theoren since receiving his note that he hadn't done more than glimpse him long enough to know to duck down another hallway. One of his biggest fears was that he'd prove weak again, be taken in all over by a handsome face and sticky-sweet charm.

Staring at Theoren now, all he could wonder was how his younger self could ever have been so gullible.

Theoren was older by five years, but he looked closer to ten now. He was tall, slender, with gold-toned brown skin, thick tufts of ill-kempt hair, and a scraggly goatee he'd be better off shaving. His eyes were as hard and mean as Kamir remembered, though when they'd first met, and for too long after, he'd thought them dark and mysterious.

His clothes were out of fashion and strangely plain, but in relatively good condition—not surprising for a man who'd always been on the wrong side of vain, though it was hard to believe that looking at his bland, outdated clothes.

He stood as Kamir approached the table, and offered the smile Kamir had once been so easily fooled by. Kamir took his seat and folded his hands in his lap. "Hello, Theoren."

"Here I was certain you'd say Master Masterow," Theoren said, smiling pleasantly but sounding condescending.

"What would that accomplish?" Kamir asked. "We have far too much history for that."

Theoren narrowed his eyes, but surprisingly, didn't respond. "How are the children?" he asked instead, which was even more shocking.

"None of your business," Kamir said tersely.

At that, Theoren did bristle. "They're my—"

"No, they're not," Kamir cut in, voice level but fierce. He might not have much of a spine, but he would be damned if he ever let his family or Theoren do to his children what they'd done to him. "You signed away all

rights to them in return for all the proceeds from sale of the house and all assets aside from immediate personal effects. Your dick may have been involved in the process, but they don't belong to you, and I won't stand for so much as a hint of interference. Do you understand me?" He clenched his hands tightly in his lap, grateful for the table that hid his trembling.

Rage filled Theoren's face for a moment—a rage Kamir had endured in the form of punches and kicks and slams into the wall only a few times, but the first time had been the moment he realized he had to get out or he'd be leaving someday on a pyre. The worst was that, if Theoren hadn't had such a terrible day, hadn't come home that night already on the verge of snapping, Kamir might have been oblivious to how deep his problems really were for who knew how much longer. He'd hated that night, but looking back, he'd been grateful it had happened sooner rather than later.

The door opened before Theoren could speak, thankfully, and his face smoothed into a semblance of that saccharine charm Kamir remembered as he flirted half-heartedly with the servant, who returned it with the polite diffidence all palace servants learned.

Another stone of fear weighing Kamir down fell away as he watched; Theoren's charm seemed far less so now, badly contrived and painful to watch, though Kamir couldn't say if it had always been so cringe-worthy or if Theoren had lost his touch in the past eight years—but he was inclined to think the former, and that he'd simply not been equipped to realize it back then.

Either way, the man who'd ensnared the boy Kamir had been was long gone. In the years they'd been separated, Kamir had faced far worse than the pathetic, fading man before him.

Theoren was roughly the same age as Jader, but could not be more different. Theoren was full of false, poisonous charm; Jader was sweet and engaging. Theoren possessed a sharp-edged, dangerous vanity, the kind that cut when it satisfied; Jader was also vain, but he was the sort who was simply happy to have someone pay him any sort of attention at all, be it someone admiring his earrings or children eager to hear his stories.

It was still disconcerting the two had elements of personality in common, but then, Kamir probably had something in common with a terrible person somewhere, too. Or some shining star of the High Court who would be mortified to find they shared a trait with the court embarrassment.

Kamir thanked the woman for the wine and platter of bread, cheese, and olives. When she was gone, the door closed firmly behind her, he took a bracing sip of wine and asked, "What do you want Theoren?"

"It's been eight years, and I never thought we would cross paths again," Theoren said, his smile this time showing a better effort at being charming. "We were married once. Is it so strange I'd want to see how you are doing?"

"I believe your last words to me were that I'd regret divorcing you because nobody else was ever going to want a sniveling boy who'd already been used up and proven worthless. So yes, Theoren, it is strange."

That rage filled Theoren's face again, and Kamir tensed to flee—but Theoren only picked up his cup of wine and drained it. Kamir held back a grimace at the idea of wine being drunk so, but said nothing, just helped himself to some of the food.

So similar to the meal he'd shared with Jader. An ache twisted sharply in his chest. He really was a damned fool, spending such time with a man who wanted only to play, but he would give anything to be dining with Jader right then, with Theoren still nothing but a bad memory.

Pouring himself more wine, Theoren took a large gulp, set the cup down hard enough some of the wine splashed over the rim, and said, "Has it ever once occurred to you, in all that snotty superiority you've acquired, that maybe I regret some of things I said and did? I did *marry you*, if you'll recall. Even though your parents cut you off and we were left with practically nothing."

Once upon a time, those words had crippled every argument and protest Kamir had mustered the strength to voice. It had taken all the meager courage he possessed back then to defy his parents—but infatuation guised as love had made him foolishly brave. Then he'd endured far worse under Theoren than he ever had under his parents.

Velina was the one who had first inspired the strength to defy Theoren, to earn his own money and tuck it away, to look into what he would have to do for a divorce. But even then he'd faltered, made excuses, stuck to patterns and evils he knew rather than once more throwing himself into the unknown and risking an even worse fate.

It was his then-unborn children, and the very real, visceral love he'd felt for them, that had made him brave enough to step into the unknown, to

obtain his divorce and fight for absolute control of his children. All of that had meant slinking back to his parents, but even back then he'd known eventually he'd break free of them as well.

So words that would have left him fumbling and stuttering, cowering and backing away and agreeing to whatever Theoren wanted to keep him happy, now only left him bitter and tired.

Losing what little interest he'd had in the food, Kamir replied, "Yes, practically nothing but the five thousand crowns you possessed, and the five hundred crowns I managed to bring with me. Perhaps that's a pittance here in Harkenesten, but you and I both know very well that back in Eushan that sort of money would have lasted us a long time if you hadn't drunk and gambled and whored it away." When he was certain his hand wouldn't tremble, he lifted his wine cup and took a small sip to wet his lips. "If you only came here to try and guilt and cajole me the way you once did, Theoren, you are wasting your time. I'm not even certain to what end you're behaving thus. If it's money you're after then you should really know better. My parents are as severe now as they ever were—and even if they weren't, I wouldn't give *you* money, and you should know that."

That rage filled Theoren's face a third time, but this time it came with an underlying smugness that put a knot in Kamir's stomach. "I think you'll do anything if it means keeping your children."

"Don't you *dare* bring my children into this," Kamir hissed, curling his hands so tightly his nails dug into his palms. "Harm my children, or try to take them from me, and you'll regret it."

Smugness growing now he knew his barbs had struck, Theoren ran his fingers over his wine cup. "I'm just not certain you're the best parent for them, given your history and inability to support yourself. I made a mistake eight years ago. I never should have agreed to let children be raised by a child—"

"A child you were more than happy to marry and fuck and get pregnant," Kamir snapped. "Don't you dare try to play this like *you're* the responsible one. Challenge me in court and you will find yourself the same loser you were eight years ago." He rose, threw his napkin on the table, and forced himself to leave sedately and quietly.

Out in the main hall, he finally succumbed to the trembling rushing over him, choking on panic.

Theoren wouldn't. He *couldn't*. Kamir had made damned certain that no one and nothing could take his children from him.

But Theoren had never much cared for idle threats. If he was threatening to challenge Kamir for his children, then he must have good reason to think he could.

"Kamir?"

His head snapped up, and misery further soured his empty stomach.

"Are you all right?" Jader asked, and beside him stood a woman Kamir had seen when he was at dinner with his parents the previous night—the woman who was unmistakably Jader's long-lost sister. On a purely aesthetic level, she was his equal in beauty. But Jader had warmth, an energy, that drew the eye. She seemed more like a painting that, while impressive, was still easily passed by.

And of course, Kamir looked like a pathetic weakling right there of all places. "I'm fine," he managed, forcing a smile. "Thank you, Commander. My pardon for interrupting your evening and, of course, the lady's. I hope the r-rest of your evening g-goes well." He bowed hastily and fled, not quite running through the halls, but not exactly walking sedately either.

He'd only just turned down the hall that would lead him back toward the private portions of the palace when Jader called out his name.

Closing his eyes, wishing fervently the ground would just swallow him up, Kamir turned around and waited for Jader to reach him. He gasped as Jader gently gripped his shoulders, then slid his hands up to cup Kamir's face. "What's wrong?"

"N-nothing," Kamir said, and when Jader frowned added, "Nothing I can't handle. Dinner with my ex was exactly as unpleasant as I feared it would be, that's all. If you would excuse me, I need to go see my children."

Jader immediately let him go, but reached down to take Kamir's hand and squeeze it gently. "Then I apologize for delaying you. Come, I'll walk you the rest of the way." He started walking, keeping hold of Kamir's hand, giving Kamir no choice but to move or take a tumble.

"You needn't escort me. I'm sure your, uh, dining companion must be most irate—"

"I really don't care," Jader said, an edge to his voice that Kamir had heard in Velina's voice before, a tightness that spoke of a lifetime of being thought less—and so treated as less—for the crime of being an Islander. "I'm going to Benta with her despite the fact everything in me rails against it. She can manage one dinner without me." He looked at Kamir and smiled, tired but true. "I'm more than happy for an excuse to spend a few minutes with you. Is there anything I can do to help?"

For a brief, panicked and lonely moment, Kamir was tempted. But he would never stand on his own if he did not stand on his own. "No, he's nothing I can't handle, but thank you."

They came to a stop in front of Kamir's door. Jader nodded. "I have every faith you *require* help from no one, but should you ever *want* it, you've only to tell me what to do." He curled one finger beneath Kamir's chin, tilted his face up, and bent to brush a soft but lingering kiss to his mouth. "I hope the rest of your night is better than it's thus far been. Sleep well."

"Sleep well," Kamir echoed, unable to think long enough to come up with something else to say. He watched Jader walk away, curling his fingers into the cuffs of his jacket and biting his bottom lip to keep from calling him back.

He could and would handle his own problems, and he would not abuse Jader by leaning on his authority and connections to make Theoren go away.

Once Jader was out of sight, he stepped into his suite. Velina looked up sharply, but Kamir just kept going until he reached the children's bedroom. Opening the door, he went to each of them. They were fast asleep, mercifully oblivious to the treacherous bastard trying to steal them away. Kamir fussed with their blankets, kissed their foreheads, and finally withdrew.

Back in the sitting room, Velina threw her knitting aside and stood. "What did that worthless scum-eating bottom-feeder do?"

"He's going to try and take the children away," Kamir said. He went over to the table and sat down before he fell down. "I don't know what he has in

mind, but he didn't make that threat idly. He's going to force me to give him money, or he will try to take my children."

"If he's so desperate for money he'd resort to forcing it out of you, I sincerely doubt he has the funds for such a frivolous court case." But she looked as worried as he felt. "What could he possibly have?"

"I don't know," Kamir said. "It doesn't matter, anyway, because I'm not going to give in. If I give him money once, he'll just keep coming back for more. Whatever he has planned, I'll just have to hope all the precautions I made eight years ago will hold up now." He swallowed, rested his face in one shaky hand. "I wish there was a way to find out ahead of time what his leverage is."

"All in his head, or using what little money he possesses to lie, bribe, and cheat," Velina said. "I'll see what I can turn up."

Kamir sniffled and sat up, smiled tremulously at her. "Thank you," he said softly. "I don't know where I'd be without you."

"Not a question you'll ever have to answer." She folded her arms across her chest. "While we're on that subject, I noticed that paperwork you've had lying about pertained to buying a house. You have not spoken to me about it once, however. Why is that?"

"Because until very recently I was going to be just this side of destitute and unable to pay you fairly, if at all," Kamir said with a sigh, rubbing his temples with his fingertips. "Even the generous sum Jader is paying me to serve as guardian of his estate will not last forever. You have stood with me all these years, for reasons beyond my comprehension, and I will not ask you to continue to do so when it would entail living like a pauper again. You have a good life here in the palace—"

She cut him off with a rude noise. "I have a good life and happen to live in the palace. The former does not rely on the latter. It is not your job to manage my money or life, any more than it's my job to manage yours. Offer me the job and let me decide for myself if I want it."

Kamir braced his elbows on the table and pressed his eyes to the heels of his hands, a sob getting out before he could entirely cut it off.

Arms wrapped awkwardly around him, and Velina murmured words he couldn't understand but which soothed all the same. He leaned into her, too miserable and shaken to do anything else for several minutes.

It was a knock at the door that finally drew them apart. "If that's him, I am going to break his nose," Velina muttered, and with a kiss to the top of Kamir's head withdrew to answer it.

She made a soft, surprised and amused noise and stepped back to let in a servant bearing a silver tray. The young man set the tray on the table, bowed, and murmured for them to have a pleasant evening.

Kamir stared at the tray, which contained a carafe of familiar pink wine and a dish that contained a variety of sweets: soft rose candy dusted with powder-fine sugar, candied fruit, nuts roasted in cinnamon and sugar, marzipan shaped like flowers and butterflies, and rounds of bitter chocolate to balance all the sweet.

"*Rushta*," Velina said.

"He's being nice," Kamir replied. "If he was interested in courting me, he would say, not invite me to dinner and hire me to supervise his estate while he's in Benta." If they were courting, that was something Kamir would simply be happy to do for him—and he was, but admitting that would be admitting he wanted something Jader did not, and he had enough to manage at present without adding that humiliation to the pile quite yet.

Velina made another rude noise but did not say anything further, simply dropped into a nearby chair, poured them both wine, and started helping herself to the sweets. After a few minutes, she said, "I have four lovers and none of them have ever brought me sweets like this—nor I them. Though I admit none of them are as..." She narrowed her eyes, and after a moment said, "Flashy, that is it. None are as flashy as the High Commander. But the Belarigo family, they're all that sort." She sniffed. "They wear their pearls and jewels like they think they're fish and the jewelry scales."

Kamir laughed. "You can't deny he wears his scales well." He took another sip of wine.

Rolling her eyes, Velina stole another marzipan flower and nibbled it between sips of wine. "He certainly enjoys when people think so—when you think so, from what I saw the other day. But for all his flashy ways, he is a good man. Enough about him. I want to hear more about this house you have bought us."

"You'll love it," Kamir said. "There's so much still to do to get it ready, but it's perfect for us."

"Tell me all about it, and we'll start planning the rest together," she said, nudging the plate of sweets closer to him. "Did you manage to eat anything at dinner?"

He shook his head. "A few nibbles."

"I'll call for a proper supper first, and *then* we'll talk."

Kamir nodded, and while he was still too unsettled to truly relax, the gift from Jader and Velina's continued support, at least, made it a little bit easier to keep going and feel like he could handle whatever went wrong next.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A knocking on the frame of his open door drew Jader from his reports, and he looked up with relief, eyes already tired from reading all morning and early afternoon. "Yes?"

Axis tipped his head toward the office behind him. "His Grace and Captain Rega are here to see you."

"Tell Lesto to learn to make appointments," Jader said with a smile, and motioned for Axis to send them in.

He rose with a smile as Lesto and Rega entered, and moved from around his desk to embrace them both. "Captain Rega, thank you again for coming so quickly. It must have been a hard ride to get here as soon as you did."

Rega gave him an amused look. "When the High Commander sends an unexpected summons, one tends to obey as quickly as possible, if not faster."

Jader laughed. "You might be running away faster still once you get a real taste of what you're in for—especially since I won't be here. On the other hand, Lesto will be, despite my best efforts to keep him from going back into the fray."

"I can handle a few months of it, and anyway, Shemal was happy for a reason to bring the children here for an extended stay. He loves showing them off to anyone who stands still for too long." It wasn't often an expression that could only be described as *sappy* appeared on Lesto's face, but it happened every time his children were brought up. Not that Jader blamed him; Shemal's sister had arrived unexpectedly one day with twins she'd recently given birth to and let Lesto and Shemal adopt them. So far, even though they couldn't move much on their own, the pair seemed to have Shemal's wandering tendencies and were rapidly picking up some of Lesto's imperious habits.

"How are the children?" Jader asked.

"I have no idea," Lesto said with a slight grin. "I haven't seen them since we arrived, though I've heard rumors they're doing well around the palace. Last I heard, they'd been semi-kidnapped by Shemal's Islander circle for

various and sundry things you would understand better than me. Something that involved the ocean that I prefer not to think about or I'll be compelled to worry—especially since I know Shemal was being vague on purpose."

Jader snickered. "It's not simply a saying that we learn to swim before we learn to walk."

Lesto looked pained. "I know; he takes them out to the pond on the estate all the time. But the ocean is another matter entirely."

"The ocean is where all the children of Mother Ocean belong. And if I recall correctly, they're old enough for the Rites of Mother Ocean."

Rega and Jader laughed. Clapping Lesto on the shoulder, Jader went to his sidebar and poured them all wine, motioning them to sit as he reclaimed his seat behind the desk. "I'm assuming, since you have not slipped away in the night, that you are prepared to accept my offer, Captain Rega?"

She was, as Lesto had said, a promising candidate for Deputy High Commander. Already a garrison captain, she had the same sort of mettle that had drawn Lesto to Jader. She was only twenty-three, but Jader had been twenty-one when he'd stumbled into Lesto's path and found his own path changed forever. Unlike the rest of the army, the ranks of High Commander and Deputy High Commander could not be worked up to—they were chosen and trained up. When Lesto's predecessor had died without having ever appointed a deputy, Sarrica had appointed Lesto. The imperial army, more like the worst sort of bloated mercenary band in those days, had been brought swiftly and brutally to heel by a ruthless Lesto and the unwavering support of a stubborn crown prince, Sarrica's father in those days swiftly declining and capable only of minimal rule.

Rega was a large woman, with the black-brown skin most often found in Selemea, which was indeed her homeland, though she moved around a lot with the army. Her hair was cut close to her head, only the barest hints to indicate it would be curly if allowed to grow out. She had a small scar on her right cheek, like a dagger had gotten just a bit too close, and a nose that looked to have been broken more than once.

She gave Jader a look and replied, "My husband and dame already have the house packed and their new wardrobes planned. They've probably arrived by now, and the carts with our belongings won't be far behind. If I back out of this now, they'll cut me into pieces and throw me in the ocean."

Jader and Lesto laughed loudly, and Jader refilled all their half-empty wine cups. "Your suite has been assigned and is adequate, I assume?"

At that, Rega looked suddenly, uncharacteristically shy. "Ah, yes, Commander. It perhaps should have occurred to me I would be placed in the imperial wing, but I admit it did not."

"I remember feeling exactly the way you do," Jader said with a smile. "You'll adjust quickly. Nothing takes the gleam off the imperial family like living down the hall from them."

Lesto snickered. "Speaking of disconcerting, shall we go walk around the military yard and make everyone nervous? That's always good fun."

"What an excellent idea," Jader said, and finished his wine before standing. Rega followed suit, and after a brief word with his secretaries, the three of them left Jader's offices and wended their way through the palace.

Nearly out of the palace, they came across a tall, broad handsome man covered in tattoos, wearing breeches, a shirt, and sash around his waist, all of them faintly damp and clinging to his skin, like he hadn't bothered to completely dry off before putting them on. His hair was long, hanging in heavy braids decorated with charms and beads, and beautiful, elaborate earrings were in his ears—a fall of double hoops that increased in size as they neared his shoulders, decorated with jeweled beads that sparkled in the light.

In his arms he carried a child who was just a couple months shy of a year old. Behind him, holding the second child, was a woman who looked much like the man: Shemal, Lesto's spouse, and his sister Kemal.

"Why are you wet?" Lesto asked, looking pained again as he took the child Kemal held out. The child immediately made happy noises and wrapped tiny, spit-grubby fingers into the lapels of Lesto's expensive jacket. An entire imperial army would probably not believe the soft, melted look on Lesto's face was possible as he cuddled the child close before kissing Shemal briefly.

Shemal grinned. "Do you really want to know?"

Lesto sighed. "You couldn't take them to the swimming pool? It had to be the large, dangerous ocean?"

"We were perfectly safe," Shemal said.

Jader grinned. *"I notice you're leaving out all the details of the Rites."*

"Do you want a dunking of your own, Belarigo?" Shemal retorted.

Kemal scoffed in her queenly way. If the Islanders ever woke up one day and decided they wanted to take up Mainlander practices regarding rule, Jader had every faith Kemal would be queen in a matter of minutes and none would be capable of challenging her. *"Mainlanders are so fussy about water. What do they think they do in their mothers? Sit in a dry womb? How do we clean ourselves? But teach a babe to swim as is right and they act like minnows before a shark."* She threw her hair off her shoulders with an effortless jerk of her head. *"A pity we could not do the Rites at home. You will have to come for the later Rites, or our honored mother will never forgive you."*

"She also would never be able to hunt me down to kill me, but she might send you back up here, which is worse," Shemal replied, and laughed when Kemal swatted him.

Lesto lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I know perfectly well when I'm being made fun of, if only because I know *Mainlander* in that particular disgusted tone very well. What are these Rites you're being very careful not to explain to me?"

"The Rites of Mother Ocean are actually three rites, spread over a number of years," Jader said. "The first is when the baby is around a year old, give or take a few months. They're taken into the ocean and various prayers and songs are performed."

Shemal beamed. "Nialla was scared but settled in. Nindia is quite the fish."

"I see," Lesto said, and for a moment looked briefly hurt. "I'm glad they're all right."

Kemal rolled her eyes. *"You're all sand logged. I'm going to get dressed and find that delightful woman who helped us."*

"She's married," Shemal said.

"The more the merrier," Kemal replied tartly and swept off.

"Shall we be on our way, Commander?" Rega asked, eyes darting to Shemal and Lesto, who seemed locked in some silent conversation and oblivious now to everyone else.

Jader nodded and they slipped away, out of the palace and into the military yard, where everyone fell silent and regarded them with curiosity, whispers rising up in their wake. Though Jader never explained precisely why Rega was there, wanting to wait for the formal announcement, it wasn't hard to guess.

After an hour or so of milling about the yard, speaking with various officers and enlisted, he parted ways with Rega when she was dragged away by her spouse and dame for various appointments.

Returning to his office, he managed to get a bit of work done before his own appointment with Sarrica, Allen, and several others regarding his trip to Benta.

Jader stifled a yawn as he took his usual seat in the sitting area of Sarrica's office. Ignoring the wine on offer for once, he poured a cup of strong, dark tea and drained it in a few gulps before promptly pouring a second.

Nearby, sipping a cup of wine, Lady Seredia chuckled, looking as comfortable in the High Offices as only Sarrica, Allen, and Lesto tended to. But this deceptively delicate looking woman was the one Allen had said found Harkenesten *relaxing*, so it didn't surprise Jader that she was so at ease in a place that intimidated even well-seasoned nobles. "You look ready for a nap, Commander."

"I thought, back when I was Deputy High Commander, I knew what it was like to be sleep deprived. I have learned in the past two years that I took all the sleep I was getting back then for granted." He smiled faintly as she laughed again. "Thank you again, my lady, for agreeing to go with me to Benta. I know you were happy in your current post."

She lifted one shoulder. "Happy is a stretch. I was content, but I was growing increasingly bored. I like a challenge, and it will not hurt my career to be able to say I was personal silver tongue to the High Commander." Her eyes gleamed, the same dark honey-gold as her thick mass of springy curls. "The High Consort is working on creating a proper imperial office for silver tongues. It will not be ready for a couple more years, but he's already collecting profiles for the High Speaker position."

"I see," Jader said. "I suppose High Speaker makes more sense than High Silver Tongue."

Grinning, she replied, "It does flow a bit better. At any rate, I intend for that post to be mine, and having you on my work history will all but guarantee it."

"I am happy to be of use," Jader said dryly, before changing the subject. "Allen said you find Harkenesten relaxing—where do you come from and what do you do that such a thing is possible?"

Seredia laughed. "You must be the only person who does not know: I grew up in Treya Mencee, returned there as assistant to the ambassador when I was fresh out of university, where I remained until I was twenty-three. I married while I was there, and my husband and I went all over the world for various diplomatic matters on behalf of the High Throne. He died a few years ago."

"My condolences."

She bowed her head slightly. "Thank you. After he died, I spent some brief time in Benta until hostilities forced me to depart, and I've been working in Tricemore ever since, a few years now. Mostly I play liaison between Tricemore and Cartha, and Tricemore and various Bentan guests. It's relatively easy work for me, but does require experience and not many possess mine. But they will have to manage without me now because I *am* eager for this opportunity."

"I am immensely grateful to have you along," Jader replied. "Now more than ever."

"The honor is—"

The door opened, cutting her off, and two people walked in, a strange mixture of confidence and shyness. There was no uniform required of the secretaries who kept the thousands of offices of the imperial palace and city running, but they all had a certain look about them anyway—a look these two certainly possessed.

Lady Seredia rose and motioned for the two figures, a woman who looked roughly in her thirties, and a younger man perhaps in his mid to late twenties. They bowed low as they reached Lady Seredia and Jader. "Commander, this is Vannia Alteri, secretary of many years to the Duchell of Moonfall. Her Grace was kind enough to permit us to steal her, and Mistress Alteri was gracious enough to agree to help us. She is fluent in Bentan, Carthian, and Delfastien. And this is Shera Kortane, an

undersecretary we are borrowing from the army's general pool. He's fluent in Bentan and Carthian, and studying to pass exams in Tricemorien. They will be your secretaries for the journey to Benta."

Jader rose to greet them properly. "I'm grateful you've agreed to come with me."

"It's an honor to serve, High Commander," Vannia replied. "With your permission, we'll go speak with your secretaries and start to familiarize ourselves with the new duties, and start coordinating with the Bentan delegation to ensure preparations for the trip and finalize your schedule."

"By all means," Jader replied with a smile. "*Mother* Ocean knows I am not capable of any of that."

They bowed and departed, and Jader resumed his seat, feeling overwhelmed all over again. "My schedule? I thought I was going to see the Duchess of Abernoth. How much scheduling does that require?"

Seredia laughed. "I wish it were that simple, but no diplomatic visit is ever so straightforward. We have to travel across half of Benta to reach the Abernoth estate, and it will be in the midst of winter, too, so we'll be stopping frequently along the way. I hadn't realized you didn't know."

Making a face, Jader replied, "Allen probably ordered I not be told."

"I see," Seredia said with another laugh, but before she could say anything further, the door opened again and Captain Tsarana tel Mendi walked in.

Tel Mendi was short, so short he would barely reach half-way up Jader's chest, but he had a sturdy, stocky build. He had light-gold skin and faintly reddish, dark brown hair and goatee, and his eyes were so dark they were nearly black. He wore a dark blue tunic with a swirl of jagged, broken, pale gray lines filling most of it.

"High Commander, Lady Seredia," tel Mendi greeted, and bowed low as he reached them.

"Captain," Seredia replied with a smile and waved him to the seat beside her. "I am pleased we'll be in such excellent company on this journey. I heard about your campaign in Valen. That was excellent work."

Tel Mendi smiled, some of his somber air fading at the praise. "Funny you should grant such a compliment, my lady; it was only because of our

silver tongues we managed to calm the rioters and sort out a peaceful solution."

"You had the sense to seek out a peaceful solution rather than skipping right to violence," Jader said. "Not enough of my officers work hard enough at that. They're all still addicted to old notions of blood and glory."

Surprise flitted across tel Mendi's face, and then his smile returned. "Thank you, High Commander. After all the criticism and ridicule we face, your words mean a lot."

"Ridicule? That's the first I've heard of it. Why? And why wasn't it brought to my attention?" Jader asked.

Tel Mendi waved a hand dismissively. "Schoolyard nonsense is hardly something for you to deal with, Commander—but I confess it's the main reason I volunteered us to accompany you. I wanted Shattered Wind to have a chance to shine." He rubbed the side of his finger up and down his nose. "We work hard. My soldiers are some of the best, but a number of different problems over the years have resulted in us dropping to the bottom, and my people deserve more recognition and opportunities than they'll ever get being a laughing stock among mercenaries. I'm lucky to have the numbers I do. I thought a fellow..." he waved a hand and lifted one shoulder, "...eccentricity would be willing to give us a chance."

"Eccentricity," Jader echoed with a snort. "That is the most tactful word anyone has ever used. I did wonder why you had volunteered when we had never even met properly. I hope this venture achieves your goals, and I appreciate your coming." He winked. "Now I won't be the only one along who doesn't speak a single polite word of Bentan."

Tel Mendi and Seredia laughed, and Jader was happy to withdraw slightly from the conversation as they conversed on the ship, traveling, Harken protocol versus Bentan, and so forth. His mind drifted helplessly to Kamir, whom he would be seeing soon as Kamir would be joining them to sign papers. Was he still willing to help? Was his ex-husband still giving him trouble? Jader had neither seen nor heard of the little bottom-feeder recently, but that was only to be expected: people like Theoren tended to stay out of sight of people they saw as actual threats.

The door opened and Sarrica blew in bickering cheerfully with Lesto. They vanished into his private office, and Myra soon followed after

carrying a stack of papers.

Of Allen and Kamir, there was no sign, but no doubt they'd both be along soon.

Jader had just returned from the privy chamber and was starting on his fourth cup of tea when Allen arrived, Jac at his side, one of his secretaries on the other. He smiled briefly at them, lifting a hand in greeting, and then he vanished into Sarrica's office as well.

But a moment later, they all spilled out and joined Jader and the others in the sitting area. Papers were thrust at Jader for a final review: the terms of his stay in Benta, the official designation of Shattered Wind as his escort, Lady Seredia's contract, and all the papers that pertained to his new title and the immediate assigning of guardianship to Kamir.

Just as he was about to ask where Kamir was, the door opened and one of the antechamber clerks stepped in and bowed low. "Lord Kamir has arrived, Your Majesties."

"Send him in," Sarrica said. "He's to be given immediate access in the future."

"Yes, Your Majesty." The clerk faded off. A moment later, Kamir stepped inside, and Jader forgot all about the stack of papers in his lap.

Kamir was dressed formally, in a long, dark burgundy jacket with thin lines of gold. He'd bound his vivid hair in multiple braids threaded with thin burgundy ribbons, and in his ears were large amethysts framed by tiny diamonds.

His eyes skimmed over the group as he bowed his head, and something—anxiety, disappointment, fear, or maybe all of those at once—flickered across his face before it dipped too low for Jader to see. The happy excitement that had crept onto his face when he first arrived was gone when he rose. Jader, for the life of him, could not deduce what had turned Kamir from excited-nervous to miserable-nervous.

"Lord Kamir, thank you for joining us," Allen said with one of his inviting smiles. He motioned for Kamir to take a seat, and Myra came up to hand Kamir copies of the documents he needed to peruse.

"Jader!"

He turned sharply, and could tell from the tone and the look Lesto was giving him that it wasn't the first time he'd called Jader's name. "Yes?"

"Does anything look amiss to you?"

"This could be a marriage contract to the Crown Princess of Treya Mencee and I probably wouldn't notice, to be honest. I'm so tired it's a wonder I can read at all," Jader said, rubbing at his eyes and draining the tea he'd briefly set aside. He thanked Myra for pouring him another cup and drained that too.

Sarrica's eyes gleamed. "Myra, do up a quick marriage contract."

Myra snorted and returned to his desk.

Allen cast Sarrica an admonishing look that failed to be anything but fond, then turned to Lord Kamir. "Does all look well, my lord?"

"Y-yes, Your Majesty," Kamir said, appearing a little dazed that Allen was speaking to him. "All seems well to me."

"Excellent." After everyone else had confirmed the papers were accurate, Myra returned with seals and wax and the patiently waiting notary, and the long, tedious process of signing began.

When that was finally done, Myra distributed the imperial tokens that could be taken to the treasury to exchange for the payment they were due.

Sarrica reached into a front pocket of his jacket, pulled something out, and tossed it to Jader.

Catching it, Jader examined the ring in his palm: large and heavy, made of gold, set with three rectangular cut jewels arranged in a column—emerald, green opal, and diamond. Inside the ring was his name and the short form of his title.

"You'll have to pick your new signet and so forth, but that is the old ring and should suffice for now."

Jader didn't grimace, but only just. "It's a bit ostentatious, even for me."

"Then all to the good you are taking up the title and will be improving upon the efforts of your predecessor," Allen said.

Jader huffed, but didn't agree or disagree. It was about the only reason he was glad he was going to Benta. Having a title should have brought him

satisfaction, but he preferred the titles he earned, not the ones given to him in power plays.

Lesto gave him a reassuring smile, then turned to Sarrica and Allen and spoke with them about some other matter.

Seredia and tel Mendi departed shortly thereafter, and Kamir rose to follow, lingering at the fringes only to bid a proper farewell to Sarrica and Allen, who were locked in conversation.

But when they finally finished, Allen turned to Kamir and said, "Are you free tonight, my lord?"

Kamir's eyes widened slightly, but he bowed slightly and said, "Yes, Your Majesty."

"You should join me at the High Table for dinner. Sarrica is abandoning me to tend to military matters with Lesto and Jader. It will only be myself and Lords Shemal and Tara. Your company would be welcome."

Jader almost strode forward to catch Kamir, he looked so close to falling over and even passing out.

"Y-yes, Your Majesty. It—it would be an honor. Thank you for such a gracious invitation."

Allen smiled again. "I look forward to seeing you." Accepting the arm Sarrica offered, they departed, Lesto close behind, leaving Jader and Kamir alone in the office, save for the secretaries.

Jader looked at Kamir and smiled faintly. "You look like someone who got swallowed by a fish instead of eating it as expected."

Kamir stared at him blankly for a moment, then gave a shaky laugh. "I'm lucky if people acknowledge me politely in the halls, Commander. The likes of me are not invited to dine at the High Table." He uncurled his clenched fingers and smoothed them restlessly down his jacket. He looked up, mouth quirking in a way that conveyed more weary bitterness than he probably intended. "The likes of me are not good enough for you, either."

"That's not for anyone but you and I to decide," Jader said, making a mental note to find who was saying such nasty things and encourage them to find something else to gossip about. "So are you only free this evening, or do you have a couple of hours to spare now as well?"

Confusion and surprise rippled across Kamir's face. "My whole day is free. I knew this would take some time, and if anything was amiss we would have been here well into the evening, so I arranged for the children to be well-occupied until late tonight."

"May I steal some of your time?"

More surprise filled Kamir's eyes, but after a moment of hesitation, a soft, shy smile curved his mouth as he accepted the arm Jader offered. "You may."

Jader held out the ring Sarrica had only just given him, and when Kamir slowly took it, said, "You may as well hold on to that since you are guardian of my estate for the foreseeable future. I've also taken on the previous Marquis's secretaries since they're familiar and that will make matters easier on all of us. However, I'm not as familiar with *them* as I would prefer to be, so I'd appreciate it if you'd watch them as closely as you comfortably can and discipline or terminate as you see fit."

"I'll do my best," Kamir replied, offering again that shy smile Jader realized was becoming one of his favorite things. They'd only known each other a couple of weeks, but he would miss Kamir fiercely when he was in Benta.

And didn't it figure he found someone so interesting right before his life was swept up in a tsunami and out to sea.

"I hope no one has been giving you trouble because of your sudden association with me," Jader said into the easy silence that fell between them as they left the office and walked through the halls. "I know we discussed it before, but I hope they are leaving you alone now it's apparent we are lovers. Let me know if that is not the case, and in my absence feel free to speak with Sarrica or Allen. As I've said before, you clearly can handle yourself, but if you want help, it's there."

Kamir's smile was soft and a bit wobbly at the edges. "I appreciate the offer, as always." He smiled up at Jader, though there was a tightness around his eyes now. "But you don't have to say we are lovers, Commander. I know rumors are abounding, but—"

Drawing then to a halt, Jader said, "I think it is safe to say we are lovers. I do not say that because I feel an obligation. I say it because it's true. I'll be honest and say it's not what I intended, but neither am I unhappy with the

unexpected turn of events—though if you want me to back away, of course I will. I admit my experience with abuse, and those who have endured all you have, is limited, so you must tell me if I overstep or—"

"You haven't," Kamir said, offering another of those wobbly-edged smiles. "It's not what I expected either, and I am happy to take matters slowly and see what comes or doesn't." He started to say more, then gave a bare shake of his head and fell silent, like he could not quite form, or perhaps voice, the words he wanted.

But he certainly looked like a man in need of a kiss. Jader was more than happy to provide. Pulling his arm free, he wrapped it around Kamir's shoulders to draw him close and dipped his head to drop a kiss on that sweet, addictive mouth. Kamir gasped against him, but in the next breath happily succumbed, his arms curving awkwardly around Jader's cumbersome layers of fabric and armor to hold fast.

"Not that I mind, Commander," Kamir said when Jader finally released his mouth, "but making a spectacle of us is not going to lessen the number of people who think they need to air their opinions on our relationship."

Jader let him go and smiled as he once more offered his arm. "I suppose you have a point." His heart tripped at that word. Relationship. It wasn't wrong. He'd just said himself they were lovers. Given all the papers they'd just signed, they certainly had a relationship. But that word sounded so much more important and permanent than the more casual 'lovers'.

It was also something he was content to think about later.

The hall they were in was occupied by only a palace guard and the woman who'd been speaking to him, but they gaped unabashedly, and Jader had no doubt what one of the more popular topics of gossip would be at dinner that night.

No doubt there'd be theories regarding marriage, as well, especially with Kamir playing the role of estate guardian, but Jader had no desire to broach that topic, even in jest. Even if he had any interest in marriage, which he certainly didn't, Kamir was a poor choice in spouse—rather, *Jader* was a poor choice. He'd been honest when he'd told Allen he didn't know what was going on between them, but it certainly wasn't the sort of thing that led to marriage.

Kamir was the kind of man who merited a spouse who'd be there to support and dote on him, not someone who was going to be missing most of the time—and a good measure of that time spent in the types of situations that could very well one day lead to his death. Allen could nudge and plot all he liked, but Kamir could and would do far better than Jader.

They reached his private office without further incident. Like Lesto, Jader kept his personal and military matters firmly separated. Unlike Lesto, until very recently he'd only required one private secretary. Now he had four. Beckoning them to leave off work and join him, Jader introduced them to Kamir and made clear he spoke for Jader in all estate matters until his return.

Quiet and shy, Kamir might be, but he seemed to have no trouble acquainting himself with each of them, and asking a hundred questions that never would have occurred to Jader. By the end, they did not seem half as tense or anxious as they'd seemed the past few days.

The whole interlude reminded Jader strongly of Allen when he was in his element. The only time he'd seen Kamir happier was that moment in the garden when Jader had spent time talking to his children, and their night together in the city. Allen had been right: Kamir was trained for this, and more importantly, he seemed to genuinely enjoy it.

Kamir had two adoring, clever, lively children. He'd overcome difficult circumstances practically all on his own—while pregnant and then with young children. He already showed every sign of being highly skilled at running a household.

Why in the Mother Ocean had he never remarried? The people of the High Court should have been fighting for the honor, not sneering and laughing behind his back. Jader would never entirely understand Mainlanders.

Though he could have stood there admiring Kamir for hours, Jader eventually tore him away. Back in the hallway, he said, "I will have to rejoin Sarrica and the others soon, but I've a couple of hours free. I can show you more of the paperwork and such that has been tossed at me lately, if you want. I think I left most of it in my room, though, since late at night is the only time I ever have to attend such matters, I swear. I'm honestly surprised I've not yet been pulled away to manage some disaster."

Kamir laughed. "Well, there's plenty of time for disaster left. By all means, show me more." He took Jader's arm when offered it, and they wended through the halls to the imperial wing, where Jader's room was located close to the entry doors.

He nodded to the Fathoms Deep guard who stood outside his door, then pulled out the key kept on a heavy chain around his neck along with his imperial ring. He still could not believe he'd eventually have the Kyrmine ring to add to it. "We're not to be disturbed save for emergencies."

"Yes, Commander." The barest hint of smile flitted across the guard's face before he settled once more beneath a mask of impersonal blankness.

Jader snorted softly and led the way inside, leaving his belt and armor on their respective hook and stand near the entryway.

Then he passed through the archway and into the main portions of the suite, smiling faintly as he always did at his little haven. Sarrica had given him leave to alter it howsoever he saw fit, and Jader had done precisely that.

The main room had the usual seating area, but it was also filled with pots and trenches and even special trellises of various plants. Maintaining them was no easy feat, but the palace gardeners had not come by their jobs lightly, either. There were also aquariums of fish and other sea life, even more finicky to maintain than the plants, but his caretakers were paid very well indeed for the trouble.

"Incredible," Kamir said, moving to the nearest of the aquariums, a large circular one that held an octopus and a handful of fish, along with the various plants needed to keep the aquarium clean. "How did you do this?"

Jader laughed and stripped off his heavy military jacket, dropping it into a nearby chair and running his fingers through his hair. "I paid for it. Told the gardeners what I wanted, in both plants and fish, and they took care of the rest. I am not the only one in the palace to have aquariums, but I do have the most."

"They're amazing," Kamir replied, moving on to one filled with tiny fish in a variety of colors, their scales flashing in the sunlight as they darted from hiding spot to hiding spot. Along the bottom of the tank were a couple of old lobsters that would probably outlive everyone in the palace.

Across the room were doors of similar design, and they opened onto a garden filled with still more plants and aquariums of creatures that needed more sunlight than those indoors. Jader walked over to the doors and threw them open, stepping out into the middle of the patio. It was covered in smooth stones that formed a mosaic of Shahira.

The patio itself stretched out over a semi-private garden far below, and his favorite spot to relax, on the rare occasion he was able, was the hammock he'd strung on a special stand that rested right at the edge. He could look around and down at other parts of the palace, or look out at the sea and distant clouds. Nothing was better than the exceedingly rare occasion he got to lie there and watch a storm roll in.

"What a view," Kamir said from behind him and, after Jader beckoned him close, joined him at the wall. "I thought I had a nice suite, but the imperial wing is even grander than is rumored."

Jader grinned. "Trust me, most of the rooms are less over the top. I told you: I'm vain and like to be surrounded by pretty things. I spent far more money than I'm willing to admit making this suite feel a little bit like home. Sarrica was exceedingly generous in permitting me the patio; it's something suites in the imperial wing aren't usually allowed to have, given the security risks. But he allowed it because there is no way to access it that would not be seen—assuming the intruders didn't simply die trying, since it's a long drop no matter what direction you pick."

"It's beautiful," Kamir said softly, smiling shyly before turning to stare at the sea. "I suspect you don't get to enjoy this view as often as you'd like."

"That is sadly very true, but I knew what I was in for when I accepted Lesto's offer to be his deputy. It is being High Commander that grants me so much luxury, so I cannot find it in me to complain too much."

Kamir turned to smile at him again, laughing softly. Jader barely remembered moving, too lost in savoring the startled gasp Kamir fed him before going pliant in his arms and returning the soft, easy kiss. When they eventually drew apart, Kamir touched his tongue to his top lip and said, "Is this your idea of paperwork, Commander?"

"I really had planned on showing you the papers," Jader said with a laugh, "but don't expect me to complain about a change of plans if it involves clothes coming off."

Kamir snickered and drew him into another kiss, and when they broke apart that time, it was only so Jader could lead him back inside and to the bedroom.

He noted Kamir's gasp as he saw it, but he was vastly more interested in dragging Kamir into bed and making himself the sole object of Kamir's admiration.

Two hours later—and officially late—Jader reluctantly disentangled himself from a sleeping Kamir and went to get cleaned and dressed. Once more High Commander, he checked on his guest one last time, ignoring the urge to kiss him goodbye or fuss with the blankets or brush back the strands of hair draped across Kamir's face.

But out in the hall, he paused to speak with his guard. "Have a servant summoned. Tell them Lord Kamir will need suitable dress to dine at the High Table tonight. Kamir's caretaker, Miss Velina, should be able to handle the matter. Have it all brought here, along with a bath once Kamir wakes."

"Yes, Commander."

"And quit smirking."

Not even bothering to smother the smirk rapidly turning into a grin, the guard replied, "Yes, Commander."

Jader playfully gut-punched him and strode off.

The military matter in need of attending was an assembly of his commanding officers, as well as all mercenary captains, and other critical persons involved with the imperial army. It was time to formally announce the appointment of his provisional deputy. He'd also be announcing Lesto's role as supervisor while he was gone, since despite his and Sarrica's best efforts, Lesto had insisted and blazed through all attempts to stop him.

Though he was nearly forty minutes late, he wasn't terribly surprised that the Secondary Hall lacked Lesto and Sarrica. Everyone else in the room was milling about chatting or reclining on the benches that ran around the edge of the large hall used for announcements not quite important enough to convene the council and court in the grand hall.

On the dais at the back of the hall, Captain Dennar Rega stood speaking in low tones. She laughed loudly at something Dennar said, then turned just as Jader reached them. "Greetings, High Commander. We were starting to

think you'd decided to abandon us this evening." She winked. "Not that I would blame you, if palace rumor is even half true."

Jader lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I should be used to the swiftness with which rumors spread around this place, but it constantly impresses me—or rather terrifies me." He started to say more as Dennar and Rega chuckled, but the doors opened again, and they turned as one to watch as Lesto, Sarrica, and four bodyguards walked the length of the hall to join them.

A nearby servant rang a bell that echoed deep and long, and those few not already falling into place at the High King's arrival quickly scrambled to do so.

"Commander," Sarrica drawled, and waved him to take position in the center of the dais, he and Lesto stepping back to stand at his right and left.

Jader skimmed the room, taking in the mix of expressions: curiosity, annoyance, jealousy, trepidation. "Merry evening. You know full well why you've been called here, and I'm certain you'd all like to get on with your evenings, so I'll keep this brief. I am departing for Benta in two weeks, to be gone for at least a few months, possibly through the end of the year, at the request of Their Imperial Majesties. In my absence, I am appointing my Deputy High Commander, to be supervised during her provisional term by Lord Lesto."

He motioned to Rega, who stepped forward to stand next to him, and presented her with a ring—a signet almost exactly like his, though it was made of silver, not gold, which meant she did not have quite the same level of authority. Once she'd passed her provisional term, that would change.

"Officers, Captains, comrades, I present to you Rega Halon, our new Deputy High Commander!"

The cheering and clapping was near-deafening in the echoing hall, and he was gratified that most of the faces in the crowd looked pleased. If a few looked bitter or unhappy, well they had every right to their disappointment. It was a highly coveted position, and bets had been going for months on who Jader would finally appoint.

Many a purse would undoubtedly suffer that night, since no one could have predicted a woman from a minor garrison that he'd only met a week ago.

As the noise quieted, Sarrica stepped forward to emphasize he supported them fully and he wouldn't be tolerating misbehavior in the ranks while the High Commander was away and the Deputy was learning her new duties. Those who didn't take his admonition seriously changed their minds when he reminded them Lesto would be supervising.

Jader still wasn't happy about that, but the only person more difficult to out-stubborn than Sarrica was Lesto.

As the formalities ended, the officers came up in ones and twos to offer congratulations and promises of support, and nearly three hours passed before the hall emptied, leaving only the four of them.

"Last chance to escape while you can," Jader said to Rega.

"Oh, I think it's a bit too late for that," Rega replied. "My husband and dame have already spent every penny to our name outfitting our suite and themselves." She winked. "My fate is sealed. I'm officially too poor to go anywhere else."

Jader snickered.

"They sound like they'll fit in perfectly," Sarrica said, and clapped her and Jader on the shoulder before stepping past them. "Now I am off to see what remains of dinner in the banquet hall. Would anyone care to join me?"

All of them cared to, as it turned out and, flanked by Sarrica's bodyguards, they made their way to the hall.

The hall was not quite as full as it would have been an hour or two earlier, but all the most powerful players were present, none of them willing to leave until Allen had departed.

At the High Table, Allen sat facing the hall with Shemal on his left, Tara on his right, and Kamir right next to Tara. Kamir looked surprisingly comfortable, given how miserable he'd seemed back in the office, and absolutely breathtaking dressed in scarlet and gold.

As he drew closer, however, Jader realized most of Kamir's relaxed demeanor came from the way he was speaking with Tara about children—specifically, that Tara was several months pregnant and unusually nervous despite various and constant reassurances.

Whatever Kamir had said, however, seemed to be helping, because Tara looked less miserable than he had in some time. And the rest of his misery

would probably fade once Rene returned.

Jader removed his sword belt, hooked it over the back of his chair, and dropped down next to Kamir. "How has dinner with this insufferable crowd been?"

Before Kamir could reply, Shemal replied drolly, *"How like a Belarigo to try and look impressive by insulting the rest of his community."*

"How like a Variago to speak so others can't hear."

Allen's mouth twitched as he replied, "How typical of you both to start acting like children the moment you're together and have an audience. You're as bad as Sarrica and Lesto." His lips curved into a true smile as Sarrica and Lesto cast him affronted looks. He glanced at Jader. "It would be exceptionally rude of me not to translate for our companions."

Jader shrugged. "What's to translate? Shemal said I'm trying to make myself look good by deriding the rest of you, and I said he's being rude in a way he thinks he'll get away with."

Kamir muffled a laugh behind his fingers, and Lesto merely rolled his eyes and thanked the servant who approached with a cup of beer and a plate heaped with food.

"How was the ceremony?" Allen asked.

"Seemed to go well," Sarrica replied. "Anyone disgruntled won't dare open their mouths too wide for at least the first month. By then, I'm sure we'll all be in the mood to start cracking heads. I'm surprised our Bentan guests are not here."

Allen lifted one shoulder. "I hinted strongly tonight was not a good night for them to join us, and they should in fact give Jader some space as he prepares to bid us all farewell. I think they do appreciate the imposition, both to Harken and to Jader personally, for all they are clearly determined and impatient to have their way. They're also not stupid, and know what price they will ultimately be paying for this favor." He didn't look very sorry about it, but he seldom did when the game pieces were moving according to his desires.

Jader thanked the woman who brought him food and drink, content to eat as the rest of the table conversed, happy to be surrounded by friends and

his new lover, the unwelcome visitors well out of sight, and no immediate problems screaming in his ear.

Given it was the last peaceful day he was going to have before he left, he couldn't have asked for a better one.

CHAPTER NINE

Kamir hummed softly as he worked steadily through piles of paperwork. He enjoyed making watches and clocks, but serving as an estate guardian made him cautiously happy in a way he hadn't felt in a long time, save regarding his children and buying a house.

He might owe the guardianship position to Jader, but the skills he possessed for it were his own, hard won under years of schooling, Velina's tutelage, and looking after his own little family. It made him tentatively proud of himself, and stirred something that felt like confidence. Whatever happened after Jader returned... Well, he was starting to truly believe that maybe, just maybe, he really could manage on his own and his family would be all right.

Finishing with the estate financials he'd been looking over, Kamir set the ledger aside with some notes for his secretaries and moved on to the extensive lists of repairs, changes, and other requests that were significant enough to require his approval before they could be enacted.

"Lord Kamir." It was Niale's level but worried tone that made Kamir look up sharply. "There's an imperial clerk requesting an audience."

Panic struck Kamir like a fist, his hands trembling noticeably as he set down his pen. 'Imperial clerk' could technically refer to any one of a hundred different positions, but it was generally used to refer to the clerks of the imperial court, and when one of them paid an unexpected visit, it was never for a good reason.

That would teach him to let down his guard, to feel confident and happy for even five minutes.

"Send them in. We're not to be disturbed until they leave."

"Yes, my lord."

Kamir fought tears. He'd been dreading this day ever since the unpleasant dinner with Theoren nearly a month ago. His family and Theoren had left him alone, practically treated him like he didn't exist, which guaranteed they were up to something. Hopefully they weren't colluding.

If an imperial clerk had come to see him, it could only be about Theoren's threat. If it pertained to the estate, he would have been expecting that and more likely summoned by the Master of Lords.

The man who stepped into his office was short and thin, so small he looked like a brisk wind would knock him over. He pushed his spectacles up his nose and bowed politely. "Lord Kamir Norring?"

"Yes," Kamir said. He beckoned the clerk closer, eyeing the sealed packet of papers he held, his breakfast churning in his stomach and threatening to come back up.

Approaching the desk, the man held out the packet. "I am serving papers of a challenge submitted to the court by Master Theoren Masterow for custody of Chiri Norring and Chara Norring. Do you accept the papers?"

Kamir nodded and managed to bite out, "I accept." He took the sealed packet, signed the paper that said he had received it, and rose to follow the clerk out of the office so he could shut and lock the door. Returning to his desk, he broke the seal on the packet and pulled out the papers.

Tears got the better of him as he read through the challenge, everything Theoren was claiming made him an unfit parent—most notably, that all this time, since well before their divorce, he and Velina had been involved in an affair. That Velina herself was a bad influence, it being well-established she continued to practice unpleasant Island traditions...

That should something happen to him, his children would be left without a suitable guardian—and as the man who had sired them, and having come far in the eight years since they divorced, Theoren wanted custody of the children wrongfully denied him by a sloppy court.

Kamir frowned, pulling out a kerchief to wipe his face. The charges were somewhat troubling on the surface, but the more he thought about it, the more they largely seemed frivolous. It was all stuff he could fight, especially since he had copies of all the paperwork from the divorce and first custody battle.

Depending on the judge who got stuck handling the matter, Theoren could find himself facing punishment for wasting the court's time. Or was Theoren forgetting that he'd married Kamir when he was only sixteen, at a time when the law was changing and no temple should have agreed to

marry them? It was the main reason the courts had sided so heavily with him. The High Court would be no different.

Kamir kept reading, shaking his head at each accusation added to the pile—until he came to the last one.

That he was further unfit because his family was in the process of disowning him.

And the paperwork didn't need to spell out that if his own parents no longer wanted to acknowledge him, how true must the other charges be, what else might not be said, perhaps he really was an unfit parent.

That was Theoren's play—to give the court sufficient reason to conduct an investigation, which would drag on for months and months at the pace the courts moved. And every month it took was time and money that Kamir didn't have. Even with the money he'd received from Jader for managing his estate, he would not be able to afford both moving his family and fighting a months-long court battle, never mind the strain of the investigation itself as court officials picked apart every nook and cranny of his life.

But *why*? Theoren certainly didn't give a damn about the children. He hadn't been happy to learn Kamir was pregnant. He hadn't been there when they were born, hadn't gone to the temple on their naming day three months after that. He'd signed away rights without even having to be persuaded past the assurance that he'd get all the money from the sale of the house and their mutual belongings.

If the challenge went badly, and the worst came to pass, Kamir would lose his children—but Theoren wouldn't gain them.

And how had Theoren known about the disownment? The initial petition might have been filed with the court, but his parents had done it so discreetly even *he* hadn't known it had been done until this moment.

Kamir stared at the copy of the petition that was with the other exhibits, tears falling anew. One thing to know it would someday happen. But to see the paperwork, his parents' signatures, his mother's elegant hand as she explained that'd he'd become a burden and a drain, had always been unreliable...

It would take months to go through, since disownment required investigation and other formalities. But he hadn't thought they'd be so proactive about the matter.

Dropping the papers on the desk, Kamir went into the private washroom in the office to clean his face and tidy his hair.

When that was done, he locked the papers in his desk, opened the office door again, and got back to work. He needed to finish going over the requests, and hopefully could then authorize the housekeeper to start the process of hiring the additional staff she'd requested.

So much for a relaxing evening. He'd be lucky now if he didn't get out of the office late, then there was dinner at the High Table, which he couldn't bow out of, then he needed to spend what remained of the night finishing a desk clock he needed to turn in tomorrow... and now he had to find somewhere to start compiling his case against the challenge.

He took a deep breath. One thing at a time. First, finish up his estate duties for the day. Then he'd sort out the rest.

Unfortunately, the role of estate guardian always took more out of his day than he planned, and by the time he finally escaped the office, he had only just enough time to dash across the palace to dress for dinner then race for the banquet hall.

And that was yet another problem on his teetering pile: he had clothes fit enough for the High Court at the low level to which he was accustomed. His wardrobe was *not* prepared for dining regularly with the High King and Consort, and ordering additional clothes required still more money and time that he simply didn't have.

It was little wonder he felt so tired lately. He would give anything to have one night simply to sit in his room and relax. An afternoon free to play with his children, who were decidedly unhappy he barely saw them anymore. The situation didn't please him either, but if he could push through until the end of the year, he would have all the time for them they could wish.

"Lord Kamir!"

He drew to a halt and turned to watch as Tara walked toward him, as beautiful and flawless as ever, looking far more elegant in pregnancy than Kamir had been. Then again, he'd been nineteen and scared to death. Elegance had been the least of his concerns.

Tara reached him and linked arms, his other hand running over his stretched belly, largely hidden by all the layers and folds of his stunning

clothes. Like anyone who lived permanently in Harkenesten Palace, Kamir spent a goodly sum on his clothes simply from necessity. But what he spent on his entire wardrobe people like Lord Tara spent on one or two outfits—and High Consort Allen's clothing budget was something else entirely.

He always felt so pretty and elegant in his room, and so very plain and awkward once he was in their company. But he smiled as they stepped into the banquet hall, and asked, "How are you feeling today?"

"Much better, thank you. I admit I did not believe that calo tea would work such wonders, but I almost feel like my old self. How did you endure this at so young an age? I would have been terrified."

"I was," Kamir admitted. "I had no choice, though, and Velina was there to help me. She's never had children, but she helped many a relative growing up."

Tara chuckled. "My poor staff is largely overwhelmed and avoiding me. Perhaps I should take on someone who won't find me anything but routine and vaguely whiny." He winked, and then they were at the High Table and greeting Allen and Shemal. Lesto and Sarrica appeared not to be joining them, to judge by the lack of place settings.

Instead, sitting in Sarrica's place was his daughter Bellen, approximately nine now, if Kamir recalled correctly. Just about the age children should start becoming accustomed to some elements of court life, like dining in the public hall. Rumor had it she was also taking up silver tongue training, which made it all the more vital she became comfortable around crowds and talking to many people at once.

At present, however, her face was fixed firmly on her plate as she played nervously with her food. Kamir looked at Allen as he finished chatting with Tara. Nodding at Bellen he asked, "Is she shy?"

"Only around large numbers of people," Allen replied. "Bellen, say hello to our guests, you know the etiquette."

Bellen looked up and smiled shyly. She was a beautiful echo of the man who'd given birth to her, though there was something of Sarrica in the way she stared, the stubborn set of her chin as she dutifully went through a rote greeting.

Kamir smiled. "You remind me a bit of my son Chara. He prefers to be quiet outside of our rooms as well. Often he's quiet in them, too. But when

he finally starts talking, it's near impossible to get him to stop." He winked, and Bellen's shy smile brightened some. "So what languages are you learning, Princess Silver Tongue?"

At this, she brightened, most of her shyness falling away as she happily discussed that she was learning Gaulden, Islander, Tricemorien, Carthian, and Bentan, and if she did well on her tests, Allen would let her start learning Delfastien and Gearthish too.

By the time the second course was brought, she'd been coaxed into other topics—all the subjects she hated studying, the pony she'd been promised for her birthday, the way her brother could never hold still, and how she wished she could play with other children.

Allen turned to them at that point to cast Kamir a pensive glance before murmuring, "We'll see," and falling back to the conversation that had paused at his distraction.

Despite always feeling awkward and outclassed, Kamir enjoyed dining at the High Table. He would never dare to presume any of them considered him a friend, though Tara always treated him in exceedingly friendly fashion, but he certainly didn't mind pretending for as long as it lasted. After years of dining alone in his room or under the shrewd, brutal gazes of the High Court, it was beyond description to sit and dine with people who treated him like he was wanted.

All of that would fade once Jader returned and eventually lost interest, but Kamir would always be able to say that for a time he'd been favored by the High Throne. Whatever his family and Theoren did to him, they couldn't take these happy evenings away.

Dinner ended a little over an hour later, when Allen excused himself early to put Bellen, nearly asleep in her rose-flavored iced cream, to bed. Once he'd gone, Kamir murmured his own goodnights and departed.

His parents stared at him as he walked the length of the banquet hall, but Kamir was more than happy to continue acting like he didn't notice them. If there was one element of this entire strange time he was enjoying, it was that Allen had extended him an invitation to join the High Table for dinner every night, but had pointedly not extended the same to his family.

That must infuriate them beyond all measure, but there was nothing they could do about it unless they hit upon something that would cause Allen to

regard them favorably—or Sarrica, but catching Sarrica's attention was so impossible it was laughable.

The feeling of triumph at his parents being so soundly snubbed while he, for once, was treated favorably was unfortunately fleeting. Difficult to stay positive as the custody challenge and disownment rose again to the forefront of his mind. Once that gossip swept through the court, he could only imagine how rapidly he would fall out of favor. Sarrica was fierce when it came to children, and Allen was proving to be of like mind, which made Kamir happy even as he knew it would a killing blow for him.

But there was nothing he could do about it save weather the storm. The house was bought. He and Velina had managed to spend three days straight selecting and commissioning furniture that would be delivered in another week, along with various other goods the house would need. Once all of that was taken care of, he could work on stocking the kitchen with supplies and foodstuffs.

Then he could move his family into it, and Pantheon, he could not wait to see the looks on their faces when Chiri and Chara saw it. They'd be sad about moving away from some of their friends, but that could be worked with, and they'd love having so much space...

He came to a halt at the end of the hallway as he saw the figure waiting by his door with a familiar sour expression on his face. Steeling himself, remaining right where he was so Theoren would have to come to him—in the middle of an intersection of hallways where anyone could happen by and guards in the large public hall not far off would hear noise—Kamir asked, "What do you want?"

"I thought you'd like to discuss the challenge," Theoren said, failing miserably at his attempt to sound soft and persuasive. Theoren never had been good at anything but thinking the world of himself. He strolled up to Kamir like they were arranging a time to have tea together.

"I'll save my discussions for the court." Kamir backed up as Theoren drew closer than expected—and gasped as he was grabbed and thrown against the far wall. His heart jumped into his throat as trembling overtook him, eyes stinging as a panicked need to run and hide clawed at him.

Theoren loomed in close. "This is exactly the kind of snotty behavior that makes your life so difficult."

Old, familiar frustration and bitterness pushed away some of Kamir's terror. "No, abusive ex-husbands and parents make my life difficult. Get away from me."

Immediately gentling, using that soft tone Kamir had acquiesced too many times than he could stomach counting, Theoren said, "Come now, Kamir. You know you bring it all on yourself, being stubborn and single-minded and ignoring the advice of your betters."

Kamir wanted to cry. Scream. Punch him in his fucking face.

But he'd be damned if he gave Theoren more leverage by getting into an altercation with him or calling for the guards. It wouldn't matter what he said or how justified he'd be, people always believed Theoren. They had for *years* until Kamir had arrived at court still exhausted from giving birth and with a case against his husband that even the laziest, most apathetic clerk could not ignore.

He'd done it once and he'd do it again, but only by doing it the same way: slowly, carefully, and giving *nothing* away until he could slap Theoren in the face with it in the middle of a courtroom. He shrugged off Theoren's hand. "Do not touch me. Get away from me."

"Kamir," Theoren said, voice soft again, the sweet tone he'd once used to seduce Kamir into so many stupid things. A tone that no one else had ever used, that had made Kamir think he was special. Treasured. *Loved*.

Instead he'd just fallen for a different version of the same tired tricks his parents had used.

"Don't be like this, Kamir," Theoren continued. "I know we ended poorly, but surely after all this time you can give me a second chance."

Kamir almost laughed, but he was afraid it would turn into sobbing. "A second chance? You show up and during our first conversation you threaten to take my children. You haven't changed at all." He twisted free and moved back to the middle of the intersection. "Stay away from me, Theoren, or I'll shout for the guards."

Anger flickered in Theoren's eyes, but he was prevented from commenting by the sound of voices rapidly drawing closer—people chatting and tittering about some person not present.

His smile more like a grimace, Theoren said, "We'll talk when you're no longer in one of your disagreeable moods. I forgot that there's no talking to you when you're like this." He turned and strode off, and Kamir shook with relief. Once Theoren was out of sight, and the group they'd heard had entered the hall, Kamir headed for his suite.

Unlocking the door, he slipped inside and locked it again behind him. Velina saw him and immediately threw her knitting and crossed the room to embrace him. "Was he lurking?"

"Yes, but he's gone for now." Kamir went over to the sideboard in the dining area and fixed himself a cup of tea.

The papers he'd left for Velina to look over were still laid out on the table, and despite how stupid and pathetic it made him feel, Kamir shook hard in the wake of dealing with Theoren.

Pantheon, he'd already done this once. Why did he have to do it again?

Velina pulled up a chair close enough she could lean in and hug him. She then rested her head on his shoulder and ran fingers up and down his spine until Kamir's tears were finally spent. "You beat him once, you can beat him again—and this time you'll be even better at it. Whatever your worthless family tries to say otherwise, you've only grown stronger and more capable over the last eight years." She tucked a strand of hair behind his ear. "More beautiful, too, but that's not really relevant to the situation, although I bet it does rub salt in Theoren's wounds."

Kamir gave a tremulous laugh. "Why couldn't he just stay away?"

Instead of answering, Velina said, "Clearly we should have gone with our first plan and dropped him down an abandoned well."

His laugh was steadier that time. "Clearly." He drained his tea and set the cup back down. "After reading the court papers, I'm half-surprised you didn't kill him."

"I ran errands instead and reminded myself why I'd rather see him suffer slowly." She moved her chair back around the table and gathered up the papers, setting them neatly between them. "Do you think your parents are mixed up in this somehow?"

Kamir spread his hands. "That seems the only way he'd know of the disownment filing. My parents have started the process, but they obviously

want to keep it discreet for as long as possible. Even I didn't know they'd already submitted the papers until today. I just don't know *why* they'd be colluding with Theoren. They hate him almost as much as I do—they would probably claim they hate him more." His mouth twisted. He was sorely tempted to find something stronger than tea, but that wouldn't actually help matters in the end.

Velina worried her bottom lip as she stared pensively at the table. Just when Kamir was about to ask what weighed so heavily on her mind, she looked up and said, "I've been thinking about it ever since he arrived, and even harder since his threat. All I can think is that it's not like him. He doesn't give a damn about those children; if he did, he wouldn't have waited eight years to regain parental rights. No, this smacks of a man who showed up to get money out of you and wound up in the hands of schemers."

"My parents," Kamir said, closing his eyes as the whole nasty scheme came crashing down on him.

Theoren had probably planned simply to barge in on him and wheedle and harass until Kamir finally gave in and threw money at him. But somewhere his parents had gotten hold of Theoren and probably offered him plenty of money if he did what they said—challenge for custody of his children and force the investigation, leaving Kamir destitute and desperate, at which point he'd have no choice but to marry someone as they'd ordered. He didn't doubt they had candidates at the ready.

Or, now that he'd somehow wound up in Jader's bed, they might be hoping that he would somehow force or persuade Jader to marry him. Which just made Kamir want to laugh hysterically.

He made another cup of tea instead, then sat down with pen and paper to start listing out everything he needed to do. An order of holding would be his first step; the court would have no problem granting that, he hoped, and that would force Theoren to stay away from him. Testimonies of good standing.

The temptation to ask Tara, Shemal, or Allen was strong... but they were not his friends, and had no reason to use their leverage to help him. It was only a matter of days before they caught wind of the whole matter and likely rescinded the invitation to dine with them.

His chest ached just thinking about it, but maybe it was better to end that flight of fancy sooner rather than later. It had been wonderful while it lasted; he would have to live with that.

Master Berrio from the clock shop would write him a testimony. Shiar would certainly give him one. He needed at least three, though, to build a truly strong defense. "I need a third."

"Bremm," Velina said.

Kamir slumped. "Of course, I'm a halfwit." He jotted Bremm's name down, then moved on to the rest of the paperwork he would need to gather: financial records, a copy of the mortgage, records of the children's schooling, healer records...

When the initial list was complete, they broke it down and made notes on everything they would need to do to secure each item. Some of them were simple—he merely needed to take his papers from the original case to the office of records and have official copies made. Time consuming and not inexpensive, but simple enough. Other matters would take much longer and entail a great deal more work.

But it was all doable, and the very first thing he was doing in the morning was going to the court to get the order of holding.

He finished his tea and left the cup to be taken away by Amaria in the morning. "Thank you, Velina."

She hugged him tightly as they stood. "It's not as though you haven't helped me time and again in return. I would not have my cozy life if you had not befriended me. And soon we'll move into our pretty new home and leave all this treachery behind us." She kissed his cheeks. "You should get some sleep."

"I need to finish up that desk clock first," Kamir replied around a yawn. "Hopefully it won't take more than an hour. Go to bed. I promise I'll find mine soon."

She gave him a last admonishing look, but gathered her knitting and went. Fixing himself a stronger cup of tea, because it was going to be a bit more than one hour if he wanted to turn the clock in tomorrow, he went into his workshop and settled in.

When he finally dragged himself to bed a few hours later, the time made him wince, but he'd just have to get through the long day on tea and determination. Stripping off his clothes, he pulled on a sleep shirt and crawled into bed. He was asleep almost before he finished pulling the blankets.

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It wasn't Velina or Amaria who woke him up, but a sudden, sharp need to empty his stomach. Kamir barely made it to the chamber pot before doing precisely that, only barely registering the soft squeak of his door opening.

"Kamir?" Velina asked softly.

He couldn't answer though, too busy curling in on himself as a sudden, single and terrible thought filled his head: he'd forgotten to drink his astiri tea after his last encounter with Jader the couple of weeks before he'd left. He'd been so enchanted, then distracted, then overwhelmed...

"Oh, Pantheon, how could I be this fucking stupid?" he asked, moaning as he covered his face.

"So you are pregnant," Velina said softly. "I thought... but assumed I must be wrong because you never mentioned it."

Kamir gave a wobbly laugh. "I was too stupid to notice. You'd think I'd be smarter than that, but I wasn't. I let myself be distracted and got careless."

Velina made a soft noise when he'd finished explaining. "What's done is done, unless you want to end the matter now."

He considered it, because life would be so much easier if this unexpected problem vanished. There were substances he could take that would certainly do that. But the same was true several years ago when he'd made the decision to keep Chiri and Chara, too. "No."

"Then we move forward. At least you're a wonderful father, and the twins will think a sibling the greatest possible gift." She helped Kamir to his feet.

"I'm more worried what the court will think. How my parents will react." Kamir took a deep breath, forced back the panicked tears that wanted out. He'd cried too much lately, and more crying wasn't going to help anything.

"W-what Jader will think? I can handle it if the whole of the High Court thinks I'm trying to force him into marriage with this, although they're mistaken about the century they live in if they think that sort of game would work. I just don't want Jader thinking that of me."

"You still don't know us Islanders very well," Velina said, scoffing. "We don't even have marriage the way you lot think of it, with your contracts and such. We say marriage because that's easier, but it's not nearly as binding as what you Mainlanders call marriage. My arrangements with two of my lovers are what you would call marriage, but neither of them are the person I've trusted my belongings to when I die—that is someone back home, who already has an informal claim on my hut. The High Commander has a good Islander brain in his head; at the very least he'll have the sense to ask you before he believes court gossip."

"You're right." Kamir nodded, took another deep breath. "Hopefully it won't matter. I'll have to endure court gossip for a time, but that's hardly new, and in a few months, we'll be living in the city."

She patted his cheek. "Precisely. Now get dressed so you can spend some time with your children; they miss you."

"I miss them, too," Kamir said, and went to do as she said.

He dressed quickly in clothes that would suit going into the city, getting stuck in the court offices for hours, and then working in his own office until—and probably after—dinner.

Smoothing down his dark gold jacket, he sat at his dressing table to fix his hair, settling on a simple braid he wrapped into a crown, securing it with jewel-studded pins.

He started to stand, but faltered as his stomach seemed to loom at him from the mirror. He sat back down and pressed his hands against his flat belly, too many emotions to sort spinning and tumbling through him, a heavy, thorny ache spreading through his chest.

It had been an accident, and it was the very last thing he needed right now. Whatever Velina said, Jader would probably return from Benta and promptly hate him as a conniving, scheming bastard—or at best a careless fool.

But for all Kamir desperately wished he'd been smarter and more careful, he couldn't be entirely sorry either. He'd always wanted more children, and

what was there to complain about in having a child that might have Jader's soft brown eyes and brilliant smile?

Smiling ever so faintly himself, Kamir headed out to face his day.

CHAPTER TEN

"What was the point in giving us a schedule if they never intend to stick to it?" Jader asked around a yawn.

Across from him, Vannia looked even more annoyed as she worked to adjust his schedule for at least the thousandth time that day alone. She'd worked hard to arrange everything, including quieter stops where they did not have to meet with people, but every hour it seemed there was another guest, another visit, and piles of apologies that amounted to nothing.

If not for Lady Seredia playing the part of translator and facilitator so perfectly, Jader might have caused several war-provoking incidents.

He wouldn't mind as much normally, for he did enjoy socializing, but he was starting to feel like a nomad's trick-performing bird. Or, well, an Islander barbarian on display for civilized Mainlanders, but if he let that thought settle into place, his mood would so completely sour there'd be no restoring it.

He had a job to do, and no matter how reluctant he was, he intended to see it through. Surely it could not be that difficult to convince one old woman to hand full control over to her daughter.

Even he couldn't take that thought seriously.

"You look exhausted," Seredia said with a faint, sympathetic smile. She looked exhausted herself, curled up on her half of the opposite bench of the large carriage, her head pillowed against her bundled shawl, cloak draped over her like a blanket to ward off the chill that slipped in despite the heavy, insulated walls.

Jader finally succumbed to the yawn he'd been fighting, then said, "I would much rather have stayed the night in a warm bed instead of carrying on just so we can be certain to reach Lord Whoever's house on time. I'm the guest. Shouldn't all these things be done according to my wishes?"

"Even royalty isn't always that lucky," Seredia said with a laugh. "I am sorry though. The hour was so late by the time everyone else shut up and went home, I was certain we'd be staying the night. I did my best, but Lady Krista was insistent. Something about needing to do all this before the first

heavy snowfall." She frowned slightly. "Though to be honest, everyone seems to be worried about something else when they think none of us is paying attention. I cannot glean what though. They're all very careful not to tell me everything."

"Shera and I had the same impression, but we haven't gleaned anything either," Vannia said with a frown. "He remained with the soldiers and other servants in the hopes of finally learning something, though he doesn't anticipate he'll have much luck. Whatever is going on, they don't want you knowing about it."

"Rebels," Jader replied. "I had a talk with tel Mendi earlier. His people managed to get gossip out of soldiers in the city while the baggage was being pulled out of the hold and loaded onto the carriages and carts. They got more of it at that house we stayed in there."

Vannia looked annoyed that tel Mendi's soldiers had succeeded where she'd failed, but only nodded.

Jader continued, "Apparently not everyone in Benta is pleased with Desmond's presence on the throne or the way he is making nice with Harken. They're even less pleased that the High Commander of Harken is visiting not just as a guest, but as a supposed long lost child of one of their most powerful families."

"Supposed," Seredia repeated with a snort, and beside her Vannia rolled her eyes. "It doesn't take more than looking at you and Her Ladyship to realize there's no supposition involved. But I suppose they'd find that even worse." Her brows drew down even further. "I had heard whispers of malcontents, but I thought it was a matter of a few grumbling nobles and others who don't have the same favor with King Desmond that they did with his late father."

"That's definitely all my extensive reports had to say on the matter. Apparently those who know better have not seen fit to share the information with the rest of the continent. That will certainly be going in my reports, along with a few strong words for my spy masters. In the meantime, do try to overhear as much as you can, but have a care. I would not want you to come to harm."

"I learned a thing or two about caution in Treya Mencee. Trust me, I've no desire to play the foolish hero. I'll leave the real spying and soldiering to

the experts. Certainly Captain tel Mendi seems to have it well in hand."

Jader smiled briefly. "Yes, he does. The more time I spend with him and Shattered Wind, the more I like them. And you, dear ladies. Getting to know all of you is definitely the highlight of this trip."

"I'm honored, my lord, and the sentiment is returned full measure." They exchanged more smiles, then Seredia glanced out the window. "Using the weather isn't a bad lie. For all I'm happy for this assignment, I wish you could have gotten into this tangle in the summer."

"Agreed." Snow was not something Jader had ever experienced, not even when he got dragged into Cartha to deal with one problem or another. It fell occasionally in some parts of Harken, or so he was told, but so rarely no one could remember when it had last happened. Certainly not the ten plus years he'd lived there. "I hope that means we're almost finished, but I dread looking at the schedule because I swear it grows by twenty names every time I do."

Seredia made a noise that might have been giggling if she hadn't been half-asleep. "I'm not looking either, not until morning and after I've had coffee. But for what it's worth, Commander—my lord—you are doing splendidly, especially given you've never received any but the most basic diplomatic training."

"Thank you," Jader replied. He tried to settle more comfortably on his own side of the carriage, but it was going to be a long, miserable night. It wasn't the confining space that bothered him, but the uneven motion, the occasional hard jerk as they hit a rock or some other stubborn obstacle.

Krista had tried to insist they share a carriage, but Jader had flat out refused. He needed space and rest, to be able to relax properly. If she'd shared the carriage with him, she would have insisted on a stilted conversation and he'd have gotten next to no sleep.

He didn't know how the rest of them did this sort of thing for a living. He'd stayed awake three days straight through battles and catastrophes, and he swore even facing the aftereffects of a devastating hurricane had not left him this thoroughly worn out.

Seredia snored softly as she finally drifted off. Jader hoped he developed her skills soon, or he might end this entire trip with murder charges. He

sighed and scrubbed at his face, wishing at the very least for some light to read by.

Instead he ran through the letters he'd been mentally composing, one for Allen to keep him apprised of the trip on the chance there was anything he needed to advise on or caution against—and of course Jader needed to tell them about the rebels. They weren't, so far as tel Mendi had been able to discern, much of a threat yet, but they had the potential to become a threat if they weren't stopped soon, and Jader's presence wasn't helping.

But when he was thinking about that unpleasant letter and the equally unpleasant reply he would receive, he happily pondered the other letter he wanted to send. That one would be going to Kamir, more relaxed and casual, with humorous bits of his own awkwardness and observations on customs that seemed so strange to him.

Like the horrible blandness of Bentan food, save for breakfast and dessert, which both tended toward far too sweet. He would give anything for a good bowl of creamy, spicy soup thick with potatoes and carrots and chicken. Or fragrant saffron rice, a spicy seafood curry, flatbread and chutney. His mother's lobster chowder or fish kebabs so spicy his eyes watered.

Thinking about food certainly wasn't going to help him sleep. Honestly, would one night in comfortable beds have hurt anything? Ugh.

Positive thoughts. What good things could he write about to Kamir? The country itself was beautiful. More austere and less colorful than Harken, but definitely beautiful in its own way. The buildings were heavier, darker, with fewer windows and doors, but they also seemed to suffer more cold than Harken. Even right then, he was practically freezing, bundled up in his best winter cloak. He was starting to appreciate why the Bentans had constantly clucked and fussed over them.

He had a feeling the first thing he'd be doing the moment they stopped long enough would be buying more suitable clothes. Or maybe he'd just try to come up with a good reason he wasn't able to leave his nice warm bed until spring.

Oh, if only it were that easy.

But if he was going to be in the city buying clothes, he could also start buying gifts. Wine, brandy, beer, but also baubles and trinkets. The jewelry

he'd so far seen certainly looked worthwhile, and he could obtain a piece or three for Kamir. His family would probably appreciate some pottery or wind chimes, other such things for their cabins if he could find them.

He thought wistfully of his rooms in Harkenesten, how much he'd enjoyed seeing them through Kamir's eyes. How much he'd liked seeing Kamir in his bed.

He lightly thumped the back of his head against the jacket he'd turned into a pillow. If they were going to keep traveling like this, he was going to demand they at least provide proper bedding; it was ridiculous they had not done so to begin with. He made a note to have Vannia take care of that once they reached their destination.

Ugh, he just wanted to sleep. Why could he sleep on cold, hard ground in a crowded camp, or through a hurricane, but not in one stupid carriage?

His thoughts bounced back to the bed he sorely missed, and the memory of Kamir fast asleep in it, his purple hair spread across the pillow and partially covering his face, the blankets tangled around his legs, leaving most of him bare.

Jader was still bitter he'd not had time for one more night with Kamir before he left. But hopefully Kamir would still be interested in continuing their dalliance when he returned. That was a lot to expect, though, of a man he'd known only for weeks and then promptly had to leave for months—possibly most of a year.

Argh, none of this was helping him sleep. Jader gave up on meandering thoughts and tried to focus on mindlessly counting pebbles as they dropped, dropped, dropped in a bucket.

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It must have worked, because he jerked awake when they stopped moving. He winced at the sunlight jabbing into his eyes through a crack between the carriage door and frame. Jader shifted and pushed away his cloak—then immediately regretted it as the Pantheon-reviled cold washed over. Mercy on his balls, why was it so cold?

Resisting the urge to return to huddling in the meagre warmth of his discarded cloak, he scooped it up and climbed out of the carriage—and swore colorfully as he got his woefully inadequate cloak over his shoulders.

Piles of white were everywhere, smothering everything. An icy wind cut through all his layers. Jader bit back a whimper, but could do nothing to control his shivering. He finally took notice of the people, envying the lush, heavy furs the Bentan natives were wearing. Behind them stood a handsome, dark and austere house, the windows shuttered, even the door shut, though people were clustered on the stairs and landing leading to it.

A tall, fat man with gray hair and beard approached, a dark scarlet cloak whirling around him, trimmed in gray fur and lined in some unknown, heavy black fabric. In thickly-accented Harken that was a jarring mix of formal and informal, the man said, "Welcome to Nettle, my humble home. It's an honor to have you Lord Star, and your fine retinue. Lady Hanalar, Captain tel Mendi."

"Lady Seredia is fine, please, my lord."

"Captain Tsarana, too, please," Tsarana said. "Formality is unnecessary."

"You're most gracious. I am Lord Wessel Kane—Wessel, please." He bowed over Lady Seredia's hand, then gave a deep nod to Vannia, Shera, and Captain Tsarana tel Mendi as he and a handful of his soldiers formed a loose half circle around Jader. He motioned to a woman dressed in livery who stood several paces back. Taking the large bundles she carried, he handed one each to Jader, Seredia, and Tsarana. "I thought you might appreciate a more practical welcome gift, though our custom is usually for lavish presents. Please."

Jader dutifully unfolded the large, heavy bundle, not remotely disappointed to see the beautiful blue and gray fabric was in fact a heavier cloak like the Bentans wore—including a hood that immediately repelled the cold as he pulled it up. He barely bit back a whimper of relief. "Your generosity is appreciated. I did not realize just how cold it could get. I've never seen..." He swept his arm to indicate the landscape, "this."

Wessel laughed, his large body shaking with it. "Snow? This is barely a dusting, I promise. Soon the first real snow of winter will fall, and up in your family home it will be as deep as you." He clapped Jader on the shoulder and drew him close to lead him into the house. "We need to get some meat on your delicate bones or you'll freeze like a tree branch, my lord."

"I wish I could disagree with you," Jader said, not bothering to say that his actual family back in Shahira had tried to fatten him up for years before finally accepting he was always going to be twig-thin.

Still laughing, Wessel all but dragged him into the house, where servants promptly came to take the cloaks they'd just been given and the ones they no longer needed. They also took their shoes, a custom Jader was never going to enjoy. Taking shoes off was perfectly normal, but that the servants hauled them away was unsettling. "Later today we'll see to it you obtain suitable clothing for a Bentan winter. But come, there is a proper breakfast waiting and a whole day for you to rest and relax before you make the final trip up into the mountains where you'll likely be stuck until the spring thaw."

That sounded positively terrifying and a little ominous. Nor was Jader remotely amused this was the first time he was hearing that the Abernoth estate was so severely isolated. Remote, yes, but no one had said it essentially became cut off at certain times of the year.

They were led into a dining room, where a sideboard was laden with food and all manner of drinks were scattered the length of the table. The smells made Jader's stomach growl, even if the food was still unfamiliar. He sat in the seat Wessel indicated, Seredia sitting across from him, Tsarana taking the seat immediately beside him after hanging his sword belt from the back of his chair. Jader was envious; his own swords were with the carriage, as he was technically Lord Jader right now, not High Commander.

A servant came forward, a deep frown cutting into his face, to take it—and recoiled sharply when Tsarana scowled and dropped a hand over the bit of belt hanging on the chair.

Lord Wessel spoke in quiet tones to the servant and with a nod of his head, sent him away. "My apologies. I did try to warn them you had different customs, but we normally would never permit weapons at the table and it is a hard habit to break."

"It's my place to apologize," Jader said. "I do appreciate your leniency."

"I am happy to indulge such a prominent figure of Harken, and such an interesting man," Wessel said with a smile.

Jader was grateful that servants appeared then to manage the food, as the one time he'd had to serve himself he hadn't known where to start. It was a

painful reminder of his earliest days on the Mainland—a reminder he could have happily lived without.

The food was, as expected, too bland or too sweet, but it was warm and filling and didn't taste *bad*. Jader ate slowly, in between dealing with Wessel's endless questions and chatter. He had no idea what time it was, but it felt entirely too early for so much energetic talking.

The coffee was amazing, but he'd heard Bentans were nigh-on religious about their coffee. So far that seemed to be true, to judge by how often he drank it and how many establishments existed solely to serve it.

Eventually, however, his lingering exhaustion started to get the better of him and, despite his efforts, the yawns began to outnumber the words he managed to get out between them.

Wessel laughed and rang the bell at his elbow for the servants to come clear everything away. "I think you have indulged me long enough, my lord, and I thank you. Come, come, we'll take you to your rooms and let you get in a bit of nap before the—" He faltered, then said a Bentan word, and finished, "this evening."

"Dinner party," Seredia said.

"Yes," Wessel said, and once more rested a hand on Jader's shoulder as he led him away up the wide, curving staircase to the second floor and down a hall where he stopped in front of a large, dark-stained wooden door painted with a trio of bird silhouettes in flight done in blue and silver paint. "Here you are, my lord. If you need anything, you've only to ring the bell pull. We've assigned a servant who should understand you well enough to tend you properly."

"Thank you, my lord, you've been most gracious. Where are my people quartered?"

"Directly across from you is a room for three, and the rest will be in rooms on the third floor. Lady Seredia is in the east hall."

Jader frowned. "Why is she not on this hall with me?"

Wessel looked briefly offended. "Women have their own quarters, of course."

"I see." Jader let the matter drop, too tired to further question something that sounded so stupid on the surface. "Thank you again. I'll endeavor not to

sleep too long."

Wessel looked as though he wanted to linger, something in his gaze that made Jader wary, though he couldn't quite sort out why. Thankfully, however, Wessel only bid him sleep well and departed.

Jader motioned for Tsarana to join him. Gesturing for one of the men to take position outside Jader's door, Tsarana bid the other two take the room across the hall.

Once the door was closed, Jader went over to the chair by the window and dropped heavily into it. "What am I missing?"

"Regarding Lord Wessel?" At Jader's nod, Tsarana said, "I can barely understand his mangled Harken, and his accent doesn't help, but I don't need language to know he fancies a tumble, my lord," Tsarana replied wryly, leaning against the door and folding his arms across his chest.

Jader made a face. "Oh, I see. I have been told before I often miss when people are flirting with me, but I swear I am not usually *that* oblivious. I must be more tired than I thought."

Tsarana chuckled. "Or distracted. Homesick."

"All of it, likely," Jader said with a sigh. "Certainly not interested, even if I thought I could enter into such an affair without sending Allen into fits." He made himself stand and stripped off layers until he was in only breeches and undershirt. Bundling the discarded clothes together, he dropped them on the large chest at the foot of his bed. It was made of the same dark-stained wood that seemed so common in Benta, with thick, heavy posts and drapes tied back with gold cords, clearly meant to be closed around the bed—probably to keep back the Pantheon-rejected chill. "Why is this place so wretchedly cold?"

"Because Pantheon alone knows what the Bentans would get up to if they didn't spend half the year frozen in place." Tsarana replied. "I'm keeping a soldier stationed at your door, and if anyone tries to pitch a fit about it I intend to pull rank. I and two others will be in the room directly across, and rotate guard duty regularly. Once we're suitably dressed for the weather, I'll be certain to keep them stationed outside as well."

Jader nodded. "Expecting trouble, or simply favor precaution?"

"Little of both." Tsarana drew himself up as Jader finished dressing for bed and turned back to him. "I wanted to say thank you, properly, for giving Shattered Wind a chance, High Commander."

"You volunteered, which no one else did. Some of them went out of their way to be otherwise occupied," Jader said, and leaned against the foot of the bed, bracing his hands on either side of him, curling them over the rounded edges of the frame. "I'm more than happy to keep giving Shattered Wind chances."

"Thank you, High Commander."

"Thank you, Captain. Wake me up if necessary and only if necessary."

Laughing again, Tsarana bowed and left.

Finally alone, Jader pulled the window drapes shut, laid one dagger on the nightstand and tucked another between the mattress and the headboard, and finally climbed into bed. Though it was tempting to pull the drapes to see if doing so did indeed make everything that much warmer, he didn't like the idea of being unable to see the rest of the room.

Pulling up the blankets, moaning as they slowly warmed him, Jader finally sank into sleep.

He woke to the muffled sound of voices in the hallway, what sounded like one quite insistent and the other—his guard, that voice he recognized—quite firm. Jader sighed, climbed out of his warm bed, and ambled across to the door. He pulled it open and stared at the young man arguing with his guard. "Is something wrong?"

The man, going red in the face, thrust out the silver tray he was holding, the food and pitcher of beer on it rattling ominously, and said in awkward Harken, "I bringing the lunch."

The words took a moment to sort out, but then Jader nodded and waved the man inside. "Thank you."

"You are welcoming." The man hastened over to the table, deposited the tray and fussed with everything briefly, then hastened out with a quick bow and a shy parting glance.

Jader shook his head. This was the only place he'd ever been where his looks did not stand out in some way, but he seemed to get a good deal more staring than he'd received even in Harkenesten when he'd first arrived.

Ignoring the food for the moment, he went over to his trunks and scrounged up the warmest clothes he could possibly find, mourning he could not put on his good, heavy boots.

Finally dressed, he made quick work of the meal and headed out to the hall, where Tsarana was speaking with a different guard. "I'm sorry if we woke you, my lord."

"You didn't. Did I miss anything of interest or relevance?"

Tsarana shook his head and fell into step beside him as they headed back downstairs. "More of that damnable snow has been falling, there is talk of turning the dinner party into something they call a frost ball, and I believe they've had tailors brought to see about clothes. But that's only what my people have gleaned from servants and eavesdropping." He smiled fleetingly.

Jader chuckled and clapped him briefly on the back. "Your people are proving to be admirable spies. Well done, Captain. I hadn't realized so many of your people spoke Bentan."

"Not so many, but even a few will get your far. Made us useful in the war, to be sure, though calling them fluent is still a touch generous. By the end of this venture, though, it'll be a good deal closer to the truth."

"I have every faith."

They lapsed into silence as they reached the bottom of the stairs and Lady Krista saw them from where she was talking to a couple of servants and a stiff-looking man in plain but sharp gray and blue clothes. She lifted a hand in greeting and walked over to them, reaching up to kiss Jader's cheeks, a gesture he reluctantly returned. "Good afternoon, dear brother. How did you sleep?"

"Well, thank you. How are you?"

She smiled. "Quite well. We managed to arrange for some tailors and seamstresses to visit, and between the three of them they'll have a proper wardrobe for you and your companions ready in a matter of days."

Jader bowed his head. "Thank you for arranging it all. We're most grateful."

"Of course. Lady Seredia woke early and has already been tended by the seamstresses. She's having tea with Lord Wessel and me just down there."

She motioned to an open door halfway down the hall. "Did you want to join us, or get right to your fitting?"

"I'd rather get the fitting over with, though I wouldn't be opposed to a cup of coffee to shake the last of the sleep. Unless the tailors speak Harken, I'll need Lady Seredia as well."

Krista's brow furrowed. "Wouldn't it be better to request Lord Wessel's assistance?"

"She's my silver tongue. Why would I snub her for the reason I brought her?"

Frown deepening, Krista said, "It wouldn't be appropriate for an unmarried woman to see a man who is not a relation naked, or near enough at any rate."

Jader almost laughed. "I'm afraid I do not understand the concern. She is part of my retinue and a friend, and what is inappropriate about nudity or partial nudity?"

Krista pursed her lips, that frigid disapproval he had been hoping to avoid overtaking her face. "I know customs are very different in Harken and Farland—"

"And I respect customs are different here, but I know and trust Lady Seredia and it's not negotiable," Jader said firmly. "We will simply have to accept we disagree on this point. I'd appreciate if you'd send Lady Seredia to me."

"As you wish. Would you like coffee as well, Captain?"

"Please and thank you, my lady." Tsarana bowed slightly.

When she'd headed off, Jader stepped into the room where the man in gray had vanished, not surprised to find the parlor had been repurposed as a tailor's shop.

Seredia appeared a moment later—and immediately set the tailors to protesting. A few polite but firm words later they settled, though, and she translated smoothly as they turned their full attention on Jader.

Jader stripped to his undergarments as requested and took position on the platform in front of the three mirrors. There were two more in the room, an older man with lines of silver in his bright red hair, and a large man of middle age with black hair and a heavy beard.

Tsarana took up position nearby, expression politely blank but his eyes sharp and alert as he watched the men work.

Thankfully the tailors seemed to excel at their profession. They worked quickly and efficiently getting his measurements, asking questions, and making all sorts of notes. Once Jader was dressed again and the coffee had arrived, they brought forth the collections of fabrics and sketches.

Jader frowned as he looked over their initial options. Beside him, Seredia smirked a bit. "What?"

"I think some rumors of you are not exaggerated. You are going to drive these men to madness with your arguing."

Nearby, Tsarana's mouth twitched with the barest smile before his blank expression regained control.

Jader shrugged. "I would deny it, but I'd be lying." He pointed at several fabric samples. "Nothing like this. I prefer jewel tones."

Seredia translated, and that launched a cheerful argument between Jader and the three tailors that lasted nearly two hours. When all parties were satisfied, the tailors turned their attention on Tsarana, who agreed to submit only after he'd summoned another soldier to stand guard.

Another hour later, as they were finishing up, a knock came at the door. One of the tailors opened it and Wessel stepped in. "Going well, my lord?"

"Very," Jader replied as he rose from the sofa. He stretched his stiff limbs. "Thank you for arranging everything, my lord. We are extremely grateful. I've swum in some truly frigid waters, but winters up here are something else entirely."

Wessel chuckled. "Yes, quite. Walk with me? Your man can follow at a distance."

Jader nodded at Tsarana, but flicked his fingers at his side. Tsarana nodded, and the other soldier in the room faded off without Wessel seeming to notice. "As you wish, my lord."

Out in the hallway, a servant approached with their winter cloaks and shoes. Jader thanked her and followed Wessel through the house and out a set of massive back doors onto a large stone patio that overlooked a large pond.

Stone steps, a lurid black against all the white snow piled on either side of them, led down along a winding path to and around the pond.

Off in the distance, tucked amidst trees, Jader caught a hint of the woman Tsarana had sent ahead.

Wessel walked close, their shoulders occasionally brushing. Now that he was rested and alert, Tsarana's earlier observation seemed painfully obvious. "So, my lord, how does it feel to be the lost child found again?"

"Strange," Jader said. "I have no memories; they were lost in the shipwreck. I remember very little before waking up on the beach. I know I landed there as the result of a shipwreck because I vaguely remember the storm, but mostly because I was told. Now I am told I am Bentan, but..." He lifted one shoulder. "I hope they are correct when they propose I might remember something once I see the place where I was born and raised for the first eight years of my life. They seem so excited by the idea, I would hate to see them disappointed."

"That would be lovely. You do deserve to remember something of where you come from. No one should suffer forgetting who they are."

"I haven't forgotten who I am," Jader said.

Wessel cast him a look. "You're Lord Trevin Abernoth, but do not remember. I would say that is forgetting who you are."

Jader gave another jerky shrug. "Yes, I suppose. Is that why you brought me out here, my lord?"

Giving a small laugh, Wessel replied, "No, but I was curious how you were doing. I can see why you are such a powerful figure in Harken, despite being a Farlander of sorts."

Only a lifetime of putting up with such insults kept Jader's temper in check. If the man was hoping to fuck him, which never would have happened anyway, telling him he'd done well *despite being a Farlander of sorts* was the wrong way to go about it.

Ignoring the comment instead, Jader replied, "So why did you bring me out here?"

Wessel did not immediately reply, instead leading him further along the path until they came to another patio, with a roof of stone and glass braced by columns carved with geometric patterns that probably held some

significance beyond him. "I wasn't at the table with Desmond when he negotiated with Harken and Korlow, but I was part of his retinue. I continue to be a loyal servant of our new king, who is a vast improvement on his predecessors. I know how much this whole affair matters to him, and what it could mean to Benta—or cost us. I also am all too well acquainted with the Abernoth family. I know my Harken is crude, and I am sorry if I have said something to offend. I do not mean to, and apologize that I did. I only wanted you to know, here in privacy, that should you require help, you've only to contact me and I will come to your aid. I have every faith you can handle yourself, High Commander, and you have some sly shadows watching out for you." He smiled briefly. "But Benta is not Harken."

"No," Jader replied. "No, it's not. I appreciate the support, my lord. Hopefully your help will not be needed, but I'm grateful it's there." He looked out over the pond, frozen along the edges. "Will the pond freeze?"

"Yes. When we were children we'd go ice—damn, I don't know the word in Harken. *Skating* is the Bentan word."

Jader shook his head. "I'm not familiar."

"Describing it will sound like madness, so you will simply have to come down and go ice skating with me before you leave."

"I will do my best, my lord," Jader said, equal parts curious and terrified.

"So what did I say that so clearly offended you?"

Jader's mouth tightened, and he finally dragged his gaze away from the pond. "You tell me I've done well *despite* being a Farlander—and while Farlander is not an insult, we call ourselves Islanders."

"I didn't—" Wessler stopped. "You're right. I apologize. I was never told of 'Islander'. I'll remember it. That wasn't all, though."

"It's true I have no memory of the Bentan boy everyone says I was," Jader replied heavily. "That is the point everyone is missing. Trevin is dead, and nobody seems to care about who I am now. I have not forgotten who I am, but nobody listens when I try to tell them."

Wessler stared at him briefly before nodding slowly. "You're right, my lord. I am sorry—again. I can only say that hope has gotten the better of them; they may come to understand in time. My impression had been that

you were as eager to be here as they were to have you. I apologize for the misunderstanding; I can see now why you would not be entirely enthused."

"No, but I can understand why they are, and I would like them to be happy. But whatever happens, my home is Harken."

"I hope we do not keep you away overlong, though Benta is not a terrible place and I hope you find some joy in your stay, my lord."

"It's been nothing close to terrible my lord, I promise."

Wessel smiled. "Good. Shall we return to the house before your shadows come to defend your virtue?"

"Virtue?" Jader laughed. "Not a concept Harken has much taste for, my lord, but I appreciate the joke. I think if that were all they feared, they would leave me to make my own decisions, foolish or not. But I have a lover back home."

Cocking his head slightly, Wessel said, "Not that I'm offering, no matter how captivating I find you, but I thought it was common practice for Islanders to take multiple lovers."

"Only when it's agreed upon by all parties. There are methods to what others presume is madness, or shamelessness. Mainlanders look askance at tiresome attitudes like virtue, but they also like to turn around and judge us for being even more open-minded." Completely dismissing all manner of hypocrisy in the process, but if they were interested in common sense and honesty, they would have no reason at all to hate Islanders.

"I see. Your lover should count themselves fortunate."

Jader thought of Kamir, shy and sweet, bright and beautiful, so vibrant and alive when he was given a chance to shine. He deserved infinitely better than Jader. "I'm the fortunate one, my lord, but thank you."

Wessel smiled and clapped him congenially on the back. "Shall we return, then? I fear you will freeze to death with so little heft to you."

"I'm going to get teased a lot for that," Jader said with a sigh. "I did have one other question, if you'll permit."

"Of course."

"My guards heard troubling rumors in the city regarding rebels—how big a problem are they, really? We heard nothing about them back in

Harken, and I feel we should have been apprised, especially since my very presence seems to be causing more strife."

Wessel's face clouded. "I see. To be honest, I hadn't heard myself they were getting that bad. His Majesty of course mentioned the matter, but he led me to believe they were trifling. Either he is lying, which I doubt, given his high regard for Harken—especially the High Consort—or he is not properly informed himself, which is vastly more troubling. I'll write him at once on the matter and bring you whatever information I receive. But out here I do not think you've anything to fear. Such groups are largely in the cities, where they can gather in houses and clubs to rail against the world while they drink too much. No doubt all your presence is doing is causing them to break some furniture, as well."

"That is certainly reassuring to hear, thank you, and again for keeping me apprised of whatever His Majesty might tell you. Now I am more than happy to go back inside where it's warm."

"Best get used to it," Wessel replied cheerfully. "Come on, I am fairly certain you've never had hot chocolate with whipped cream, and that is a very good reason to visit Benta."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kamir was going to throw up. He had hoped nine years ago that he would never have to go to court again—at least for something as upsetting as protecting his children. They were *his*. This shouldn't be an issue.

Hopefully today's petition to get an order of holding would hasten it toward not being an issue again. He wasn't entirely convinced a judge would grant the order, but Velina was right in that it couldn't hurt to try—at least it would be on record that he didn't feel safe around Theoren and had tried to force him to keep a distance.

He pulled out his pocket watch and stifled a sigh as he saw his scheduled court time was nearly two hours overdue now. Damn it, he had other things to do with his day. The house was nearly ready. He'd really hoped to go into the city to look it over and see if any changes were necessary. And even though everything had significantly quieted since Jader's departure a few weeks ago, he was still going to be stuck in the office doing work all day and still catching up on the morrow, so who knew when he'd have time to inspect the progress on the house. He could not afford to sit in court for hours on end.

But he also didn't have a choice. He tucked his watch away and tried to focus on the book he'd brought along. Pantheon knew he wouldn't be getting another chance to do something as simple and fun as read for a long time.

Try as he might, though, all he did was wind up reading the same page over and over. His mind kept flitting between all the work that needed doing, fretting about the trial, daydreaming about the house and how excited the children would be, and how Jader was doing.

Did Jader miss him? Was he already wishing he didn't have a lover so he could enjoy a lover or three in Benta?

Doubts tried to creep back in about whether he wouldn't enjoy them otherwise, but Velina had always made it clear—and said it again recently, unasked, as though anticipating his worries—that if Jader had any intention of doing so, he would have discussed the matter with Kamir before leaving.

But it was hard to remember that when Kamir could hardly compare to... well, nearly everyone else. And who knew *what* was happening in Benta.

It didn't matter. He and Jader were a temporary thing. Look at what happened the last time he'd gotten infatuated with someone. He was not doing that again, he wasn't. He'd gotten out of that mess. He had two good children. A house. Money. He was proving to be good at managing a full estate, and the secretaries seemed to enjoy working with him, the staff who'd written to him were always congenial. Whatever happened with Jader, he was *fine*.

Kamir sighed and tried to go back to reading his book, or at least think of something else—something that wouldnt drive him mad.

Across the enormous hallway, Thereon sat with his solicitor—the same solicitor, oddly enough, that Kamir's parents used. The more time passed, the more Kamir was certain his and Velina's theories were correct: Theoren was doing his parents' bidding in exchange for money.

Unfortunately, that meant they were going to be heartless and ruthless. They were on the verge of having Kamir exactly where they wanted him, right where they needed him to finally see through the plans they'd always had for him, and they would never permit another failure. The Norring family motto was *Dreams require action*, which he'd always thought beautiful, but his parents seemed to think it meant pursuing dreams by turning everyone else's lives into nightmares.

He did not want to think about what sort of case they were further building against him if their solicitor was involved. Rezzo was considered a good friend by his parents, a rarity given they thought anyone not noble was beneath them.

And there Kamir sat without any support of his own, not even Velina because she had to watch the children while he dealt with this all day.

Just as he was ready to scream from frustration, the doors opened. He looked up hopefully at the clerk who stepped out into the hall, barely breathing.

"Lord Kamir Norring and Master Theoren Masterow. The judge will see you now."

Kamir rose and smoothed down his jacket, picked up his satchel of papers, and walked into the courtroom. It was a beautiful room, if austere and cold, as all courtrooms seemed to be. Thankfully the only other people present were the judge and her various clerks, as well as the transcriber.

Taking his place at the right-hand podium, he set his satchel on it and waited.

The judge was a stern looking woman with gray hair and eyes, light brown skin, and a stocky build. She looked at them over the rim of her green-framed spectacles, then back down at the papers in front of her. Kamir relaxed slightly. She might be stern, but she didn't appear to be mean or dismissive as so many judges could be. He only had real experience with the judges back in Eushan, but he'd dealt with three of them and crossed paths with a handful of others since then. By and large, judges were not pleasant people, at least not when they were working.

She looked at him. "Lord Kamir Norring?"

"Yes, Honored."

She glanced at Theoren. "Master Theoren Masterow?"

"Yes, Honored."

She glanced down at her papers, then back up. "Your request for an Order of Holding has been reviewed by the court, Lord Norring, and after careful consideration we have decided to grant it. Master Theoren—"

"Can't we object?" Theoren sputtered.

The solicitor rested a hand on his shoulder and said, "Apologies, Honored."

The judge ignored him. "What precisely would you like to object to, Master Masterow?" She picked up the papers in front of her. "Lord Norring has pleaded he finds you a threat to his person, and submitted evidence I certainly think is objectionable, though not in a way that favors you. So what are you objecting to? Exhibit one, that you broke the law in marrying a boy of sixteen?"

Theoren's face went red, but his words were strangled by the solicitor's hard grip on his forearm.

Clearing his throat, the solicitor said, "Honored—"

"I'm not finished, and I'm not interested in hearing the technicality he slipped through on, so spare me your tiresome defense. There's also verified accounts of abuse and a long list of financial violations. Finally, I see your signature on papers trading your children for money. Certainly your business, but it does give credence to Lord Norring's pleading. The only objection I have is that nobody hauled you off to the stocks and left you to rot."

"No objections, Honored," the solicitor said. "Our apologies."

Theoren's mouth flattened. "Nobody thinks it's a little suspicious that he wants an order against the man trying to reclaim his children?"

"That was taken into account, Master Masterow, and in the eyes of the court, added credence to Lord Norring's plea. The Order of Holding is hereby granted, effective immediately. Master Masterow, you are banned from speaking to or otherwise engaging with Lord Norring. You are to maintain a distance of at least one hundred paces. The court acknowledges, of course, that this would be a difficult distance to maintain while you both reside in the palace, therefore, you are banned from the public gathering spaces until the Order of Holding expires. Should you enter a room where Lord Norring is already present, you are to leave it immediately. Should he enter a room where you are already present, you are to leave immediately."

She turned to Kamir. "Lord Norring, the Palace Clauses permit you a bodyguard through the length of the Order of Holding. The court strongly suggests you accept one; in addition to the obvious role of protection, bodyguards can serve as trusted witnesses."

"Thank you, Honored, I would gladly accept the offer of bodyguard."

"Very well, a bodyguard will be assigned by end of day."

Kamir bowed his head slightly. "Thank you, Honored."

"Dismissed. Lord Kamir, exit first. Clerk, inform me when he is out of the wing and at that point, Master Masterow, you will be permitted to leave."

Across the way, Theoren said something that his lawyer quickly cut off. Kamir didn't waste time looking at him, but from the judge's expression, Theoren was close to being in official contempt.

Grabbing his satchel, Kamir bowed to the judge and departed, heart beating so fiercely he pressed a hand to his chest once he was in the hallway.

He'd gotten it. The judge had granted the order. He would still have to deal with his parents, and no doubt Theoren would disregard the order at some point, but he *had* the order and a bodyguard.

Allowing himself a small smile, he returned to his rooms.

Velina came out of the school room as he closed the door. She met his eyes, hands clasped in front of her stomach.

"Granted," Kamir said.

Lifting her hands in a silent cheer, she crossed the room to hug him tightly. "Thank the *Mashta* Ocean."

"And I did accept the offer of a bodyguard. They'll be assigned by the end of the day."

"Good. I know you're reluctant, but it lessens nothing about you to have additional protection."

Kamir nodded, though he still felt like he was hiding more than fighting.

He would not put his ego before his children, however. Hiding until he could strike once, hard and fast, had worked before. As long as he remembered that and focused, it would work for him again. "I'm going to get some work done on the latest commissions. Let me know if someone important comes by, or the bodyguard arrives earlier than expected. Turn everyone else away."

"Of course." She hugged him again, then fetched the snacks on the table and whisked them off to the schoolroom.

Though he was tempted to look in on the children, Kamir didn't want to disrupt their schooling or risk losing too much time on the commissions he needed to get done.

Settling in at his table, he immediately sank into the methodical work of putting a clock together. When he was finished, it would be an elaborate gold piece with crystal facing, set in a marble statue of Ariana, Goddess of Spring and Children. The statue was by one of his favorite sculptors. If he could purchase an extravagant piece of art for himself, it would be one of Touro's statues.

A knock came at the door a few hours later, and Kamir packed his work away before stepping out to join his family for lunch.

"Papa!" Chiri cheered, and even Chara turned in his seat to smile in greeting.

Reaching them, Kamir kissed the tops of their heads before taking his seat. "How are your lessons going?"

Chara shrugged, more than happy to let his sister describe their morning in exhausting but enthusiastic detail, which kept them all occupied while they ate. When they were finished, he kissed and hugged them again and sent them off with Bremm to play in the gardens.

Soon, very soon, he could take them to their new home.

For the present, however, he had estate matters to attend. And later that evening, an appointment with a healer to ensure his pregnancy was going well. Only a couple months into it, there really wasn't much to check on, but he intended to avail himself fully of the benefits of healers that had been denied him the first time. He wasn't nineteen, alone, and terrified anymore.

He ghosted his fingers over his stomach and smiled softly.

Voices drew him from his daydreaming, and he let his hand fall, smile slipping away as he turned onto a crowded hall and wended his way through the cluster of nobles and harried servants. Some event or meeting must have recently let out—something important, to judge by the faces he passed by.

As he reached the room everyone was vacating, Sarrica stepped out, Lesto at his side. Kamir gave a brief, passing half-bow, smiling shyly at Lesto. Everyone said he was terrifying, and certainly Kamir had seen why they thought so, but he'd always remember best the Lesto who had come to visit him and speak with him and treated him as a peer.

"Lord Kamir," Lesto greeted.

Kamir's smile widened. "Good day, Your Majesty, Your Grace."

Instead of returning the greeting, Sarrica scowled at him. Well, that was, to Kamir's knowledge, Sarrica's pensive face, but it certainly had more scowl to it than anything else.

Kamir bowed again and made to move on.

"A word, Lord Kamir," Sarrica called out. "Right now." He didn't wait for a reply but simply strode down the hall and threw open the door to a smaller sitting room.

Lesto huffed. "I apologize for his rudeness." He offered his arm, and Kamir took it gratefully, hoping Lesto did not notice his trembling. "Do not worry. I have no idea what thought has suddenly entered his head, but if he was truly angry, he'd settle for dressing you down right here in the crowded hallway." His single eye gleamed with amusement as he smiled faintly at Kamir. "That he bothered to think about the matter first says he is on your side, whatever he says."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

They stepped into the sitting room and Lesto pulled out a ring of keys and locked the door before escorting Kamir to a seat. "Sarrica, what in the world is this all about?"

Sarrica ignored him, eyes focused on Kamir. "How far along are you, my lord? If I had to guess, I'd say two months, give or take a couple of weeks."

Kamir wanted to cry, but drew a breath and calmly said, "Two months and one week, Your Majesty."

Anger, confusion, and more emotions than Kamir could catch flickered across Sarrica's face.

"How—how did Your Majesty..."

"Notice?" Sarrica finished for him, and continued in a dry tone, "I am not as much of a halfwit as the court takes me for. There is much I miss, my consort and friends will attest to that, but I loved my first husband very much, and it was hard not to notice how much he hated carrying our children. I was achingly aware of every little change that increased his misery, right from the very start. You have the puffiness, and some other little details, of someone in the early stages of pregnancy. What puzzles me is that you have never struck me as a schemer, but this smacks of simplistic but effective scheming."

Kamir gave a shaky laugh. "I'm no schemer, Your Majesty. I'm busy enough raising two children and keeping us in a home."

"Yes, and quite the home you recently purchased," Sarrica said. "Especially for a man currently being challenged as unfit to raise his

children, as well as disowned. Odd time to be adding a new member to the family. Yet you say you are no schemer."

"It was carelessness, as stupid as that makes me. My children's caretaker suggested getting rid of the baby, but I could never bring myself to do it—I couldn't with the twins, either. I know how it looks, but I swear your Majesty, there is no scheming involved." Kamir said to the carpet, only barely managing to keep his voice audible. "I simply got... carried away and distracted and forgetful. I should have taken my tea the last time the High Commander and I spent the night together, but I forgot. That's all there is to it. I never had any intention of bothering the High Commander with my carelessness."

"Mmm," Sarrica replied. "I am tempted to believe you, but my High Commander has enough to deal with now and in the foreseeable future without coming home and walking right into the trap you, and whoever else could be involved, are tidily laying."

"Sarrica—"

Shooting Lesto a look that made him fall silent, Sarrica turned back to Kamir and said, "I am forbidding marriage between you and Lord Jader. If you're being honest about not scheming, I doubt that will trouble you."

Kamir didn't know whether to laugh or cry. It was exactly what he needed to help stop some of his parents' scheming, but for all it would never have happened anyway, to have the possibility so completely destroyed was devastating. "Yes, Your Majesty. I assume you'll put that in writing?"

Sarrica's brow furrowed, and a moment passed before he said, "Yes."

"Thank you, that would be appreciated. May I be dismissed, Your Majesty?"

Sarrica's frown deepened, and he shared some look with Lesto that Kamir didn't understand, but at last said, "Yes, you may."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Kamir bowed and fled, forcing himself to walk sedately to the office only because he refused to draw more gossip than he could possibly avoid. Once he reached his office, however, he locked the door, sat in his chair, and finally cried.

It was stupid to be upset. He'd entered into an affair with Jader knowing full well that it would never be anything but a brief liaison. He'd been

content with one night, and beyond ecstatic that Jader had turned it into so much more. But even then, Kamir hadn't been stupid enough to think that marriage would ever be a possibility.

But knowing something was impossible and having the chance ripped away by order of the High King were two different things. This wasn't just impossible, it was legally declared forbidden and sealed with the imperial crest. That was a much colder, harder reality than simply watching quietly from afar and accepting it would never happen.

He pulled out a kerchief and dried his eyes, breath hitching as he tried to get control of himself. Sarrica had made his decision, and Kamir would have to live with it. Best to focus on the good points, like the fact his parents would not be able to try and force him to coerce Jader into marriage—or worse, go straight to Jader and try to force the matter themselves.

It wasn't much so far as victories went, but he would take what he could get.

He curled his hands around his stomach, wishing he were bringing a new child into a happier world, instead of the snarled, thorny mess that grew nastier every day.

Would Jader want anything to do with the child? Would he demand full custody? The thought broke Kamir's heart, but if that was what Jader wanted, Kamir was in no position to argue. The judges would laugh him right out of court for trying to stand against a close friend of the High King.

Speaking of friends, it was probably only a matter of time before his invitation to dine at the high table was rescinded. It was surprising that Sarrica hadn't already said as much, but maybe he hadn't thought of it; he didn't attend public dinners nearly as often as Allen.

Well, it wasn't like he hadn't known that was fleeting, too. However nice it had been to pretend he'd been making real friends with Allen, Tara, and Shemal, it would never have become a reality.

All in all, it was for the best Sarrica was so shrewd and observant. Better to end all of that now before he did something stupid like get too attached to the idea. It was fine. *He* was fine. He didn't need to be cozy with the High Throne to be successful or keep his children safe.

So yes, he'd needed the reminder: he didn't need anyone but himself to get things accomplished. Chin jutting out, Kamir rose and went to wash his

face, then unlocked and opened his office door, and settled back at his desk. The first thing he reached for was the mail, set in a small basket at the front right corner of his desk. Letters from the groundskeeper and housekeeper, bills from various traders, copies of letters of recommendation for the additional staff the housekeeper wanted to hire, personal bills for the last few items he'd had delivered to the house... and a letter bearing Jader's familiar script.

Hands shaking slightly, though for the life of him he couldn't say why he was nervous, Kamir snatched up his letter opener and slit the wax seal. Pulling out the letter, he settled back in his chair and read.

Dear Kamir,

Every other letter I have written today has been filled with political machinations and dutiful reports, so I hope you will permit me to chatter rather more inanely at you.

I vehemently dislike the cold of this country. Have you ever endured snow? If not, I hope you continue to avoid it. Visitors to the Islands always gripe about the heat, and every time I rolled my eyes. But if they felt the heat the way I feel this cold, I am sorry for so callously disregarding them because I fucking hate this wretched weather.

Not all of it is bad, of course. Much of the food is rather bland, but they make excellent beer and something called hot chocolate that I've grown rather fond of. Their music is beautiful, and the countryside impressive when not covered in the deplorable snow.

We were meant to finally be heading to Lady Krista's home today, but the snow has fallen so heavily it reaches nearly as high as the top of the doors and I'm told we will not be able to travel for a few more days at least, possibly several. Our host is Lord Wessel, and while I find him occasionally overwhelming, he's a decent enough man.

I hope this letter finds you well, and not wanting to kill me for dumping the burden of my estate on your shoulders mere moments before I departed. I have every faith you are managing it better than I would.

How are your children and Velina? I hope your ex-husband is leaving you alone and that you're still enjoying yourself at dinner with Allen and the others.

Is there anything from Benta you would like to have? I am looking forward to when this snow clears and I can visit the nearby town to peruse the shops and such. It certainly will make a nice break from being stuck in houses all day having endless teas and parties and dinners. If you're inclined to reply, letters get through well enough. There is a raptor trained to fly between here (and another at the Abernoth Estate) and the port city, Jameth, and another from Jameth to Harkenesten, so they take only a matter of days.

Thank you for tolerating my grumbling. Should you need the favor returned, consider it done.

Sincerely,

Jader

Kamir read the letter over three times before he finally made himself put it away. Jader had written to him, for no reason other than to talk, to have someone to complain to. All the people Jader knew and it was Kamir he'd decided to write to.

Was he allowed to write to Jader?

But of course he was—Sarrica's decree was that they were forbidden to marry. But he hadn't removed Kamir as Jader's estate guardian, and he hadn't forbidden him to communicate, which Sarrica would have done if he'd wanted.

So Jader was lost to him in some ways, and probably would be lost completely once he returned and saw Kamir was pregnant, but letters were harmless enough. He could indulge himself in Jader's company for a little longer, even if that company was only through writing.

Smiling faintly, touching the letter through his jacket just to feel it crinkle, he finally put his attention on the rest of his work. Later that night, after he'd eaten dinner and gotten some more work done on his commissions, he'd sit in his room and write a letter to Jader. He'd write as many of them as he could before that too was taken away from him.

He was halfway through his paperwork when the promised papers from Sarrica arrived—accompanied by Myra, Sarrica's head secretary, and a court notary. Sarrica must be even more furious than Kamir had thought to insist that his best and most important secretary personally oversee the signing and notarizing.

Kamir motioned for them to sit as he accepted the papers. Settling in his own seat, he slowly read through them—an imperial decree that the High King was forbidding marriage, or any similar such arrangement under imperial law, between Lord Jader Star, Marquis of Kyrmine and High Commander of the Imperial Army, and Lord Kamir Norring, youngest son of the Viscount of Tesly but soon to be disowned by same.

Tears threatened again, but Kamir angrily forced them back. Picking up his pen, he initialed and signed in all the marked places, adding his signet to the last page in purple wax.

When he was finished, Myra signed as witness and the notary took them to put her own signature and the notary seal. "I'll submit these to the court and have an official copy sent to you, my lord. If you do not have it in two weeks, contact the court."

"Thank you," Kamir said, and walked them to the door.

He wished suddenly Sarrica had thought to ban him from the high table. Gossip about the imperial decree would be spread across the palace before dinner, and the only thing he dreaded more than how people would treat him was the way his mother would react. It wouldn't take long for people to deduce the reason Sarrica had issued the decree, and even if by some wild chance no one figured it out, time would provide the explanation in another month or two.

Unless, of course, Kamir moved his family *now* and simply avoided court. He'd have to return for the custody hearings, so it wasn't a perfect solution, but it would ease some of the weight he could already feel pressing down on him.

Something to discuss with Velina, and he would definitely have to look in earnest for a replacement tutor.

So perhaps he needed to quit the office early tonight and focus on his family and moving.

Nodding to himself, Kamir called his head secretary in and made all the necessary arrangements. He then finished up a last few bits of paperwork, tidied his desk, and left the office, walking quickly through the palace to his suite.

Bremm was just returning with the children as Kamir stepped inside.

"Papa!" Chiri raced down the hall to him, and Kamir bent to scoop her up. Eight years old was a touch too big to be picked up and carried around, but Kamir did it anyway for the simple, sorely needed pleasure of holding one of his children close.

He set her down again as they reached the suite. "I hope they behaved for you, Master Bremm."

"They always do, my lord," Bremm replied with a smile as Kamir unlocked the door and ushered everyone inside.

Velina looked up from her knitting, surprise on her face as she saw Kamir, but she said nothing, only greeted the children and listened avidly as Chiri told her about that day's accounting of bugs and birds.

Bremm excused himself to gather his things from the school room. Kamir went to make himself a cup of tea and settled at the table with it, mind drifting but thankfully not settling on any one thought too long.

Finally sending the children off to their room to play, Velina joined him at the table. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing terribly important," Kamir said with a sigh, and told her.

"Oh, Kamir..."

He shook his head, refusing to linger on the matter because if he did, he'd get upset again, and he was already overburdening Velina with all his stupid problems. "It does drive home that perhaps we should go ahead and move. The house is nearly ready. We can manage while the last few details are put in place. The only major issue is finding a new tutor."

Velina nodded. "I can ask around—"

"Have I done something wrong?"

They both jumped and turned, and Kamir felt awful that he'd forgotten Bremm had not yet left for the day. He had his satchel clung across his chest and was holding some of his textbooks in his arms.

"I had thought I was doing well, my lord, and I apologize for intruding on a private conversation, but..."

Kamir pushed his tea away and stood. "You're exemplary, Master Bremm. The problem is that we are moving into the city, and I know you work exclusively in the palace. I would not dare assume you would continue to work for me once we are gone from here."

"I work in the palace as a matter of coincidence, really," Bremm said. "A family I worked for in the city moved here, and I agreed to continue tutoring their children for an increased fee. Then my spouse got a job in the imperial library, which meant we could have free room and board. These days, however, we wouldn't mind moving back to the city, except that it would be expensive. But if I already had a job arranged..."

"I can't currently pay more than I do," Kamir said. "Perhaps in the next year or two, I'll be able to manage a pay increase, but not right now."

"It won't take me long to find additional clients now that I have one certain job in the city. It's only been that I do not have time to seek work while keeping up with everything here in the palace."

Kamir smiled. "The house is plenty large enough for guests, Master Bremm. You and your spouse are certainly welcome to stay for as long as it takes to find a residence of your own. It's the least I can do."

"We'd be honored, my lord. When are you moving?"

"This evening, before it grows dark and the city curfew takes effect, but do not feel obligated to keep pace with us. There is going to be quite a bit of chaos for the next few days as we get settled. I know you'll need time to give notice. We can meet at the end of this week and discuss everything in detail, would that be amenable?"

"Most amenable, my lord. Thank you, truly."

"Thank you, Master Bremm. I'll see you in a few days. Do not worry about further lessons for now. The children will be too pre-occupied to sit still for them, anyway, I'm sure." Bremm bowed and left, and Kamir sat with a shaky laugh. "I suppose I cannot complain about the bad in my day when that sort of good falls into my path."

Velina didn't share the laughter. "If I could break the High King's nose right now I would."

"He's doing what he feels is best for his High Commander—more importantly, he's trying to protect a friend. Certainly in his position I would be suspicious of me. It's not as though Jader was ever going to marry me anyway, what harm is there in forbidding something that was never going to happen?"

"Plenty of harm, to judge by the sadness in your eyes, but I'll leave the matter alone for now." She dropped her folded arms. "I think it's time you told the children the happy news—about the house. Other happy news can wait." She winked.

Kamir dredged up a smile and finished his tea. Standing again, he led the way to the children's room. He lingered in the doorway, watching with an ache in his chest as Chiri played with her wooden dolls, acting out whatever little story she'd spun for them today. Across the room, sprawled in a nook built into the wall, Chara was reading a book.

It was actually Chara who noticed him first, a slight frown overtaking his face. "Is it already dinner time?"

"No," Kamir said, stepping further into the room. "Come here, children. I have something important to tell you."

Chiri immediately abandoned her toys and raced over; Chara followed more sedately, looking pensive rather than excited.

Kamir crouched and held out his hands, squeezing theirs when they offered them. "It's good news: I have bought us a house in the city. A space all our own, with a courtyard and garden and plenty of rooms to play in."

There was silence for a moment, and then predictably they *both* burst out with more questions than Kamir could keep up with. But well over an hour later, they finally shifted from fearful to excited and would have started packing up all their toys if Kamir hadn't stopped them.

"Get your jackets and wraps and we'll go see it. Perhaps we'll even eat dinner in the city tonight, would you like that?" They cheered very loudly that they would and raced off to get dressed.

Kamir went to fetch his own jacket and wrap, but was waylaid by a knock at the door. Velina bustled off to get it, and returned with a letter. Kamir's heart sank as he saw Allen's personal seal. Opening the letter, he quickly read,

Dear Lord Kamir,

Please know I am sorry for what transpired this afternoon. The matter is being discussed. You are still quite welcome to dine with me, though of course I understand that you may not want to at this time.

Sincerely,

Allen

"Is the messenger still here?"

"Yes," Velina said.

"I'll pen a reply," Kamir said, and hastened to his desk to do so, hating that his hand trembled. When he'd written out that he wouldn't be able to attend dinner for some time as he was going to be in the city, but he appreciated the offer and hoped Their Majesties would forgive him, he sent it off and fought against an urge to throw up.

He was still trying to recover when another knock came at the door. This time when she opened it, Velina gasped. She stepped back and pulled the door open for someone to step inside.

The man who did wore a teal tunic emblazoned with a skull and crossed swords, a compass in one hollow eye. He wore a sword at his hip, and there was a jagged scar cutting across one half of his face, and the eye was a strange, filmy white. Oh, Pantheon, what had he done now that His Majesty was sending Fathoms Deep to fetch him—arrest him? Surely not, even for the High King that was extreme, and Allen had sent a rather classy dismissal, all things considered. They wouldn't bother with that if they were just going to arrest him, would they? "Lord Norring?" When Kamir nodded, the man continued, "I am Sergeant Charlaine Astor, your court appointed bodyguard."

Anger replaced Kamir's terror. "Court appointed? I know everyone thinks me hopelessly stupid and gullible, but I'm smart enough to know when the High King is inserting a spy. Don't insult me by pretending otherwise, Sergeant."

A ghost of a smile flickered across Charlaine's mouth. "I won't deny I report to the High King—the tunic makes that clear enough—but I was not assigned as a spy, my lord. Let us say..." the smile widened by a hair, "the High King acted as he felt was best. The High Consort disagreed with his actions quite vocally. I am... something of an apology, as it were, and something of a promise. My only orders are to protect you and your family and assist you in any way you desire."

Kamir didn't believe that for a moment; there was no way Sarrica would lend out one of his Fathoms Deep simply to play bodyguard and assistant for a person he disliked—a person he probably detested at this point. Even

more laughable was the idea that Allen would be angry with Sarrica over the decree. Why should he care? The only person remotely affected by it was Kamir, and only because he was stupid enough to be at least half in love with a man hopelessly out of reach. And nobody else knew about that.

But he would be a fool to send away a soldier from Fathoms Deep. Even Theoren would see that notorious teal and rethink his actions.

"Very well," he said. "Thank you for taking up the duty. We were just about to leave to go visit our new home, so you have either excellent or terrible timing."

"Excellent, I would say," Charlaine replied. "Do I need to summon extra protection to cover the carriage?"

"There is no carriage. We're taking two horses, so you'll need a horse of your own, but that's all."

Charlaine frowned. "That isn't safe, my lord."

"My ex-husband is the sort to find me in dark, deserted corners, Sergeant, not crowded pavilions and public streets. One moment and we'll be ready to depart." He turned away and strode into his room, hurrying into the dressing room to find a jacket and wrap.

And to take a moment to still his trembling, which was equal parts anger and fear. Damn it, he'd just wanted one evening to be happy, just him and his little family enjoying their new home. For all he could not complain about being protected by Fathoms Deep, whatever Charlaine said, he'd be reporting in detail to Sarrica—every last single, pathetic, humiliating detail.

Because his life wasn't difficult enough without stealing the last of his dignity and privacy.

Whatever. He could get through this. He'd gotten through everything else life had thrown at him, he could grit his teeth and muster being spied on for a few months. Eventually the challenge would end, eventually Jader would come home, and then everything would be over.

And by that point, he'd have far more important things to worry about. He rested a hand on his stomach briefly before shrugging into his jacket and arranging his wrap around his shoulders to pull up into a hood once they were outside.

Leaving the sanctuary of his dressing room, he headed out to show his children their new home.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jader was normally content to stay in one place, for all that he'd left home and eventually landed all the way at the top of Harken. But there was a world of difference between not leaving Harkenesten Palace for days, and being stuck in a dark, stifling manor with people he wasn't comfortable around—except perhaps Wessel, who was slowly becoming a friend, despite everything. He still wished he was home running an army instead of mired in Benta playing at politics, but if there was one thing being stuck in Wessel's house had taught him, it was that moping about would accomplish nothing.

On the other hand, he'd rather be hiding in his room moping than going downstairs to greet the latest round of guests—this one entailing another long lost family member. Jader stifled a sigh and looked one last time in the mirror, fussing with all the stiff, heavy layers of fabric that did not move with the same ease as Islander or Harken clothes, but *were* warm and made of all the beautiful colors he'd requested.

Turning away, he picked up the earrings he'd selected—little dangling schools of fish, each one made from different jewels, eight of them to each ear. Perhaps it was silly, but he felt a good deal braver with that piece of home firmly in place.

Ready as he would ever be to face more family, more strangers, and an interminable dinner party that had, because of the weather, turned into a prolonged house party, Jader finally left the relative safety of his bedroom.

Tsarana and Seredia waited for him in the hallway, and he lightly touched both their arms in greeting, smiling at the return touches to his shoulder and back before Seredia fell into step alongside him and Tsarana just ahead of them.

He could hear the voices well before he saw the sources, and forcefully shoved away the dread and sulking that threatened to rise up again. He was High Commander: he could handle one damned house party.

A hush fell over the semi-crowded hallway as they saw him, then was followed by a smattering of whispers and people shifting as they looked

between Jader and his 'siblings' near the door. Krista's face lit up with eagerness and she motioned impatiently for him to join her as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

Standing next to her was a man who looked even more like Jader than Krista—they really could have been twins, save for a clear difference in ages. They had the same boney build, black hair and brown eyes, the same snow-white skin that got Jader startled looks and concerns about his health back in Harken. Seeing the two of them together, unmistakable relations of his, Jader felt a faint but sharp ache for the memories he'd lost forever to the sea. He'd long ago stopped wishing to have his lost life back, but that didn't mean he wasn't sad it was dead and gone.

"Hello, it's a pleasure to meet you. I've..." Jader hesitated, the Bantan difficult, heavy and clunky on his tongue. *"Hear much."*

The man smiled, though it didn't quite reach his eyes, and extended his hand, and Jader shook it. He said something in Bantan, and Krista translated, "He cannot believe it's you. It really is like seeing a ghost. Even I am still taken aback sometimes, and I've had a few months to grow used to it." She smiled, a bit of wobble to it as she looked between them, then cleared her throat and said, "Lord Jader, I present to you our eldest brother, Lord Cherrell, Captain of Abernoth Pass. The guarding and upkeep of the pass has been entrusted to our family for the past four centuries. More than a few of our ancestors have died driving back enemies who would breach Benta by way of the Pass. The duty of commanding it has always fallen to the eldest son of each generation, and my brother carries the legacy with honor."

"So you don't inherit the title?" Jader asked. "Even though you're the oldest?"

Krista repeated the question, which garnered another smile from Cherrell that was even stiffer than the first one and turned his eyes chilly. He said something to Krista which made her whack his arm playfully, and then she replied, "Abernoth is unusual in Benta in that our line is matriarchal. It is always the eldest daughter who inherits the title, unless there is no daughter, though that has not happened in a long time, and it always returns to a woman the moment a suitable heir is born. My brother likes to tease that I'm hardly duchess material, but he's always supported me when so much of the

country insists a woman should not hold a title, merely complement her husband's."

"People are fools. It's wonderful Abernoth is matriarchal." Jader smiled. "So many cultures are patriarchal, and I don't understand why when the mothers are the heart and blood of the home."

Krista's face lit with a smile he'd never seen before, and for a moment, Jader again felt that ache for the family he'd lost. "It's happy to hear you think so, but I forgot Islander culture is *very* matriarchal, so of course you'd agree. Very few in Benta approve, but Abernoth women are a stubborn lot and we do not treat with men who take issue."

"A sound policy," Jader replied with a laugh, and they finally turned to pay attention to the other guests clamoring for an introduction. Jader tried to remember all the names, but there were too many names, titles, and greetings for him to memorize them all.

Especially since everyone seemed to think personal space was something for other people, and kept pressing too close and touching in ways he was certain they would not with each other. But he was used to being the oddity in the room that did not merit the same courtesies. He simply gritted his teeth and endured.

Thankfully, Tsarana started glaring them back, and Wessel stepped in to help, deftly moving everyone onward to the dining room. Once they were all settled with cocktails and appetizers, Cherrell turned to him and said something that sounded like a question.

Krista said, "He would like to know how you managed to become High Commander. It was not a surprise to anyone when Lord Arseni was appointed by His Majesty several years ago, but how does an Islander become his successor?"

Jader tamped down on his anger. It was a question people in Harken never stopped asking—why would Benta be any different? "He happened to be at the garrison where I was stationed on a day when I lost my temper and yelled at my superior officer and peers after they did something monumentally stupid that wound up injuring six people, one of whom later died of their wounds. I was furious, but mostly I was scared because I knew the lieutenant would simply hide what had really happened and blame what couldn't be hidden on me, and nobody would ask twice because who cared

what happened to an Islander? If anyone else had caught me losing my temper at a superior office, I would have been whipped and put in stocks. But Lesto wanted to know what was going on. When I was done telling him, he threw all of them in the stocks and demoted the officer. The next day I was ordered to return with him to Harkenesten, and a few months later I was declared his Deputy High Commander."

Krista laughed. "What a tale!" She repeated it to Cherrell and the others at the table, who all laughed and commented. Krista translated their comments, which ranged from approval to stern remarks about how insubordination should not be rewarded.

"But neglect of duty, lying on reports, and racism should be?" Jader challenged, and the man who'd commented looked away without replying.

It was going to be a long meal.

He got a slight reprieve when the first course arrived, a thick, creamy soup that would have been vastly improved by some spicy seasoning. Or any seasoning at all, really. But eating was infinitely better than talking.

As people began to make progress on their soup, however, the conversation resumed. While some people spoke amongst themselves, most of the table was still more than happy to pepper him with questions and wait for the translations.

"Is it true Islanders don't believe in monogamy?" one of them asked.

Jader bit back his first reply to that and made himself take another bite of soup before replying, "We believe that only those in a particular relationship have the right to dictate the rules of it, and that relationships come in many shapes and forms. So it's more accurate to say we do not believe monogamy to be the only option, as so many others do."

"But what about inheritance laws and such?" asked the man right across from him.

"My property goes to whomever I choose. If I die without bequeathing it, my family discusses the matter and my mother makes the final decision. If the family cannot settle the matter, the community mother handles it. When I left home to pursue a military career, I bequeathed my belongings to my youngest sister. They are essentially hers, unless I choose to return to the Islands and reclaim them. When I die, they will belong to her fully."

Another man asked, "What about the family business? Surely those need a clear line of inheritance."

"Islanders don't have the same way of living as Mainlanders," Jader said. "I have more brothers and sisters than I can keep up with, never mind cousins, nieces, nephews, and so forth. There are more than enough of them running about that nobody in the family is lacking for people to pass skills on to. Whether they're eldest, youngest, middle, or only barely blood-related is immaterial. We don't believe in forcing people to take up an occupation or interest they've no inclination toward."

That garnered still more comments, questions, and opinions, most of which Jader let wash over him as the first course was taken away and the second brought out.

Leaning in close, Seredia murmured, "You're being flirted with, you know."

"Really? Because I feel more like I'm being stalked to put in a cage."

"Well, it would be a very pretty cage, and theoretically you'd enjoy the tricks they want you to perform," Seredia replied.

Jader almost inhaled his wine and shot her an admonishing, albeit amused, look. Seredia withdrew with a snicker.

A few paces behind him, against the wall, Jader could hear Tsarana shift slightly and murmur in low tones to the guard who'd accompanied him into the dining room. After a moment, she moved to take up position on the far side of the table, almost directly opposite Jader, standing in front of the long bank of shuttered windows that took up nearly all of that wall.

What was troubling Tsarana?

But he wasn't High Commander right now, and he had to trust his guards to do their job, even if everything in him railed against doing nothing.

"So do you have lovers, my lord?" a woman asked, batting her eyes and giggling.

"I have one," Jader replied. "He's an earnest man who is probably too good for me, beautiful and smart and raising two lovely children."

There were a few startled looks, even a rather ridiculous gasp. "Children?" Another woman asked. "That's exceedingly generous of you, to be willing to take as lover someone who already has children."

Anger filled Jader, and he set down his glass hard enough some of the pale wine splashed over the rim and across the delicate, cream-colored table cloth. "Why am I supposed to be troubled he has children? "He is—" He snarled in frustration as the Harken words slipped away. *"Mothers are sacred, and children precious. Back home, someone like him would be looked upon highly, and considered too good for a floundering fish like me."*

Beneath the table, Seredia rested a reassuring hand on his thigh and translated smoothly since Krista could not understand the Islander he'd slipped into.

When she was done, a few people had the decency to look abashed, but most simply looked confused. Jader drained his wine and was grateful when a servant stepped in to smoothly refill it without his needing to figure out how to ask.

Desperate for a conversation he could enjoy, Jader turned to Wessel, who smoothed away the angry look he'd been casting the others. "This is an excellent wine, my lord. Fyr Dane white, correct? One of their ice wines, I think, though dryer than the ones I've previously enjoyed."

"My mother, rest her soul, loved wine and amassed quite the collection. I had heard you were especially fond yourself, my lord, and tried to make certain we had wines to impress." Wessel winked. Seredia and Krista translated for the table, and that thankfully launched the discussion of wine and other forms of alcohol that Jader had hoped for.

A man who hadn't yet spoken to him chuckled as he commented, and Jader was surprised to hear the word 'Chass'.

"Captain Chass?" he asked. "Why is he talking about Chass?"

Krista said, "Lord Darling owns a few breweries, amongst other things, and he says that one of his best customers is His Royal Highness. I presume this Captain Chass is also a prince?"

Jader's mouth quirked. "Prince Chass is the High Consort's brother, one of three, and Captain of Penance Gate."

"Oh." Krista's eyes widened slightly before she swiftly translated.

It was her brother, Cherrell, who then said through her, "Impressive. I'm surprised you did not bring Penance Gate as your escort."

Seredia's mouth flattened slightly before she replied in pleasant but cool tones. Cherrell grimaced slightly and replied.

"What did I just miss?" Jader asked.

"He was implying that you must not be well thought of, after all, if the High Consort did not send his own brother's famous mercenaries to be your honor guard." Seredia cast Cherrell another look. "I reminded him that asking Penance Gate to play bodyguard on a peace keeping mission is a bit like asking a warhorse to plow a field. Or did he know something we didn't about why the High Consort should be wasting his brother's time that way? He says no, he simply did not think that far, and admits he's a bit disappointed he did not get to meet the notorious Penance Gate."

"He should be grateful Penance Gate wasn't sent," Jader said. "They're only sent out when a problem is beyond resolving and can only be removed."

The next course was brought in, some sort of heavy, gamey meat redolent with fragrant seasoning, for once, accompanied by foods Jader didn't recognize but which tasted marvelous.

His meal was interrupted by Krista, who motioned to the woman beside her and said, "Lady Heather and the others were discussing the practice of dying hair, and I mentioned that your lover had dyed hair. They were curious, as that is not something nobility does here. It's generally a practice of..." She pursed her lips. "Certain lower classes. They wondered how it came to be taken up by nobility—but I know Harken citizens also do things like tattoos and piercings other than their ears."

Jader's brow furrowed, and he spoke in low tones to Seredia, lapsing into Islander. *"Did they just say that dying hair is generally something only done by whores?"*

"Yes," Seredia replied. *"Nobility pierce their ears, but otherwise altering the body in such ways is considered uncouth, something for the 'unrefined and uneducated'."*

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard," Jader said, but forced a smile and replied in Harken for her to translate: "In origin, the Harken practice of dying hair is religious. The priests, monks, soldiers, and so forth of the various temples would dye their hair to show what god or demi-god they served, with other accoutrements to indicate rank, specialties, and so on.

Over time, as religion became a less central part of life, the practice spread out. It was popularized a few generations ago by a consort who left the order he was a part of when he fell in love with the High Queen of the time. Nowadays it's not as common a practice, but still done, especially in the city and surrounding areas from whence that consort came—where my lover is originally from. I'm astonished it's a practice associated with lower classes, given that it's costly in time and money, something only the affluent would be able to afford. There are cheap ways to dye hair, but they don't work nearly as well as the more established, costly methods."

When Seredia finished translating, there was a momentary lull in the conversation before Krista said, "I know it must seem otherwise, my lord, but I swear nobody here means any harm. They're simply curious, and I apologize their curiosity gets away from them. Nobody believe your lover to be anything but as wonderful as you say."

"I appreciate it," Jader said. "If you will pardon me, however, I feel the need for some air to clear my head. I'm afraid I've been enjoying the wine a bit too much." He rose without waiting for anyone to reply, signaling for Seredia to remain where she was.

Tsarana slipped from his spot against the wall and follow Jader into the hallway.

Letting out a soft sigh, Jader wavered between retreating to his room, to one of the many empty drawing rooms, or outside for a bit. As much as he detested the Bentan cold, fresh air *did* actually sound like a good idea. "We're going to the back patio."

"Yes, my lord." Tsarana motioned to someone down the hall, and a Shattered Wind guard slipped from the shadows near the archway that led to the front hall and door and joined them.

Jader turned and started to head through the house—only to be stopped as someone called out his name, which always sounded sharp and odd in a Bentan accent, like they were incapable of making their words soft and round.

"Lord Jader," Wessel's secretary repeated as he hastened down the stairs, a touch out of breath as he reached them. "This was mixed up in Lord Wessel's post, I assume by mistake. I was just on my way to take it to your room." He offered a letter.

Jader's heart trip-trapped as he recognized Kamir's handwriting. He'd written that letter to Kamir on a whim, simply to have someone to talk to where he did not have to speak of work, work, and more work. He'd tried not to get his hopes up that Kamir would reply, but couldn't deny the happiness blooming in his chest. "*Thank you very much,*" he said in slow, careful Bentan, his word as awkwardly soft as the Bentans always sounded awkwardly sharp.

The man smiled, bowed, and slipped away.

Continuing on through the house until he reached the patio out back, Jader stood close to one of the lanterns attached to the wall so he could read the letter.

Dear Jader,

I'm glad you will soon be free of the snow. I hope that holds.

Nothing terribly exciting is happening here, I'm afraid, at least not to my knowledge. The council meeting did not go well. There was apparently too much arguing and sniping, to the point His Majesty called a halt, fined all the councilors 500 crowns apiece, and said they'd best remember how to do their job before the next meeting in six months or they'd recall this first warning as trifling and wish they'd heeded it.

Jader snickered. Five hundred crowns was trifling for Sarrica in a temper. How disappointing the council hadn't accomplished anything, but then again, that meant the Islands would be left alone for another six months.

There was a mixture of disappointment and relief, since the main issue up for discussion was the Islands, but I doubt I can tell you anything there that you don't already know.

Time moves so swiftly, the end of year festivities will be upon us before we know it, and all too soon we'll be into summer and a new year. I hope with the clearing of the snow you are that much closer to achieving your goal and returning home; it sounds like you're still quite homesick.

Velina has been gone these past three days celebrating an Island holiday. I cannot recall the name of it, but I'm sure you don't need me to tell you. My children helped her make flower wreaths and walked around like little royals the rest of the day.

At that Jader's chest gave a sharp, aching twist, and he closed his eyes as he willed the stinging homesickness back. He'd been trying not to think about it. The traditional Island new year was a few months before the official Harken new year. It was a week-long celebration across all the islands, and in days long past wars, feuds, and all other hostilities were forbidden—and often, the forced week of peace was when many people worked out differences. There were countless stories of ancient wars that had been brought to an end with the beginning of the new year. If he were home, he'd be helping his brothers prepare food, practicing a dance routine with two or three of his siblings, playfully griping as his mother pestered him with endless errands and chores to make ready.

He'd also possibly be making a gift for Kamir, and he wished he could see Chiri and Chara walking around in their little flower crowns. If he were in Harken, he'd be celebrating with Shemal and some of the palace Islanders, having their own feasting and dancing on the beach. Would Kamir have come if he'd asked? It was one of the few celebrations where Islanders had never minded outsiders; the new year was all about new things, new faces, new starts.

Swallowing, pushing the ache of homesickness away as best he could, Jader continued reading.

The children have asked after you, and wanted to know when you would be back to tell them more stories. They want to show you the new house, too. You seem to have made quite the impression. I told them you'd be home as soon as you could, but that you're doing important things for the High King. They considered that far less crucial than telling them stories, but I do not think His Majesty would be amused if I said as much.

Jader laughed. On the contrary, Sarrica would be amused and delighted, and probably insist on telling stories himself. Few ever saw the High King when he was simply Sarrica, husband and father, and a man who very much adored being both.

Idly pondering what stories he could write out for Kamir to pass on, he read the last bit of the letter, which answered the question he had from the previous paragraph.

As you no doubt deduced, we are recently moved into a new home in the city. Nothing grand, but it's handsome and spacious and well away from my family and the machinations of court. Thankfully your secretaries do not

mind coming to me, as I'm unable to visit the palace every day. But of course, if you prefer I do so, it will be done.

If there's anything you'd like me to send you, some token of home perhaps, simply let me know.

Yours,

Kamir

"You look the happiest I have seen you in days," Tsarana said. "Is that from—get down!"

Jader obeyed, just as Tsarana leaped in front of him and drew his sword barely in time to block the thrust that would have put a hole in Jader's chest had either of them reacted any slower.

Their assailant rapidly became eight. Jader took a sword from one of the felled men and joined the fray, and in the end, they managed to kill six of them, the other two fleeing back into the woods from which they'd come.

The Shattered Wind soldier who'd followed them outside gave chase, vanishing into the dark woods just as the door flew open and Wessel, Cherrell, and Seredia spilled onto the patio. "What in the Pantheon?" Seredia demanded. "Were you *attacked*?"

"So it would seem," Jader said, retrieving his dropped letter and shaking the snow off, frowning at the places where the ink had smudged. He carefully tucked it away inside his jacket then turned to the bodies. "Do we have any idea who they were?"

Cherrell was kneeling beside one of them, and with a grunt tipped the body over so it was on its back, revealing a cheap black tunic with a rough, homemade crest embroidered on the front: a two-headed swan surrounded by a ring of evergreen needles. "Rebels."

Wessel's voice cracked out, making the servants who'd come out behind him jump. One of them vanished back into the house, and the remaining two moved forward to help with the bodies—but stopped when Wessel said something else.

"What did he say?" Jader asked.

Seredia replied, "He wants to know how the rebels knew to come here—he's angry at Cherrell, I think, though I couldn't say why."

Cherrell rose to his feet, wiping one bloody hand on his breeches, and replied coolly to Wessel.

"He doesn't know. The last time he had dealings with rebels, it wasn't anywhere near here, and the men he brought with him on this visit are all highly trusted and loyal to Abernoth. Wherever the leak is that revealed your presence, it has nothing to do with him."

Jader frowned. "Why did they attack me out here? They couldn't have known I would come out here alone; I didn't know it until I decided to do it."

"They were probably waiting until tonight to sneak into your room and kill you there," Tsarana said. "That's what I'd do in their place. A small force, break into the house, swift murder, sneak back out. Not hard to bribe or blackmail the location of your room from a servant."

Seredia's mouth flattened as she turned to repeat Tsarana's words to Wessel, who by his puzzled look hadn't been able to follow everything they'd said. Both he and Cherrell looked even angrier by the time she finished.

Movement came from the woods, and Jader relaxed slightly to see the Shattered Wind soldier who'd given chase was returning. She looked the little worse for wear, and frustrated, but alive and relatively unharmed.

"Learn anything?" Tsarana asked.

"No," the woman said bitterly. "They got away from me, given the edge they had with the terrain in the dark. Definitely Bentan, but we already knew that. Professional soldiers, by their armor and weapons, the way they moved. If I had to guess, I'd say they have horses waiting somewhere. They traveled too lightly for people traveling and staying in these woods for prolonged periods, which would be necessary, given there's not much around here outside of at least a day's ride, more like two in this weather, even with experience."

"You sound like you know snow," Jader said.

Shrugging, the woman replied, "My husband is from Cartha. I lived with him there for several years before we finally couldn't take it anymore and returned to Harken. Snow and I are old enemies."

Jader smiled briefly before the severity of the situation returned. Cherrell and several of his men were hauling the bodies away, their weapons, armor, and whatever other effects had been on them piled on a cloak taken from one. A couple of servants carried it all away at Wessel's bidding.

Following them in, shivering from prolonged exposure, Jader fell into step with Wessel. They came to a stop in Wessel's study, where the rebels' belongings had been laid out on a large, wide table. Though Jader hadn't expected much, he was still disappointed as he took in the unremarkable pile: swords, daggers, a few purses of coin, pouches of foodstuffs... a vial of murky liquid that had a purplish tone when he picked it up and held it to the light. "Swamp water, I think."

He tossed it to Tsarana, who caught it deftly and gave the vial the same thorough examination. Uncorking it, he carefully sniffed at—and wrinkled his nose. "Yes, definitely. It's been cut with some sort of herb to mask the smell, but a bit of it is still there. I guess if they couldn't stab you, they were hoping a sloppy backup plan would suffice."

Jader made a face. "I'd rather they'd succeeded in stabbing me, if swamp water was the only other option."

"What is swamp water?" Seredia asked, and beside her, Krista looked equally puzzled.

"Poisoning, I think," Wessel said, brow furrowed, exhaustion and unhappiness cutting deep lines into his face.

"Correct," Jader said. "It's a cheap, rough, but effective poison. Dump it into anything with a strong flavor and it will kill you rather quickly. It congeals the blood in a matter of minutes: not a pleasant way to die. It's taken from a type of snake that inhabits marshes, swamps, other such environments. They're particularly common to Treya Mencee, though I believe they can be found in the Triumvirate too, or at least something similar can be found there."

Seredia looked sick. "If you hadn't stepped outside..."

"I've never been more grateful for my own rude behavior," Jader said as exhaustion slammed into him. "Speaking of rude behavior, I believe I've had enough excitement for one night. Tsarana, I will trust the solving of this mystery to you. I'm not really allowed to be doing such things, anyway."

"My lord," Tsarana replied. "I'll do my best to have something worth reporting by morning."

"I have every faith. Lord Wessel, I apologize my presence made such a mess of your dinner party. I'll endeavor to make it up to you. Seredia, as always, thank you for everything. Sleep well, all. Goodnight."

He left without waiting for their replies and hastened up the stairs as quickly as his battle-exhausted body could manage. Locking the door to his room once he was inside, he then rigged the door and window with ribbons and crystal glasses from the table by his wardrobe so that he would hear it if someone tried to open either.

Once he felt relatively safe, Jader stripped, pulled on sleeping clothes, stoked the fire, and finally climbed into bed. He took Kamir's letter with him and reread it several times, mind spinning with stories for the children and what he would say in his reply.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Kamir sighed and smiled faintly as the men who'd delivered the last of his furniture finally departed, Charlaine escorting them out because his list of who was allowed to go through the house unsupervised was extremely short and not open for discussion.

The main room was beautiful, and he wasn't sorry he'd spent a bit more than initially intended for the sofa, chairs, table, and floor cushions that now filled it. Thankfully, that was the last of it, because as lovely as everything was, he was exhausted from the past several days of moving, settling the children, tending to Jader's estate, sending more paperwork to the courts, and the hundreds of other little things that filled his days.

Not to mention the steadily-growing problem inside him. He wouldn't show for some time yet, but according to Velina, rumors were already flying and far too accurate.

Kamir sat at his desk and gratefully took a sip of the tea Velina had left for him—but ignoring the snack she had also pointedly left. Food would not sit well on his stomach just then. Instead he turned his attention to the post, which needed to be taken care of, but was far easier a task than everything else that required his attention.

All thoughts of work fled, however, when he came upon a letter written in Jader's hand. Immediately abandoning everything else, he broke the seal and settled back in his chair to read.

Dear Kamir,

Thank you for mentioning the meeting. I admit I'm mostly relieved the Islands will be left alone a little while longer. Though I've every faith Sarrica and Allen will do right by them, I do not place the same faith in the council.

I wish I could see Chiri and Chara in their little flower crowns. I am deeply saddened I am not there to celebrate; the New Year festivities are amongst my favorite. But thinking of them does remind me of a tale I think your children will like, I've included it on the last few pages.

I've been trapped in this mothers-rejected house for more days than I care to count, and all of the dinner party guests have been trapped alongside us. I think the only person more miserable than me about this overstuffed house is poor Wessel. He's a magnanimous host, but even the Mother Ocean would find her patience sorely tried by these motherfucking Bentans. I think the snow has addled their brains, or at least frozen their manners.

For instance, no less than all of them brought up my 'Islander leanings' and were flummoxed and frustrated that I did not want to simply remove my clothes and conduct an orgy in the front parlor. That I have a lover, and our relationship is a closed one, seemed beyond their comprehension, as though Islanders are incapable of what is standard practice for most everyone else. It's quite frustrating. I thought having the conversation once would be enough, but I have been so very, very wrong.

But the tiresome conversations remind me of something else they said, that you should be grateful I am willing to take you as a lover. I told them, rather rudely, that it's quite the other way around. For all my experience with the world, I am painfully aware that you have swaths I do not, and it leaves me worried I will only add to your troubles, or do something to cause you pain or fear, and I would hate to do that. I hope you will let me know, howsoever you're most comfortable, should I ever do something wrong.

It frustrates me beyond imagining that people seem to think so little of children. I cannot even count the numbers of siblings, cousins, and such that I have. Most of my siblings are only half related to me (well, not related at all, technically, but most Islanders never held it against me, and those who do are looked at askance and reprimanded by the mothers).

I am sorry if I seem more petulant than usual. All this locked in the house nonsense is exhausting, these Bentans make no sense to me, and I am better at being a soldier than a noble. You, Allen, and the others make it look so effortless. I knew it wasn't, but I appreciate that more now.

On the bright side, Lord Wessel has stocked some truly excellent wines. I am hoping to obtain several barrels myself when we eventually make it back to civilization to do some shopping.

I hope you are doing well. Don't hesitate to let me know if you are not.

Sincerely,

Jader

Kamir sniffled and reread the letter—then realized that what he'd thought was the start of the tale was actually a postscript

P.S. Please do not let anything the others might say alarm you. We were attacked by rebels, but they weren't very good at what they did and no one was injured aside from a few bruises. We will be certain to take more care in the future. And I leave the political aspects of this matter wholly to Allen and Sarrica as much as possible.

Rebels? Attacked? Jader had almost been killed? And he'd left mentioning it to a postscript? *Kamir* was going to kill him.

Taking a deep breath, he finally turned to the story Jader had included, smiling softly over how much Chiri and Chara would love it.

The Tale of the First Pearl Diver

Once upon a time, when the oceans were still young and not many Islanders yet lived on the land granted them by Mother Ocean, there was a young woman, named Ashti, in love with a mother of her village, whose name was Keva. Now Ashti was very young, barely considered an adult, and Keva was some years older and held in special regard by her community for she was wise and kind and strong, and had already born many daughters, all of them showing signs of being very much like their mother, and several strong, capable sons.

Ashti had been a foolish child, and many did not think she had left her foolishness behind, for she was quiet and kept much to herself instead of joining more fully in the community. Instead of dancing and singing, or fishing or building, or any of the many other things most young girls did when they had no desire to be mothers, she often spent her days swimming. Further and further she would go, and deeper and deeper, bringing back all manner of beautiful things for the children of her family, sketching what she saw that she could not bring back.

She also brought back beautiful things for Keva, who always thanked her and offered her cool water or nectar to drink, or food to eat, but always Ashti would smile and refuse and depart again. Many declared her cold, self-absorbed, nothing at all like a woman should be. But Keva hushed them

and reminded them to be kind, and carefully tucked away every treasure Ashti brought her.

Then came a day that a man from a nearby community sought a bond with Keva that would unite their communities, make them great and strong. Heartbroken, for who would ever look at a foolish woman when they could have so much prestige and authority, so many better options for people to take as lovers, Ashti fled once more to the ocean where she felt safe and welcome.

Down and down she dove, deeper and deeper, until she could scarcely surface again without her lungs bursting. Eventually she found oysters like she'd never seen before, easily missed for the way they blended into the craggy darkness to which they clung. Taking several of them, thinking to present them to her mother, she surfaced again and struggled exhaustedly to the beach. Pulling out her knife, she opened one to taste it for herself—and out spilled a beautiful stone, shaped like a perfect sphere, glistening like the moon, and gleaming with all the colors of a rainbow.

Astonished, Ashti took the rest of the oysters to her mother, then ran off to visit Keva, still damp and sandy from her day of diving. When she reached Keva, who was relaxing outside after a long feast for her family and the visiting suitor, she shyly offered the beautiful stone she'd found in the oyster.

Awed by the stone, Keva asked where Ashti had found it. Excited and proud, Ashti explained—and Keva realized for the first time that the girl she had assumed was merely bringing gifts to a community mother like so many others did, was in fact a young woman bringing love tokens. Humbled, Keva invited her to stay for a drink, and this time would not let Ashti refuse.

In the morning, Keva proudly wore her newest gift, which came to take the name of the woman who first discovered them—what the rest of the world calls pearls. Not long after, Ashti and Keva moved into a new, larger home together, with space enough for them and the man from the neighboring community.

Over time, Ashti became a highly respected mother in her own right, and taught all her children and grandchildren how to dive for pearls, which they came to do only for those persons they most treasured. Tales of the pearls spread across the Islands, and that particular island came to be known as Shahira, Pearl Island.

Some say (especially my family) that her family remained the greatest of pearl divers, and eventually were called Belarigo, which means 'hidden depths' for our talent at diving the deepest and finding the best pearls. Everyone else likes to say our depths are very, very hidden and not worth the trouble. They're just jealous.

And that is the tale of the first pearl diver, how Shahira came by its name, and the founding mother of the Belarigo family.

Kamir smiled and tucked the story into his jacket to read to his children at bedtime, then reluctantly returned to the rest of his work, which looked even less appealing than it had before. But he needed to get it done because, though he hoped his trip to Kyrmine would remain short, there was always a chance something would go wrong and his stay prolonged. The less he had to worry about while he was gone, or upon his return, the better.

But he hadn't gotten farther than a couple of small tasks before he was helplessly drawn to Jader's letter again. Pulling it out, he read it through a third time, heart hammering as he lingered over the words:

But the tiresome conversations remind me of something else they said, that you should be grateful I am willing to take you as a lover. I told them, rather rudely, that it's quite the other way around. For all my experience with the world, I am painfully aware that you have swaths I do not, and it leaves me worried I will only add to your troubles, or do something to cause you pain or fear, and I would hate to do that. I hope you will let me know, howsoever you're most comfortable doing so, should I ever do something wrong.

Did Jader really mean all of that? How could the man be so smart, so sweet and earnest, and so infuriatingly stupid? Was he truly unaware he sounded like they were courting? They were lovers, not planning to marry.

Not that they could anyway. Pantheon, he had a lot of nerve getting frustrated with Jader for holding back information—and then being so cavalier about it—when he was withholding two rather vital bits himself. Well, only one really mattered. He doubted Jader particularly cared whether or not they were allowed to marry.

Even if the fool sounded like a man who acted like they were far more serious than they were. Kamir wanted to kiss him or throttle him, or maybe both.

He forced himself back to work, but wasn't remotely sorry when footsteps interrupted him a short time later. "Good afternoon, Sergeant. I'm surprised I'm only seeing you now."

"Your house is impressively secure, all things considered. I'd be happier with an additional guard at that gate, but I'll save another argument for a different day." He winked his good eye. "I was ordered to let you work in peace, but now the mistresses of the house have bid me fetch you to the kitchen."

Kamir laughed. "Oh? How unusual, Liana usually prefers we stay out of her way when she's in the kitchen." He would be truly sad when Bremm and Liana finally found somewhere of their own to live; they had fit into the household seamlessly.

The scent of honey, cinnamon, and roasted nuts reached him well before they got to the kitchen, and Kamir's stomach rumbled in a way that for once was not ominous. As he stepped into the kitchen he was met with a work table laden with food, including many of his favorite sweets—and two very determined looking women. "What in the Pantheon is all this?"

"We thought a celebration of your new home was in order," Velina said.

"Our new home."

Velina scoffed. "*Yours*. You saved the money, you paid for everything that fills it, your name is on the deed, *you* did all the work, no matter how much you like to dismiss your own efforts. You've come a very long way from the boy who barely knew a thing about running a household or keeping a home. I think it's long past time you celebrated. A pity you can't have the punch I made, but I'm more than happy to drink your share."

Laughing, Liana said, "I made samples of many different things. Try it all and tell me what cooperates, and I'll put a menu together. The end of the week, I think? Before you head off to Kyrmine."

Kamir opened his mouth to argue that such a fuss wasn't necessary, but Velina, Liana, *and* Charlaïne gave him looks and tricked a smile onto his face. "Can I try the baklava first?"

Beaming with approval, Liana slid the platter containing half a dozen tiny pieces of baklava across the table. Kamir meant to eat just one or two, but by the time he managed to make himself stop, four of them were gone.

"Finish them!" Velina said.

"No," Kamir replied with a laugh. "Look at all the other food you're expecting me to try!"

"But that seems to be all right for your stomach?" Liana asked, and looked more pleased than ever when Kamir nodded. She pushed more platters toward him and ordered Charlaine to work as well. The two of them were bickering congenially over how spicy her fish should be when the gate bell sounded.

Charlaine frowned. "Were any of you expecting someone?"

All three shook their heads.

"I'll go see who it is, then. Stay here, both of you." He slipped away, and Kamir finished eating the last bits of goat meat and rice from the biryani Liana had made and chased it with a sip of tea.

Before he could further commend Velina's cooking, however, Charlaine returned with a bemused look on his face. "His Royal Highness Prince Chass has come to see you."

Kamir choked and sputtered on his tea. "*What.*"

"So you're not acquainted?"

"No, why in the world would Prince Chass associate with me?" And it was more than a little peculiar that Charlaine said 'prince', when even Kamir knew that Chass was almost never out of uniform and preferred to be addressed as 'captain'. It was a longstanding tradition in Harken that while on duty all soldiers, no matter their civilian standing, were addressed as and treated according to their military rank. Even Lord Lesto, way back when he'd been of lower rank, was treated according to that rank rather than as a duke—well, theoretically, but everyone treated Lesto like they wanted to keep living, above and beyond anything else.

Charlaine's mouth flattened. "I cannot begin to imagine why he would come to call. I'll send him—"

"No," Kamir said. "I'll see him. Where did you put him?"

"He insisted on remaining in the courtyard," Charlaine said.

Kamir slipped off the stool he'd taken, tidied his hair and clothes, and headed off before Velina or Charlaine could try to stop him.

His steps faltered slightly as he saw Chass, who was most definitely not in uniform and was far more beautiful than Kamir had ever realized. In his blood red tunic and spiked armor, Chass never looked anything less than intimidating and usually closer to frightening.

Right then, in clothes that were of the latest fashion in subdued, smoky jewel tones, a single sapphire teardrop in one ear the way merchants and other perpetual travelers wore them, he very much looked like a prince—and related to the High Consort, with the unmistakable gold-toned skin, bright blond hair and sky blue eyes.

"Good day, Your Highness. I'm honored you would come all the way out here to visit me, especially as I've never had the pleasure of your..." Kamir stopped as Chass turned and met his gaze, "um, company." He dipped into a belated bow, heart thudding, aching, in his chest.

If there was one thing he had become good at spotting over the years, it was others like him who had been abused. They always recognized one another. From a distance, so far above Kamir he could never have imagined this encounter in his wildest dreams, Chass had seemed as terrible as rumor and fierce appearance said.

Up close, his eyes reminded Kamir of what he saw in the mirror, of others like him, when they'd crossed paths as he slowly made his way to Harkenesten. He'd had to work odd jobs and stay in houses that were part of a slowly-growing system to look after people like him that had been started by the late High Consort Nyle and continued by the High King. Houses filled with other victims of abuse, rape, and sometimes soldiers who hadn't recovered well from war, or those too sick or disabled to go elsewhere.

No one had ever said Chass had suffered abuse. Up close, he didn't look like a terrifying monster. He looked like a man who never removed all of his armor.

Chass smiled wryly. "I hope my unexpected visit is not putting you out, my lord."

"Not at all, Your Highness," Kamir said softly. "Would you like to come inside?"

"No, but thank you. I won't be staying long. I..." He hesitated, then drew himself up slightly, setting his shoulders and chin. "I wanted to say that I

know how you feel, and I thought you might like to know you are not alone. Regarding the imperial decree, I mean."

Surprise and humiliation rippled through Kamir. "Oh? I—that is comforting, Highness, though I'm sorry you're acquainted with the feeling."

Chass grimaced. "I don't need to tell you what you've clearly intuited—"

"You don't need to tell me anything, Highness."

Nodding, Chass said, "No, but my priest has said many times that talking more about... things... will help me finally bury them, which I apparently have not done. I don't know that I agree with him, but I promised to try." He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I would have approached you some time ago, if only to say you're not alone, but I have rightfully earned my ugly reputation and you did not need the grief that would come from being associated with me. We both of us have suffered, my lord, but I do not have your strength and kindness. Instead of overcoming what was done to me, I *became* what was done to me—and then became much worse. I have been trying to atone for my past, but... At any rate, my mother rightfully punished me, and part of that punishment was ordering I divorce my wife and forbidding me from both remarrying and ever bearing children. So I *do* know, viscerally, how that feels." He smiled, a wan, pale, tired thing. "On a more positive note, I have every faith your decree will be rescinded in due course. You are far too favored by the High Throne and, more importantly, the High Commander, for it to remain in place. But in your place, I would not believe that, so I wanted you to know you're not alone."

Kamir swallowed and wiped away the tears that had escaped. "T-thank you, Highness. That means a lot. You're very kind to come so far to offer such reassurances to a stranger."

"Those who are united in pain will never entirely be strangers," Chass quoted quietly. "I will leave you to your day now, my lord—"

"Kamir, please. I wouldn't have you be so formal, Highness."

Chass's smile then was still faint, but truer. "As you wish, and please, Chass is fine. I've never cared about formality save where it keeps soldiers in line. Now I had best be on my way before your little Fathoms Dense guard dog goes for my throat." His mouth twitched.

Kamir choked on a laugh. "Fathoms Dense?" He looked over his shoulder and saw Charlaine looming in the doorway. Turning back to Chass, he said, "I don't think Sergeant Astor would be very amused if you called him that where he could hear."

Chass's brows shot up. "I see. Never fear, the sergeant is used to me and mine." Clearing his throat, he called out, "Who was dumb enough to put you on protection detail, Fathoms Dense? You're only good for standing around hallways looking pretty."

"At least I'm pretty, Penance Menace."

Kamir lifted his eyes to the sky, but his lips twitched up into a grin. "I see."

Chass shared the smile, then bowed his head. "Have a good evening. If you should need anything, let me know and it will be done. Be well."

"Be well and goodnight," Kamir said as he watched Chass leave and locked the gate once he was out of sight.

He turned—and nearly jumped out of his skin to see Charlaine only a couple of paces away. "Charlaine!"

"Sorry," Charlaine said, scowling. "Why are you crying? What did—"

"Nothing. His Highness was nothing but kind."

Charlaine gave him a funny look. "That *was* Prince Chass, right? Captain Chass? Of Penance Gate? *Kind* is not a word he knows."

"Then I would hazard you don't know him very well," Kamir said firmly, even angrily, remembering that tired, haunted look in the depths of Chass's eyes. "He had no reason to come out here to see me, but he did anyway, simply to share a few kind words. I understand he is not liked, but please, I do not want to hear any more untoward things about him in my house."

"As you wish, my lord, of course," Charlaine said with a smile. "You're right in that I do not know him well. Those with sense largely stay out of his way, and those crazy enough to follow him learn quickly to obey."

"You make it sound like they don't do so by choice."

Charlaine laughed. "Apologies, no. Whatever Chass is or isn't, Penance Gate is fiercely, I daresay dangerously, loyal to him. Not that I can speak—Fathoms Deep would do anything Lord Lesto asked of us."

Kamir nodded. "I know you report to Their Majesties, Sergeant, but I'd be grateful if you'd not mention His Highness to them."

"Why is that?" Charlaine asked. "You won't get in trouble for speaking with Prince Chass, especially since he appeared uninvited."

"My fear is that *he* would get in trouble. He did me a kindness, and I won't repay it by seeing him hurt. Please?"

Charlaine hesitated, then finally nodded. "As you wish, my lord. I don't really do all that much reporting, you know. My job is to protect you and ensure your happiness and well-being. I'm no nefarious spy. Their Majesties want to know you're well, especially in the aftermath of the High King's... rash decision making."

Kamir sincerely doubted that, but it wasn't worth arguing about. "Thank you, Sergeant, I really do appreciate everything you have done and continue to do."

"It's my honor, my lord. Now, you have to come tell Velina she has lost her mind, and if she makes her dratted shellfish curry as spicy as she is planning, nobody will be able to eat it."

Kamir snickered as he fell into step alongside Charlaine as they returned to the kitchen. "I like her spicy curry."

"There's no hope for any of you!" Charlaine threw up his hands and heaved a sigh, making Kamir laugh even harder.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jader never thought he'd be grateful to spend all day in the snow, but he was so desperate to leave Wessel's house and the other trapped guests that he would have cheerfully walked through a volcano to get away from them.

It had taken an entire day for the guests to clear out, and he and the others—including Wessel—were grateful to have a brief, quiet dinner before going off to their separate rooms for some well-earned solitude. And in the morning they were headed into the nearby town to do some shopping and get away from the house for a bit.

Sequestered in his own room with a carafe of wine and some sweets the cook was constantly thrusting at him with an insistence he needed fattening, Jader finally opened the letter that had come that afternoon.

Dear Jader,

I'm afraid you've created a pair of monsters now. I read your story to the children and now they expect them every night at bed. Chara especially liked the tale of a girl who was quieter than everyone around her, as he is often teased for precisely that. I do not know if that was one of your intentions with choosing that particular tale, but I am grateful.

However, I hope you are quite prepared to keep sending stories now, lest I pack the children in a crate and send them to you so that you might fully suffer the consequences of your actions.

Jader grinned. He wasn't certain what he loved more: the children liking his stories that much, or Kamir being so playful and teasing.

Speaking of actions and consequences and the like, you're sweet and smart to ask after me so. If you lack maturity, I've not noticed it. Please be assured on that point, and I promise I will do my best to convey if you ever step wrong. The consideration is appreciated. I am sorry you are the focus of so much unpleasant attention, especially as you've done nothing wrong. I never understood why so many here in Harken deride Islander practices when I can rattle off fifty people without effort who are in some sort of threesome arrangement despite the fact they've already had children. And I am not given to court rumors, but before I moved into the city, there was

quite the story circulating of the arrangement that Lord Fehard, Lord Assamanti, Lady Bedar, and Lord Keshtama enjoy and given what I know of them, I am inclined to believe it. Though I also wish I did not know that much about them. Some images, one just doesn't need in their head.

That time, Jader stopped reading because he was laughing too hard to continue. He wasn't acquainted with Fehard or Keshtama, but Assamanti and Bedar were military, and Jader had definitely walked in on them not once, but twice, in the army's general supply room. He'd made it very clear there'd better not be a third time, but he was fairly certain getting caught was most of the thrill for them. Mother Ocean knew what they got up to when two more were involved.

And it was heartening to hear Kamir say what he always thought: that Mainlanders were a bunch of damned hypocrites, and he would bet good money Bentans were too.

I hope by the time you receive this that you are no longer under house arrest. The more you talk about snow, the more I think I would detest it. At least there is good wine and, now the other guests are gone, relatively good company?

Speaking of being away from home, I am traveling to your estate in the next few days to assist with the hiring of new staff, specifically a new head chef and a new stable master, along with a few general staff for cleaning. There is discussion of reviving a few of the trades in the nearby village that were shut down by your predecessor. The estate has the funds to help them get started, but that decision is outside my boundaries. I can forward the proposals if you like, or we can push the matter off until next year, though I caution you may lose promising revenue from those who cannot afford to wait and must go elsewhere. Let me know what you'd like done and I will take care of it.

Otherwise, I'm afraid there is not much I have to relay. Life has been relatively quiet, which is a mercy. You are sorely missed by many. I do hope your time in Benta improves.

Your truly,

Kamir

P.S. Waiting until the postscript to tell me of dire things, and to only mention them offhandedly, is not a nice thing to do. I have been worried

sick. Please do not come to harm, and do not make light of any danger you face. I would rather hear of it from you than from another source, or worse, not at all. Please, please be careful.

Jader winced. So much for that. He'd hoped it would make Kamir worry less, not more.

Well, his next letter would definitely begin with an apology.

The clock chimed, reminding him of the late hour and triggering a jaw-cracking yawn. Well, that was that. Bed for now, and tomorrow he'd finally do something other than wander around Wessel's house.

Stripping off his robe and stoking the fire, Jader climbed into bed, set the letter on the side table, and snuffed the lamp, and settled beneath the warm blankets to sleep.

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Thankfully, the weather had stayed calm through the night and they were able to head into the nearby town as planned—save for Cherrell, who insisted on going on ahead with the soldiers to ensure the way was clear and safe. It wasn't as nice as the city another two days' journey, but passable, he was told. He wouldn't have cared if it was a port hovel. It wasn't being stuck in the same house for days on end.

Wessel sat beside him, and across from them sat Kristina and Seredia. Tsarana rode alongside the carriage with four of his soldiers and Jader's secretaries. Content to let the others converse, Jader pulled out his latest letter from Kamir to reread.

"What makes you smile so, my lord?" Krista asked.

"Hmm? Oh, a letter from my lover. I enjoy hearing from him, even if it makes me miss home all the more."

"That's sweet," Wessel said before Krista could reply, for which Jader was grateful, as her reply would invariably be *you are home*. He tried to be understanding and patient, he did, and sympathize with her position—but it grew increasingly frustrating when she would not even attempt to do the same. "What is your lover's name?"

"Kamir Norring. He's the youngest son of a minor noble."

"What does Lord Kamir do?" Krista asked. "I heard mention of him from time to time, and have seen him in brief moments, but never could form a

clear impression."

"Do?" Jader asked. "What does any noble do? He is the youngest son, so he is trained to someday marry and run a household or similar such. Currently he has been kind enough to serve as guardian of my estate."

Wessel beamed. "So you plan to marry the lad? Sounds a fine match. You'll have to pick out gifts aplenty, my lord. Absence does set the heart wandering, you know. It wouldn't do for your lover to feel compelled to look elsewhere. His family must be quite pleased to have made a match of such a fine figure as yourself."

Jader didn't bother to correct any of the misunderstandings, and he discreetly signaled for Seredia not to bother either. "Lord Kamir is the fine one." He smiled faintly. "I'm only an old soldier. So what is an appropriate gift, then, my lord and lady, for a lover far from sight?"

As hoped, that launched them into a discussion—more a debate—about what made the most appropriate romantic gifts. By the time they finally came to a halt, Jader's mood had vastly improved. They clambered out of the carriage and dismissed the carriage and horses. Two guards, in addition to Tsarana, and Jader's secretaries remained with them, and Jader had every faith the remaining guards would shadow from a distance.

Wessel took them first to a coffee house, expected and welcome. Snow was falling when they left, but slow and lazy and not likely to cause any further problems.

The next stop was a bookshop, where Jader left Seredia to select some books for Allen, while he borrowed Lady Krista to help him consult the shopkeeper on books Kamir's children might like, and Wessel did his own browsing.

Nearly two hours later they finally moved on, sending the packages off to the carriage by way of a clerk from the bookshop. Another hour passed in a toy shop, where he bought gifts for Sarrica's children, Lesto's children, Tara's unborn child, and Kamir's children. It was like being back on the Islands, with more kids underfoot than could be counted. Jader loved it.

Pushing away the homesickness, he sent the packages off with another clerk and followed his companions back to the street. "Anywhere else would you like to visit in particular, my lord?" Wessel asked.

"I would like to look at jewelry, though maybe we should have lunch first?" Jader replied with a smile.

"Jewelry, certainly, and lunch sounds a fine idea. I know just the place." Wessel led them down the street to the corner, then down a couple more to a small pub that smelled of roasting meat and hot, spiced wine.

Jader yawned as he sat down, not realizing until that moment just how much energy shopping had taken out of him. It had been a long time since he'd done more than summon a jeweler or tailor to his office. His mother wasn't wrong when she said he'd become a spoiled brat.

The food, when it arrived, smelled marvelous—surprisingly so. Jader took a bite of the fragrant stew in front of him and froze in surprise. "This is spicy."

Wessel laughed. "I thought you might approve. I only visited Harken once, with some old friends I went to school with overseas, but I remember that almost everything I ate was so spicy I had trouble finishing it the first two months I was there. It took me a long time to grow re-accustomed to food here by the time I left. I thought you would appreciate this place."

"I have missed food that has a little heat to it," Jader said. "Thank you." On either side of him, Seredia and Tsarana murmured their own thanks. Even Lady Krista seemed to enjoy it, enough so she ignored all their protests when the meal was finished and paid for it herself.

The light snow had ceased falling by the time they ventured out again, but the air had grown significantly colder. Wessel and Krista looked to the sky and shared a frown.

"Is something wrong?"

"It's hard to say," Krista replied. "The temperature has dropped significantly, which means we could get ice, but regardless of what may or may not fall, it could soon be too cold to even be outdoors. The weather is not usually this brutal so early in the season, but it has been known to happen. After we visit the jewelry shop, we should best be on our way, or there's a good chance we'll be stuck here in town until it warms up again."

Jader nodded, and Wessel led the way back along the streets until he stopped in front of a charming little shop with a dark green door, the name painted in brilliant scarlet.

Inside, the place smelled like fresh pine and a hint of cinnamon. A heavy, handsome man stood behind the counter, the boredom falling from his face as he took them in—and eyes popping wide as he noticed Tsarana and the other soldier. He spoke in rapid-fire Bentan, not that Jader would have understood him if he spoke slowly.

Lady Krista approached the counter and motioned to Jader, and they conversed for a moment before the man turned and sketched Jader a handsome bow. He spoke in Bentan, and Krista said, "He says it's an honor to make your acquaintance and would like to know what sort of jewelry you're seeking today."

"Earrings, at least twelve pairs. I've brought examples of what I'd like. I'd also like some hairpins, and I've brought examples of those as well, and finally I want to commission a couple of complete sets, one with strong blue elements, the other pink." Shera stepped forward and presented the small jewelry box he'd carried all day. Taking it, Jader set it on the counter, unlocked it, and turned it to present the contents to the jeweler.

The man's eyes widened, and he immediately started speaking again as he gingerly picked up the various pieces of jewelry inside: four sets of earrings, each very different, and two hairpins that were similar to what he'd like to have made for Kamir. The complete jewelry sets would be for Allen and Tara. For Lesto, he'd already arranged several barrels of Benta's finest beers, and for Sarrica several casks of ridiculously expensive Bentan brandy. The only other gift after the jewelry was a sword for his new deputy, but that would be taken care of another day.

After several minutes of back and forth, the jeweler pulled out a large sketchbook and rapidly started drawing, jotting numbers and other notes along one edge. Several minutes later, he turned the sketchbook around and the conversation resumed, Seredia stepping in to take over when translating got to be too much for Lady Krista.

Nearly two hours passed before Jader was satisfied with his commissions and handed over the down payment. "*Thank you very much,*" he told the jeweler, who nodded and smiled happily as he went to put the money away.

Lady Krista chuckled as they stepped back outside. "I think you know more about Bentan jade than I do. I've never seen such intense debate over jewelry before."

"I don't think I've ever seen Master Spiro so happy," Wessel said. "He doesn't get to work with fellow enthusiasts very often."

Jader lifted one shoulder. "Bentan jade is hard to come by even in Harken. I could not call myself fond of jewelry without obtaining at least a couple of pieces. Thank you for indulging me, especially as it feels like it's gotten even colder and my delay may have cost us a chance to make it to your estate, Lady Krista."

"I think we'll just be able to make it. Come, the family carriage should be waiting for us where we left Lord Wessel's, and he can finally go home and enjoy a quiet house."

Wessel made dismissive noises as they walked. "You know I dislike empty houses, my lady. I admit this past week was a bit much, but I've enjoyed having everyone present and look forward to seeing you again."

Jader was content to let them talk, too busy trying to hide from the miserable wind they were walking against. It felt like knives and left his lungs burning and stinging. The very moment he got home, he was traveling all the way south and lying naked on the beach for a week straight, and he didn't particularly care if he came away from that journey as red as a cooked lobster.

When they reached the carriages, Jader turned to Wessel and bowed slightly. "Thank you for everything, my lord. You've been a marvelous host, and I hope we continue to be friends long after I return home."

"I have every faith," Wessel said. "Perhaps someday you can host me."

"I would be honored."

Jader startled briefly when Wessel hugged him, as that was not something he had seen Bentans really do, but returned it gladly.

Then he followed Lady Krista into the large, heavy Abernoth carriage. Several minutes later, everyone was settled in place and the carriage lumbered off. The rest of their belongings, and the soldiers they'd left behind, should already be well on their way to the Abernoth Estate, led by Lord Cherrell.

Weather permitting, they would reach it themselves a few hours after dark.

"Mother will be most excited to finally see you," Lady Krista said. "She's been extremely impatient these past few days. If the snow had not cleared last night, I do believe she would have shoveled it all herself to reach us and put the entire staff to work right alongside her."

Jader smiled faintly. "Well, I'm glad we have not forced Her Grace to such desperate straits."

Lady Krista's levity faded, a reprimanding look taking its place. "You need not be so formal with us. I'm your sister. She is your mother. I know you don't remember us, but we remember *you*."

Tamping down on his impatience, Jader replied, "Formal Harken has four words for sister, the same again for brother, and the same again for neutral and fluid, and still more words to clarify whether they are younger, older, of lesser or lower rank, and so forth. None of that includes whether they are blood-relation, half-blood relation, adopted, or step-relation. Those are just some of the reasons formal Harken is so difficult to learn. Parentage is even more complex, with mothers, fathers, dames, sires, and so forth. Old-fashioned Harken has even more words that we've since dropped, as it's now rightfully considered in poor taste to clarify what sort of genitals a person has unless they prefer those particular pronouns. The only place you see remnants of some of them is in certain formalities, such as titles: Duke, Duchess, Duchen, Duchell, for example, which are retained largely for legal matters. And we haven't even gotten into informal Harken."

"I don't understand your point," Krista said.

"My point is that, all told, there are hundreds of words and combinations in Harken to clarify how exactly someone is related to you, but even formal Harken has nothing on Islander, which has thirty-odd words just for mother, not including variants used by the different islands and communities, and nothing is considered crasser or ruder than using the wrong one. People can study Islander for years and still never master forms of address. It is something we take seriously with all relations and community members, but we take it most seriously in regards to our mothers. I respect all of you remember me, and I am trying hard to learn and follow Bentan customs as much as I can—but I will not call a woman mother or sister when they do not yet feel like such to me. It's too ingrained a custom for me to leave off simply at someone's command."

Krista bowed her head slightly. "Even though I invite you to call me sister?"

"All parties should be comfortable with a relationship before declaring the nature of the relationship," Jader said, turning to look out the window. "We have a saying on my island: the fool dives for a hundred pearls, the wise dives for one." At her puzzled look he said, "My island, Shahira, has a tradition of diving for pearls when we want to ask for a permanent relationship with someone. It's dangerous, for the pearls in question can only be found in deep, dark, cold waters. Just being able to swim that deep takes years of practice, and years more to be able to stay down there long enough to gather sufficient oysters in the hope one might contain the sought for pearl. Diving for them is not something done lightly."

"I see," Krista said. "I had not realized Islanders had such traditions."

Jader's mouth twisted. "Few do."

Krista said nothing, merely turned to do some staring out the window of her own, a pensive frown on her face.

"I am Harken-born and a silver tongue, and yet I suspect I don't know as much about the language as you," Lady Seredia said. "But I guess I never had to."

Jader nodded, and thankfully after that the conversation subsided. He pulled his cloak more firmly around him and closed his eyes, content to let his thoughts tumble and roll as they liked, though they had a distinct habit of turning to Kamir and stopping there.

Would Kamir like the hairpins Jader was having made? He'd initially been tempted to get Kamir the same full set he'd commissioned for Allen and Tara... but the image of Kamir with flowers in his hair would not leave him, so flowers it would be.

At some point he managed to drift off, though he had no idea how, given the success he had the last time he'd tried sleeping in a carriage.

He woke as it came to a stop, and the sound of several unfamiliar voices filled the air, echoing off stone. The carriage door pulled open, and a footman appeared to help Lady Krista and Lady Seredia out. Tsarana followed next, and finally Jader stepped out, pushing back the hood of his cloak to better examine their surroundings.

All around him came exclamations, cries, and words that were definitely swearing by their tone. He glanced at the seven servants gathered in a loose half circle around them, but quickly looked away again, discomfited by their staring.

Instead, he looked at the enormous manor in front of them. It was hard to tell the exact color in the dark, even with a full moon glowing overhead and reflecting off the endless piles of snow. But it seemed to be the same dark brown stone he saw almost everywhere else, with dark shutters, smoke coming from the various chimneys, and flickering lights at either side of the enormous doorway.

Lady Krista came up to stand next to him, her arm hooking loosely through his. "Shall we go inside?"

"I'm certainly not going to argue for staying out here in the cold," Jader said with a smile, and nodded at the still-gawking staff as they passed by them.

The house was thankfully significantly warmer than outside, if still a bit chilly. More servants stopped what they were doing to gawk, but Jader ignored them as he pulled off his cloak and removed his boots, grateful for the large, fur-lined house shoes that someone brought him. He felt a little silly walking around in such things, but they were warm, and that was all he really cared about.

Lady Krista was speaking in low tones to a woman who had the air of someone in charge. After a couple of minutes, she said, "Mother is still awake, though she says she understands if you prefer to wait until tomorrow to meet her."

Jader shook his head. "Even I can appreciate that she has waited long enough for a day she never thought would come."

"Thank you," Krista murmured, and once more taking his arm, she led him up a long, dark staircase and through dimly lit hallways to a large, ornately carved wooden door. She knocked, and a young woman answered the door. Her eyes widened, mouth dropping open as she stared at Jader. Krista cleared her throat, and the woman startled, finally pulled the door all the way open, and bowed low as they entered.

Two figures stood by a large bank of small-paned windows: Cherrell and an old woman, tall and imposing, not nearly as frail or feeble as Jader had

been led to believe. She looked exactly like an older version of Krista.

Sobbing filled the air as Cherrell escorted the woman to him. Her hands covered her mouth as she reached up, stared up at him. Dropping them, she said something in Bentan, but before he could ask for a translation, she reached up and gently grasped the sides of his face, pulled him down so their foreheads pressed together. "Trevin..." More Bentan after that, but Jader caught enough words he knew to figure out he was being welcomed home. He covered her hands with his own, and from there it wasn't hard to hug her properly and let her cry, let her garbled words wash over him.

"Mother says welcome home, you've been gone far too long, and she's so very sorry we did not look hard enough to find you."

"You did the best you could," Jader said. "You did more than most would. There was every reason in the world to believe your son was dead." He personally thought their son *was* dead, but this was not the time to say that.

Finally, the woman who had once been his mother drew back and said something else to him. Jader shook his head, and she looked ready to start crying again. Instead, she stepped away, set her shoulders, and said something to Krista.

Smiling faintly, Krista said, "She would like proper introductions." Stepping forward, Krista indicated Jader with her right hand. "Mother, I present to you Lord Jader Star, Marquis of Kyrmine and High Commander of the Harken Imperial Army." She motioned to her family with her left hand. "Lord Jader, I make you known to Lady Tialla, Duchess of Abernoth."

"It's an honor to meet you. I am deeply sorry I lost my memories of you. Mothers should always be remembered and honored." He started to say more, but a knock came at the door and servants came in with large trays of steaming bowls and plates.

Once the food was arranged, they faded off again, leaving Jader alone with his family to share an awkward meal that mostly left poor Krista so busy translating she was unable to eat. "Mother would like to know how you survived, if you recall."

"I'm afraid I don't," Jader replied. "I woke up on a beach, completely naked, with an aching head and a broken arm. I could not remember

anything, save bits of the storm and a language the Islanders couldn't understand. By the end of that first year, I'd largely forgotten that, too, and after another year had passed, there was nothing at all left of whoever I had been. There were other bodies on the beach, but I was the only one still alive."

Tialla nodded, blinking back tears. She said something else, and Krista translated, "She says it is unfortunate nobody knew you were speaking Bentan."

"Yes, it is," Jader replied. "If that wreck had happened a few years later, someone might have considered taking me to the Mainland, but back then, Islanders avoided them far more vehemently than we do now."

Tialla reached over and squeezed his hand, said something else.

"She says what matters most is that you are alive and well. She is proud that you have come so far after losing so much." Krista frowned slightly, but only picked up her tea and sipped it.

After a brief, awkward silence, Tialla asked another question and Krista answered, explaining when she was done, "She wanted to know how you became High Commander. Since I already know that one, I went ahead and told the tale." She winked and Jader smiled.

Tialla said something else, patting his hand, and Krista said, "She says you have your father's temper, and the tale of how they met and married is not so very different from how you became High Commander."

"I see," Jader said with a smile. "Thank you."

Conversation grew less stilted after that, and continued until they were all doing more yawning than talking. It still took some time after that before Krista was able to extract them and lead him down the hall to his bedroom. "Thank you, my lord. I am certain you are exhausted, but it was kind of you to indulge Mother so long."

"It's an honor," Jader replied. "I may not remember anything, but I am not so callous I would begrudge a woman wanting to see her long lost son." Even if he had been begrudging and resentful since meeting Krista. But meeting Tialla punched him in the gut far harder than meeting Krista had. Mother Ocean, he could not wait to be home again. He yawned. "Apologies. Thank you for everything, Lady Krista. I will see you in the morning."

"Sleep well," she murmured, and hugged him briefly before slipping off down the hall and vanishing around the corner.

Jader stepped into his room and closed the door. His belongings had already been delivered, and someone had even gone to the trouble of unpacking his clothes. A nightshirt and dressing robe were laid out on the bed, a small cup of brandy on the table beside it, glowing a rich red-brown in the flickering light of a lamp.

He changed quickly and picked up the brandy, sipping it slowly as he let himself unwind and relax. Shivering slightly, he wandered over to the window to make certain it was shut—and paused as he saw figures in the snow, all of them with swords at their hips, the metal bits of their armor gleaming in the moonlight. Jader set his cup down—and then stopped, relaxing as he recognized Cherrell amongst them. They were probably on patrol or changing shifts, or maybe something outside had drawn their attention. They looked intent upon something, but not urgent or alarmed, so it was probably nothing.

Shrugging it off, Jader pulled the curtains shut and ventured closer to the fire, adding some additional logs so it would burn through most of the night.

Tomorrow, his real work would begin, and he had no idea now if the task would even be manageable. He'd been given the impression of an old, feeble, foolishly stubborn woman, not the sharp, alert duchess he'd met tonight. It did not seem to him that it was necessary she hand over the title to Krista, no matter how much retaining it impeded whatever plans Krista and the others had. It was Tialla's title, rightly and fairly.

It was also tomorrow's problem, and he was too overwhelmed and out of sorts to think about it any longer tonight. Setting the empty cup back on the table, he climbed into bed, grateful for the warmth that slowly sank into his half-frozen bones. Snuffing the candle, he let sleep have him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kamir wanted to die. The trip to Kyrmine should have been a simple two-day affair. Instead, they were on day four and the only time he'd been more miserable was the night he'd spent ten hours giving birth to twins.

First a sudden, nasty storm had slowed them down. That had been followed by poor roads that had cost them not one but two wheels, and on the rare occasion the carriage was cooperating, Kamir's stomach was not.

He climbed back into the carriage from his latest bout of throwing up and curled up in the corner, resting his head on the soft pillow Charlaine had been kind enough to obtain for him. "I am sorry I keep slowing us down."

"This is your trip, my lord," Charlaine said. "We travel at your pace and pleasure. Are you certain there is nothing more we can get for you? I do not think I've ever seen someone look so miserable."

"I'll be fine once I can get out of this carriage for good," Kamir replied. "Thank you, though. I am grateful to have you here. I'm certain there are many things you would rather be doing, instead of being stuck with me all the time."

Charlaine's mouth twitched. "If I was back in Harkenesten I would be standing in front of a door or training in the barracks until it was my turn to stand in front of a door. Mind you, I'd rather guard doors than hurt and kill people, but I'm not going to complain about having something different to do. Neither will Van."

"That really was too much." Kamir had no idea how he was going to pay for the additional bodyguard, but that was a problem he would have to address later. He hated to leave the children behind, but there was no way he would be able to manage them, himself, and the estate.

"It really wasn't, my lord."

Kamir nodded and rested a hand on his roiling stomach, willing it to behave for just a few hours. That was all they needed, and then he could take the remainder of the day to rest before getting to work tomorrow.

Thankfully his stomach *did* behave the last stretch of the trip, and as he stepped out of the carriage and breathed in the sea air, he started to feel even better.

A tall, broad, handsome woman came down the steps to greet him, her bright red hair fanning out around her head in beautiful curls. "Lord Norring?" When he nodded, she bowed low. "It's an honor to have you here, my lord. Your assistance these past months has been greatly appreciated."

"I'm happy to be of help, and it's a pleasure to finally meet you, Mistress Heti." Kamir said. "I do not suppose I could trouble you for some tea? Calo if you have it, something herbal otherwise. I'm afraid carriages and pregnancy do not get along well for me, and I could do with something to soothe my stomach."

Heti's gave him a gently admonishing look. "Of course, of course, you should have said so immediately instead of letting me blather on, my lord." She motioned to the men who'd come out of the house and stable. "See His Lordship's things are taken to his room with all haste." She looked at Charlaine, eyes widening as she finally took him in. "Fathoms Deep, that is quite the honor. What brings you to our humble estate?"

"I am Lord Kamir's bodyguard," Charlaine said. "If you could arrange a room for me that is close to his, I would be grateful, though if necessary, I'm happy to sleep in his room on the floor or a sofa."

"Nobody sleeps on the floor in my house." Sniffing in offense, Heti bustled off into the house and started handing out orders as servants approached. When that was done, she escorted Kamir into a beautiful parlor appointed in cream, pink, and mint green. "Tea and some food that should stay on your stomach. How far along are you? Is this your first?"

Kamir settled into a delightfully comfortable chair with a happy sigh. "No, thankfully, though it's been some years since I gave birth to my twins. They're nearly nine now, so I am long out of practice. This one is a little over three months along, about fourteen weeks, I'd say." Free of his travel coat, the bump from the growing babe was more visible, though it'd be a few more weeks yet before it showed heavily.

Heti clucked her tongue and muttered to herself as she bustled out of the room, vowing to bring the tea and food herself.

"Are you certain you're well, my lord?" Charlaine asked.

"I'm fine, I promise. Me and my fussy stomach are old enemies, and it hasn't beaten me yet." Kamir settled into his chair and closed his eyes. "Nothing some tea and rest won't fix, and hopefully the journey home will not be as miserable as the journey here." He opened his eyes, and startled slightly to see how intently Charlaine was watching him. "Is something wrong?"

"What? No, my apologies, my lord. I was simply thinking that it's readily apparent why the Commander is so fond of you, and why the High Consort thinks so highly of you."

Kamir opened his mouth, but immediately closed it again, not really certain what to say. He doubted Allen thought of him much at all, though he'd sent a couple of notes commenting Kamir was missed. Which was ridiculous.

As to Jader... Jader was complicated, and Kamir was too worn out to tread that well-worn path at the moment.

Thankfully Heti returned then bearing a large wooden tray that contained a pot of tea, cups of mango juice, a larger cup of beer, and various snacks. There was also a plate piled with proper food that she handed to Charlaine before returning to fuss over Kamir for several minutes. "Ring if you need anything further, my lord, and the moment you think you can keep proper food down, don't hesitate to let me know. If you need me to push back appointments a day or so, we can do that easily."

"No, tomorrow should be fine for all of it. I would hate to delay matters further than I already have. Oh, I did receive a reply from His Lordship, and he has granted full approval to re-open those shops the previous Marquis closed. So contact them and arrange appointments for later in the week, if you would be so kind, and we'll set that in motion as well while I'm here."

Heti looked like she wanted to hug him, but she settled for folding her hands in her apron and sweeping him a beautiful bow. "Yes, my lord. Ring if you need anything, I mean it." She bustled off, closing the door quietly behind her.

Sipping gingerly at his tea, Kamir sighed in relief when it seemed to settle on his stomach. After he managed to keep down the first cup of tea, he nibbled at a bit of rusk dipped in his tea between sips.

"You're looking better," Charlaine said as he finished his own meal and set the plate back on the tray, picking up the cup of beer that had been sitting there.

Kamir's mouth quirked over the rim of his teacup. "I certainly feel much improved, as I'd hoped. I think I will go to my room to freshen up and then see what can be done today." He finished his tea and rose—but hadn't gone more than two steps when the door opened again and Heti entered holding a stack of post.

"You shouldn't be up and about yet, my lord." Practically dragging him back to his seat, Heti flipped neatly through her stack of letters and held one out. Kamir's heart gave a lurch to see Jader's familiar handwriting. "Finally had a chance to go through today's post and this was there for you. I've nearly got your room ready, if you'd like to go lie down in a bit and rest until supper. I'll be back. Do you need anything, Sergeant?"

"No, but thank you."

She bustled out again, and Kamir took a cautious sip of the mango juice before breaking the wax seal on the letter.

Inside was not one, but two letters. The second one was sealed with red wax, a small heart pressed into it. Surely not. Kamir's cheeks heated and he hastily stuffed that letter back into the envelope to read later in private. Opening the first letter, he read:

Dear Kamir,

Have I said enough that I hate snow? Because I truly fucking hate snow. Especially when that snow is hiding ice, and instead of going for a relaxing walk, I wind up tumbling like a drunken oaf and damaging my ankle so badly I now hobble like someone three times my age. My dignity, presumably, is still somewhere outside in that mother-forsaken snow.

Kamir pressed the hand holding the letter to his face to muffle his giggles. It was terrible of him to laugh, but the idea of Jader forced to hobble around instead of storming about the way he always did was too funny and endearing not to laugh. He must be a hundred kinds of miserable.

When he was finally able to quell his giggles, Kamir continued reading.

Thanks to the snow and my own clumsiness, I am now confined to the Abernoth manor much as the snow confined me to Wessel's home before.

Worse, I am confined to the ground floor, since trying to go up the stairs nearly ended in my pride joining my dignity. My patience may soon become another casualty, as being unable to move much means I am often trapped in a room, and once people enter it to talk to me, they seldom leave until they must. I'm not certain what's worse: the impossibly rude questions of Wessel's guests, or the detailed inquiry into every second of my life being inflicted on me by the Abernoths. That sounds unkind, and I don't mean to be. Largely I feel awkward and ashamed I am not the son they so desperately want me to be. I can only say 'I don't remember' so many times before I sound and feel like an ass. Normally I do not mind being the center of attention, but I prefer to be so when I am either handing out orders or trying to get clothes off, or at least able to leave when a conversation grows tiresome.

All this sitting about doing nothing but chattering has left me sleepless at night, but I have found something of a cure, or at least a distraction, in thinking of you. I often do anyway, but my thoughts have turned very specific and increased in frequency. I have enclosed those thoughts in a separate letter, as I'm sure you've noticed. Feel no obligation to read or reply.

Now that I have spoken incessantly about me, how are you? I hope you and the children are still enjoying the new house. I will look for a suitable new home gift the moment the snow clears and I can walk again. If there is something in particular you would like, feel free to say. That seems the very least I can do for the way you so kindly endure my endless whining.

This letter will find you, assuming I guessed correctly, at the fancy new manor that belongs to me which I have yet to see. I hope you are being treated well; Mother Ocean knows you're more its lord than me at present. Do as you like, please. If there's anything I dislike in the future, I'll deal with it then, though honestly, I think you'll make far better decisions than I, this being one of your fields of expertise.

Have Tara and Shemal pulled you into their antics yet? You'll have to tell me what you've been up to with them; Allen's letters are infrequent and strictly about business. I do not think Sarrica has ever written a letter in his life, merely signs the ones put in front of him. Tell Lesto of my woes and order him to write me. I am stuck in parlors all day listening to gossip or disappointing my Bentan relatives. If this goes on for much longer, I'm

going to break into the wine cellar and stay there until I'm allowed to return home.

Kamir broke into giggles again, this time so overcome with them he had to brace himself with both hands, elbows resting on his thighs.

"What in the Pantheon has you laughing so hard?" Charlaine asked. "I don't think I've ever seen you laugh that way."

"Oh, my apologies," Kamir said, laughter fading. "I must seem a complete loon."

Charlaine shook his head. "Not remotely. You look happy."

Kamir ducked his head, smile returning as he stared at the letter. "Jader damaged his ankle while out for a walk in the snow. He's, um, not very happy about it."

"The *High Commander* turned his ankle in the snow?" A look of disbelief and delight overtook Charlaine's face. "And now he's whining about it? Oh, to be back at the palace with the pleasure of spreading that tale."

Kamir gave him a playfully reproving look. "Sergeant, Fathoms Deep is supposed to be above gossiping."

"Fathoms Deep has simply refined our skills to the point Lord Lesto doesn't catch us at it." Charlaine grinned when Kamir laughed. "What else does our estimable High Commander have to say?"

"That he is stuck sitting in a parlor all day forced to listen to other people and answer a thousand rude questions."

Charlaine rolled his eyes. "Poor High Commander, enduring all that cruel torture."

"He agrees with you completely," Kamir said with another giggle as he resumed reading.

When I am not trapped or writing whiny letters, I dine with Her Grace. She is a sharp, fearsome woman, and I admire her greatly. I hate that I have no memories of her, and that we do not share a language, but must go through Seredia or Krista at all times. I am trying to learn some Bentan, but honestly it was by the grace of Mother Ocean I managed to learn Harken. I don't know how the silver tongues do it, never mind the unfathomable skills Allen possesses.

Unrelated, mentioning Allen reminds me that your hair, of all things, came up at dinner the other night—the second time, in fact, as it also came up at Wessel's dinner party. One of Cherrell's friends was unhappy with his son, who'd run off and dyed his hair emerald green. Apparently it's the practice of 'vagabonds and cheap whores', but given the man uses the same tone of voice when speaking of Islanders, I wasn't terribly sympathetic to his plight. The look on his face when I told him my lover made an elegant hobby of dying his hair beautiful colors almost made this entire trip worth it. Are you still sporting purple, or have you moved on to a different shade? What color?

Kamir reached up to touch his hair, which was mostly back to its mouse brown. He'd been so busy and reluctant to spend the money when there was so much else to do—especially with a custody challenge looming over him.

Would it be so terrible to dye his hair, though? Certainly it would be time consuming; he'd spend most of a day getting it done. But he could trim what remained of the purple, maybe go to the trouble of bleaching it this time and pick a jeweled blue or green...

Shaking his head, he finished the last bits of the letter.

But I believe I have rambled and whined at you long enough. I must save some whining for the next letter, after all, though with my luck by that point I'll have managed to break my arm climbing out of bed.

I hope this letter does find you well, and that you're enjoying your time at Kyrmine.

Yours,

Jader

Yours... Normally Jader signed with 'sincerely'. What had provoked the change? Kamir really wished his heart would stop pounding. One silly little word change meant nothing. His letters had grown increasingly casual; no doubt this was simply a product of that.

Kamir savored it all the same. They would not be lovers forever, and certainly never spouses. Jader would never love him the same way he loved Jader—was coming to love, anyway, really love, not the ridiculous infatuation he'd nursed all these years. But friends was not a bad thing to be, either. This letter felt like they were really and truly friends, and that was something Kamir could happily live with.

It might all come tumbling down when Jader returned home and found out Kamir was pregnant, but he was still clinging to the hope that Jader would not be as rigid about such matters as the rest of the High Court. His fingers twitched, but he refrained from touching the slight bump at his stomach.

Instead he folded the letter and tucked it back in the envelope. Slipping that into an inner pocket of his jacket, he finished his tea and stood. "I believe I will go lie down now. Thank you again for coming with me."

"It's an honor to serve, my lord," Charlaine said. "Come, I'll escort you to your room so I know where it is and can familiarize myself with the layout of the house."

Kamir nodded. "As you wish, though I still don't see what sort of threat I'd face out here. My ex-husband has never been that ambitious or hard-working."

"He strikes me as desperate, though, and that can drive even the kindest person to do terrible things. When they start out terrible..." Charlaine shrugged one shoulder. "The results are often tragic. Nothing like that will happen on my watch."

Kamir simply nodded again.

Out in the hall, Kamir asked a passing servant where he should go. Instead she requested he wait one moment, turned on her heel, and vanished right back through the door she'd just walked through. Before Kamir could react, Heti appeared. "You've excellent timing, my lord. I was just informed your room is ready and was about to come find you in the parlor. I am sorry it wasn't ready upon your arrival, but the room we had prepared proved to be incorrect, and then it took longer than we anticipated to get the new room ready. I am extremely sorry."

Incorrect? How could it be incorrect? One guest room was much like another. "There's no reason to be sorry," Kamir replied as he walked alongside her up a grand staircase and along a mezzanine to a smaller staircase that led down a wide, quiet hallway lined with lush plants and beautiful landscapes. The floor was covered in rugs of oceanic tones, giving the hallway the air of a seaside cabin.

It ended in a beautiful set of double doors carved with merfolk and other fanciful oceanic beings and creatures. If Chiri saw those doors, she would

gawk at them for hours and try to trace every last line. Even Chara would be entranced, and the ocean did not usually interest him overmuch. "What is this?"

"Your room, my lord." Smiling, Heti pushed the doors open and led the way inside. "Lord Jader was quite insistent you be made comfortable in the master suite. That is why we were late. We had to get this room ready and it's been shut up for years. The previous lord did not use it. He and his spouse preferred different rooms at the other end of the house." She clasped her hands in front of her as she turned to face him. "I hope it meets with your approval, but if anything is wanting, let me know and the matter will be resolved promptly."

"It's beautiful," Kamir said softly. The whole place looked like an underwater palace from a storybook. It reminded him also of Jader's suite in Harkenesten. Jader would love the room when he saw it, all the glass and color, the aquariums filled with decorative fish and plants—he'd probably replace those with real plants and animals.

The bed was large and oval, surrounded by white and silver netting, built into a raised dais that required steps. The headboard resembled the doors with its carvings, save it was scattered with little glass globes of water filled with more glass fish.

If ever a room had been made for Jader, it was this one. Allen and Sarrica had known what they were about in giving the Kyrmine title to him, no matter how much Jader had protested.

Kamir felt like the worst sort of interloper standing there, and it was all the worse that Jader had ordered it to be so. When he learned of what Kamir was hiding, he would likely regret his generosity and be sorry he'd ever trusted Kamir.

"Everything is perfect," he said, smiling at Heti. "You and your staff are beyond wonderful. Thank you very much."

Heti preened slightly before dipping into a bow. "We're honored to serve. Your belongings have been unpacked. If you need anything, simply ring. Did you want dinner prepared?"

"Yes, I think so," Kamir said. "Nothing too elaborate, though. I do not want to put the staff to any trouble."

"No trouble at all, my lord. Dinner is at ten, then. I'll send someone to wake you in time to dress if you do not wake before then."

She and Charlaine departed, leaving Kamir alone. He stared helplessly around the room. It was only going to be for a few days. Surely Jader wouldn't mind too much, when he learned of the baby and the decree.

Swallowing the lump in his throat, Kamir crossed the room to the doors on the far side. The first proved to be a wash room, complete with the running water that Sarrica wanted installed in Harkenesten. The project was perpetually delayed by the council, who argued about the cost, though everyone knew it was more to do with their own laziness and the fact the construction would inconvenience them for a few months, never mind the long-term convenience that would result.

The second door proved to be the dressing room—a dressing room nearly the size of his old bedroom back in Harkenesten. His tiny collection of clothes looked lost amidst all the emptiness. Given what he'd seen of Jader's clothes and jewels and shoes, this room was yet more evidence Kyrmine finally had the right lord.

He removed his travel clothes and set them aside to be laundered, and pulled on a soft, warm sleeping gown. He trailed his fingers over his stomach, helpless against imagining for the thousandth time what sort of child would be born. Would they want to be a boy? A girl? Something in between or neither? Hopefully they would be a strong and healthy child, maybe with Jader's pretty eyes or that beautiful dark hair. Maybe Kamir's skin, though, so they'd hold up a little better in sunshine when playing on the beach...

He picked up his discarded jacket and pulled out the pocket watch he'd mistakenly left there—and then remembered the letters and pulled them out as well. Leaving the dressing room, he walked over to the wide bank of windows to the left of the bed, and stared out at the fields, the road, and the glittering ocean beyond. He fervently hoped Jader would want partial custody, and their child would get to spend time here. It was a good home for raising children, from what he'd seen so far. Definitely for the best he'd not brought Chiri and Chara; he never would have been able to get them to leave again.

But that path led to the sorts of thoughts that hurt too much. Leaving them behind, Kamir climbed into bed. He set the watch and letters on the

bedside table and settled in, breathing in the scent of lavender and moth flowers as he slowly drifted off to sleep.

When he woke, the room was darker, but a glance at the window showed the sun was still up. He rolled to the end of the bed and picked up his watch. Only a few minutes past seven, plenty of time until dinner.

Sitting up, he retrieved the envelope with the letters, his heart speeding up as he pulled out the one sealed with red wax and stamped with a heart—the classic mark for *private*, so certain letters would not be opened by secretaries or other staff used to handling all the post for their employers.

It was not the sort of letter he'd ever expected to receive. He wasn't the sort of person to inspire such letters. Except, apparently, when Jader was bored and going mad from it. Smiling fondly, Kamir carefully pulled the wax seal loose without breaking it and smoothed out the letter.

My Dearest Kamir,

There was a dinner party last night, as the weather was kind enough to permit it, with Lord Wessel and several other familiar faces from his house party. Thankfully this time they largely refrained from their tiresome questions.

Almost as frustrating, however, is being made to endure as they all get drunk and harass me with lewd suggestions and inappropriate touches. If only you had been here so I was able to drag you off to enjoy a few of the more interesting ideas. Lady Something-Something had a few thoughts involving silk ribbons that I rather liked for you, though sadly I do not know your thoughts on bondage. But I'm versatile, so I'm just as happy to have you do the binding if that is to your taste, or we can leave off altogether.

Lord Needs a Bath whispered a rather crude thought involving a desk, and it reminded me vividly how much I enjoyed fucking you against the wall. The desk I write this letter on is the perfect height for bending you over, or spreading you across so I can enjoy the pleasure of your expressions as I fuck you until you scream.

I would love to be home right now, wheedling you into spoiling me while I am unable to do more than hobble about. Is that bratty of me? But I'll gladly call myself a brat if it means I could spend the day in my bed with you beside me, reading to me, eating with me, climbing on top of me and

fucking yourself on my cock. I do enjoy the rare occasion where you take that little bit of control. It brings out a fire you seldom let show.

There's a handsome settee in my room that would be perfect for such an arrangement, and narrow enough that, when you were done using me for your pleasure, you'd have no choice but to lie atop me until you felt like moving again. Just thinking about it banishes my misery and even the wretched cold.

When we felt like moving again I'd drag you from the settee to my bed. The one I have here is not as nice as my bed in Harkenesten, but it's comfortable and warm. If you were here, I would gladly refuse to leave it for a day or two, and overindulge in you until we had to spend another two days simply in recovery.

Writing this letter has not relaxed me, but it's certainly distracting me in the most delightful and frustrating ways. I had to stop partway through to bring myself off, and wished throughout that my hand was your talented mouth, that I could drag you up when you were done and taste myself on your lips. Then I'd push you to the floor and return the favor, fuck you with my tongue and lips until you screamed my name.

The only smart thing I did in preparing for this trip was pack a box of toys to keep myself amused. I will have to dig it out of my trunk if I'm to get any sleep tonight, but I cannot find too much reason to complain.

Thank you, as ever, in indulging me by reading. As I said before, do not feel obligated to reply, and if you prefer I do not write such letters, simply let me know. Otherwise, you'll likely read more of them. I've never written such letters before, but now that I have written one, I fear a monster has risen.

And if I've left you as frustrated in the reading as I made myself in the writing, I cannot be terribly sorry. I like the idea of you thinking of me thus.

Yours,

Jader

The bastard had definitely left him frustrated—but also mired in guilt and misery, which rather effectively ruined the frustration.

Should he tell Jader of the child? He'd been putting it off because Jader had so much else to deal with. To tell him something so important in a letter

seemed mean—and cowardly. And what of the royal decree? Lesto had signed for Jader, as he had permission to do such things in Jader's absence, but it was easy to tell from Jader's letters that no one had mentioned the decree to him.

If Kamir dared to do so without the knowledge or permission of the High Throne... He could not even begin to fathom Sarrica's wrath, and he absolutely could not afford the punishment that Sarrica would levy.

Which left him right where he was: Jader's lover, Jader's friend, and withholding two very important pieces of information.

No matter what he did, it would be the wrong thing. But if he told Jader what was happening, Sarrica would lash out, and his punishment severe enough it would affect Kamir's children. So that wasn't really an option, no matter how sick it made him to keep hiding things from Jader.

There was also the custody hearing at the end of the month. He couldn't do anything that would further jeopardize that.

Jader was going to *hate* him by the time he found out, and Kamir couldn't blame him.

But there was nothing he could do to fix it. Everything might be different if he hadn't been so stupid about forgetting to drink his tea. Then again, with his family, it might not have been.

He pulled out the other letter and reread them both, laughing and smiling all over again, wishing desperately he was there to comfort and distract Jader exactly as he wished.

Kamir worried his bottom lip as he finished reading the erotic letter for the third time. He couldn't be there, and Jader couldn't be here... and Kamir had never written an erotic letter in his life. He'd never even considered it. He was probably going to sound hopelessly stupid and awkward, but Jader had never done it either, so Kamir could push down his nerves and return the favor.

Climbing out of bed, he went to the little writing desk on one side of the room and dug out everything he needed, including a writing board so he could return to the bed.

Once everything was in place, he skimmed over Jader's letter one last time for inspiration and courage, and then finally started writing.

Nearly an hour and several rewrites later, he finally had a letter he thought he could stand to send. He read it over one last time, face hot the whole time, then made himself fold it. Climbing out of bed, he carried it to the desk—and hesitated, one hand straying up to his hair, a messy combination of mouse brown and straggling bits of purple. He would have to go into town anyway to purchase a proper seal for the personal letter, and purchase some gifts for the children as he'd promised. Why not spend some hours dying his hair? When was the last time he'd done anything for himself? His hair had always been his one indulgence...

And pathetic as it made him, he wanted to send a lock of hair to Jader. He'd have to rewrite the letter again, but hopefully it would be worth it, and Jader wouldn't regard the gesture as stupid or presumptuous.

Clearly he was set upon the deed no matter, so there was no point in thinking otherwise.

Tucking the letter in a drawer, he then sat at the desk to start on a regular letter—and nearly jumped out of his seat when someone knocked on the door. A servant entered and said, "Dinner is in one hour, my lord."

"Thank you, I'll be down shortly."

When she'd gone, Kamir reluctantly set his pen aside and went to get dressed, mind humming with everything he still wanted to say—and stubbornly ignoring all the things he couldn't.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Back home, Jader rarely looked forward to the post. Most of the time it was work, work, and more work. Rarely was it a letter from home, which was nearly the only mail he enjoyed getting.

Buried in the depths of Benta and slowly being murdered by snow, the post was often the best part of his day. It didn't bring something every day, but two or sometimes even three times a week was more than enough.

Especially since Kamir had responded to his private letter in the best possible way.

He hadn't opened it yet, had been determined to wait until he had a chance to savor it. He had also insisted on going upstairs to his room, no matter how much everyone had protested. He refused to sleep downstairs a day longer, in a room with a door he couldn't lock. Kamir had written him an erotic letter and he had every intention of enjoying it behind the complete privacy of a locked door.

Leaving his breakfast tray outside, he closed and locked the door, retrieved the latest letters from where he'd left them on his writing desk, and climbed back into bed. His ankle wasn't happy about all the moving, but Jader didn't give much of a damn. Anyway, he shouldn't be moving it again for a couple of hours, so it would hopefully settle down.

He opened the unsealed letter first, smoothing out the creases as he read:

Dear Jader,

I hope you're doing better by the time this letter reaches you. It seems Benta is as reluctant to have you as you were reluctant to visit.

I wish I had some interesting gossip from home for you, but sadly, between living in the city and traveling to Kyrmine, I have completely fallen out of gossip. Disgraceful, I know, but I hope you will not think less of me for it.

Sadly, the same reasons mean I have not dined recently with Their Majesties and the others. I have every reason to believe they are doing well, however, and I will be certain to find a way to tell Lesto you would greatly appreciate a letter from him.

Your home in Kyrmine is beautiful. It reminds me of your suite in Harkenesten. I believe you will fall in love with it on sight. Your staff is marvelous. My impression is that your predecessor did not treat them well.

I am making all the arrangements required, and am honored you trusted me to do so. Hopefully all will be as you wish upon your return. The process of hiring new staffis going more smoothly than I dared hope, truly you will love your new home. I hope you are able to finish your tasks quickly that you might return and enjoy it all the sooner.

My ex-husband is, mercifully, leaving me alone, though part of that may be that he simply has no choice right now. Mostly I think that living in the city puts me too far away for him to bother, but whatever the reason, I am happy with the result.

You need not buy me a new home gift. You've done more than enough for me already. I greatly look forward to your letters; continue to send them and I will call myself content—more than content, to be honest.

Jader frowned. Something about the letter was off. Was he losing his mind? All of Kamir's letters showed a certain formality, like he was constantly aware and painfully conscious of every word he put to paper, but this one seemed stiffer than usual, like he was holding back or avoiding something.

It made no sense he'd been so out of touch with the palace he'd ceased dining with them altogether. No one just stopped dining at the High Table until they were ordered to stop, and Kamir had been happy there. When he forgot to be nervous, he was as comfortable there as Allen and Tara and Shemal—especially Shemal, who understood what it was like to be the odd one out better than even Tara.

Never mind that Kamir was so carefully proper and polite. He'd never quit dining with them, even if he was forced to go out of his way, unless he was ordered to stop.

But why would he be told to stop dining with them? Allen had promised he would protect Kamir.

Making a note to write Allen about the matter, he resumed reading.

I must apologize to you, my lord. My companion on the trip to Kyrmine wanted to know why I was laughing so hard, and I shared your woes of walking in snow.

What companion? Who would be traveling with Kamir that wasn't family? Jader shook his head and banished the uncharacteristic possessiveness. If Kamir was traveling with a friend, all to the good. He should always have plenty of friends. If the mystery person was a lover, Kamir would have said. He wasn't the sort of person to hide that kind of thing.

And Kamir had written him a letter sealed with red wax and a heart. He certainly wouldn't do that if he had taken another lover.

So if that gossip reaches the palace at some point, I am wholly to blame and very sorry. I will be more circumspect in what I share going forward. I was simply distracted and amused and wanted to share the anecdote.

I do not advise trying to drink an entire wine cellar. For one, that would be a terrible waste of wine after a point, and I know you would hate yourself for that. For another, it would make you too ill to travel, which you especially hate. And finally, you'd probably twist your other ankle, and everybody would hate that, I have no doubt.

Jader laughed. Perhaps he'd been reading too much into the earliest parts of the letter, because this seemed entirely like a Kamir at ease—more at ease than usual, even.

Homesickness washed over Jader, sharp and stabbing, leaving his breath short and his eyes stinging.

He'd expected to feel that sort of sharp ache for the Islands, for Harkenesten, for Lesto and the others. Not for Kamir, no matter how much he missed him.

But there was no denying that right then, he would give up everything else to have Kamir right there with him for even a few minutes.

He looked across the room to where the jeweler had recently delivered his commissions. Jader had examined everything thoroughly before approving and sending the final payment, but he rose all the same and went straight to the emerald green velvet box that contained Kamir's gifts.

Opening the box, he stared at the hairpins inside, lightly tracing the lines of them with his fingertips. Three were in yellow gold, three in white gold, each one decorated with a different bunch of jeweled flowers. They were made to be worn in multiple ways, but Jader was really looking forward to

seeing Kamir wear them as he'd worn that spray of flowers the day Jader had really and truly seen him for the first time.

He closed the box and resumed reading.

I cannot believe something as silly as dying one's hair gets looked down upon. Never mind it makes no sense to align such a practice with those who do not have much money. Dying my hair as I do is expensive, probably more expensive than people realize—in money and time, and few people ever consider the latter.

As to whether or not I have recolored mine, I will leave the answer to be discovered in the additional letter.

You are sorely missed. I hope you're able to return home soon.

Yours truly,

Kamir

A twisting ache pulled at Jader's chest as he read the parting words.

Somewhere along the way he'd become a bit more enamored of Kamir than he'd realized. Madly in love and ready to go to temple? No. But that wasn't a possibility to be dismissed anymore.

It could simply be he was clinging overmuch to a man who was leagues and leagues away, and his ardency would cool again when he was back in Harkenesten and life was normal once more.

That was a problem he could not sort until he was home, however, so for the present he was happy to concentrate on that last, teasing bit about Kamir's hair.

Limping back over to the bed, he tucked the letter back into its envelope and drew out the sealed one—and was acutely aware there was something more than paper in it. Breaking the seal, he unfolded the paper. Heart and cock reacted at the surprise contents: a small lock of brilliant, ocean green hair bound with a piece of silver ribbon.

Jader groaned. He wanted to see Kamir *now*. Naked, his beautiful hair spread out on Jader's pillows, expression happy and hungry as he drew Jader into a kiss and begged so sweetly to be fucked. And Mother Ocean, would Jader be happy to oblige. He'd spread Kamir wide, rest those slender thighs on his shoulders, and fuck Kamir with his tongue and mouth until he screamed, and while he was still shuddering through his climax, Jader

would bury himself deep and fuck Kamir again, until they were both too sated and wrung out to do more than call for dinner to be brought.

Fuck, he didn't even need the letter. That lock of hair was plenty inspiring all on its own.

But he really wanted to know what kind of erotic letter sweet, shy Kamir had written.

Giving up any pretense of control, he stripped off his dressing robe and settled comfortably in bed.

My Dearest Jader,

You certainly succeeded in your goal of leaving me frustrated. I would call you cruel, but I am enjoying too much the attempt to have my revenge.

The mention of my hair, and what foolish Bentans associate with dyed hair, inspired me to try something that's been suggested to me before but I never was bold enough to try. Let us say the hair on my head was not the only hair I dyed this time.

Jader swore. The evil little bastard. That image was going to drive him mad for days. Lightly gripping his cock, stroking as idly as he could manage so it would last, he resumed reading.

It is not an experience I would want to repeat often, but at least this time I suspect it was well worth the effort and mortification. You will have to tell me if I am correct in imagining the effect it's had on you.

Is being fucked over a desk similar to being fucked on a table? That I have done, though not in many years. That time was a woman I crossed paths with while traveling. The contents of her trunks were vastly more interesting than mine. When you return, we shall certainly have to see how a desk compares to a table. If you feel the need to have me across both in the name of thorough experimentation, I would be happy to accommodate.

Groaning, Jader gripped harder, stroked faster. As he'd suspected, that fire Kamir too often banked flared hot and bright when he was given opportunity. Mother Ocean, Jader was more than happy to be the reason.

The last time I was in the palace, I happened by that room where you first kissed me. There was a small group of youths using it, probably seeking the same solitude we were that evening. In light of your letter, I now am helpless to resist wondering all the filthy ways that first meeting might have

gone if circumstances had been slightly different. Would you have shown restraint anyway? Or put me on the sofa or up against the wall and removed just enough clothing to get what we needed? Or would you have spread me out on the floor and fucked me thoroughly?

Mother Ocean, Jader wanted to do all of it. Crude and fast while they were both still mostly dressed. Strip Kamir bare and have him slowly on the floor. He was definitely going to drag Kamir into that room when he got home. If Lesto could sneak off with his pirate to their torrid little sitting room, he could do the same with his lover.

Jader gave up reading as he lost himself in imaginings, using both hands to work himself, one wrapped firmly around his cock, the other playing with his nipples, pinching and twisting them. He dragged his nails down his chest, across his stomach, then reached further down to tease and roll his sac, tugging in that way he loved, the slightest bit of pain as he stroked hard one last time. He groaned loudly as he came, completely uncaring if anyone else could hear him.

He lay there sprawled on the bed for a moment, messy hands resting on his stomach. Eventually he sat up and fetched a washing cloth to clean himself up. Tossing it in the laundry bin by the wardrobe, he returned to the bed and his letter.

As I write these things, I am acutely aware I am alone in your bed here in Kyrmine. It's enormous, too much for one person, but alas that is what I am—alone, wet, and aching. I can certainly get myself off, but it's not what I want and leaves me unsatisfied.

Are you bringing yourself off, reading my words? I wish I was there to watch; I can only imagine how much more breathtaking you are pleasuring yourself.

I hope I've persuaded you to leave off the wine cellars.

Yours truly,

Kamir

Jader let the letter fall to the bedding, arms draped across his stomach as he stared up at the ceiling lost in thoughts of home, thoughts of Kamir, the ache so deep and twisting his eyes stung anew.

Kamir thought him *breathtaking*. No one had ever described Jader in such an extravagant way. He *wasn't* breathtaking, but he was more than happy to bask in the knowledge that Kamir thought he was.

Eventually he dragged himself out of bed and, after tucking the letters away, washed and dressed for the day. There was some sort of snow fair that day, which sounded like a terrible idea, but as much as he hated the snow, he was damned tired of being confined indoors. Of course, that very thing was what had inspired him to take the walk that had betrayed him in the first place.

Jader sighed at himself as he finished buttoning his jacket. Going to his trunks, he pulled out a pair of boots that would match what he was wearing and set them by the door. Returning to the wardrobe, he pulled out one of his jewelry cases and mulled over his options before finally settling on a simple pair of cascading hoops threaded with sapphires and diamonds.

He carried the boots with him as he walked slowly and carefully through the halls. His ankle still twinged, but it was leagues better than it had been two weeks ago. As long as he continued to minimize how much he used it, he should be good as new in another week or so.

"I might have known you'd try to do it alone," Tsarana said from behind him. He braced his hands on his hips as Jader turned to face him. "If you don't have a care, my lord, you will limp the rest of your life, and I know that will absolutely infuriate you."

"Fair enough." Jader sighed and allowed Tsarana to help him down the stairs, his boots handed off to the soldier standing a few paces behind them. He cast Tsarana a look. "You seem peeved about more than me being stubborn."

Tsarana gave a soft huff. "Some of our laundry has gone missing. The staff is trying to locate it, but I fear it somehow got left behind at Wessel's manor, which means we are short a good many tunics. But it's a minor irritation; I'm just annoyed with myself for doing something so stupid."

"Won't be the last time, trust me," Jader said with a laugh. "You may as well accept that."

"Wise words," Tsaraa said, and returned Jader's smile with one of his own.

Downstairs, when they finally made it, everyone else was already gathered in the hallway. "My apologies, I hope I have not left you all standing around waiting."

Krista shook her head and smiled. "We've only just arrived ourselves. How are you?"

"Improving slowly, I think. Let us hope I do not undo all my progress today. I would hate to prolong everyone's suffering by keeping me confined to quarters even longer." That drew laughter from the group, and the soldier holding Jader's boots helped him into them before they all finally headed outside.

Jader felt like a child having to cling to someone, but he had no suitable crutches and he wasn't so egotistical that he would try walking on the treacherous ground alone—that would definitely put him right back to sitting in chairs all day long for weeks on end.

Instead of a carriage, they were traveling by sled. It was very like a carriage in purpose, but built on slats of wood rather than using wheels. The horses pulling it were larger, and there were six of them instead of the usual four. "Fascinating."

"You should see the dog sleds," Krista replied as she accepted the hand a servant offered and climbed into the sled.

Jader followed after her, with Seredia and Tsarana on either side of him, Vannia and Shera a short distance behind. Five other soldiers rode horses on all sides of them, along with a few additional footmen. Lord Cherrell had chosen to ride as well, accompanied by still more guards, these ones bearing the dark purple and gray uniform of Abernoth Pass.

"Why are there so many guards?" Tsarana asked. "Is something amiss I was not informed of?"

Krista shook her head. "If we believed there might be even the slightest chance of danger, we would have told you. No, my brother agreed to provide extra security at the fair itself simply because you're an honored guest. It's a..." she waved a hand in the air as she struggled for the words she wanted, "way of showing off. The biggest problem we encounter at snow fairs is drunks. Occasionally some poor fool gets too drunk and falls into the water if it's not frozen over. Security's main duty is to prevent such things. The danger has never been greater than that."

"I see," Jader said. "Thank you for explaining."

Nodding and smiling, Krista said, "I know you have no reason to love the snow, my lord, but I am hoping you will enjoy the fair. It's a pity you cannot ice skate; I know Wessel was looking forward to teaching you."

"I am extremely curious to see this ice skating everyone talks about," Jader replied.

Tialla started speaking then, Krista and Seredia taking turns doing the translating, explaining everything they'd see and do at the fair. It was a pity Kamir wasn't there because he would probably enjoy the fair a thousand times more.

"There will also be vendors out selling various wares, items they don't sell any other time of year or even in the stores this time of year. If you needed another trunk of presents for your friends back in Harken." Krista's eyes sparkled as she met his, mouth quirked in a teasing smile.

Smiling sheepishly, Jader said, "I won't even pretend I wasn't wondering if I could do that very thing."

They all chuckled, and conversation moved on to other matters that Jader eventually faded out of, more interested in thinking about Kamir and the recent letters. He would definitely be replying—ardently.

And he'd be writing to Allen as well, just to set his mind at ease about anything Kamir wasn't saying, since Kamir was definitely the sort to suffer in silence rather than ask anyone but Velina for help—especially if he thought he couldn't or shouldn't bother someone. Such as a High Commander who initiated an affair mere weeks before he was ordered to Benta, and without discussing parameters and expectations the way he should have.

Though in his defense—very meager defense, he conceded—he had not expected Kamir to be more than one more brief lover in a long string of them. Jader had never felt like the settling type, especially with all the non-stop work that came with being High Commander. If he married at all, he assumed it would be something arranged. As much as he, and Lesto before him, preferred to keep the position as military as possible, his current situation was a sharp reminder it was also a political role.

Distance normally would have calmed any interest he had in a lover. The few he'd kept longer than a matter of days, he'd lost interest in after being

sent out to deal with one problem or another as Deputy High Commander. What made Kamir so different?

There were a thousand answers to that question, many of them learned in all that Kamir said—and didn't say—in the many letters he'd written since Jader had been in Benta.

And it was a bit dazzling to be thought breathtaking. Kamir could have only said that because the letter was erotic and florid language suited that. Kamir wasn't the type to say something he didn't mean, however. He said or didn't.

After a lifetime of being too pale, too Islander, too everything he wasn't supposed to be... well, Jader had climbed to High Commander despite all those supposed shortcomings because he was also vain and stubborn and selfish. Being thought breathtaking certainly fit with that.

Would Kamir be interested in a proper courtship? Jader itched to write a letter that very moment, but that would be crass and even cowardly. He would simply have to be patient and wait until he was home.

Though given the wall he kept meeting every time he tried to bring up the subject at breakfast, tea, dinner, and whenever else he could manage, he was starting to think he would never go home. About the only bright point in his life was that he only had two months of winter left to endure. That still seemed depressingly long, but at least there would be an end.

In the meantime, he would continue writing letters and enjoying Kamir's replies.

A soft chuckle drew him from his thoughts, and he looked up to see everyone in the sled looking at him with amusement. "What?"

"It's so easy to tell when you are thinking of Lord Kamir," Seredia replied.

Tialla spoke, and Krista translated, "She'd like to hear more about your lover."

"I'm fairly certain I will bore you all quickly."

When Seredia translated, Tialla scoffed and motioned for him to talk.

"Lord Kamir is—"

A pained cry drowned him out, but before Jader could find the source, the sled came to a rough, jarring halt.

Everything exploded into chaos. Krista threw herself out of the sled, Seredia cried out in pain, her arm bleeding, another cut on her forehead. Shera started to climb out of the sled, then abruptly fell to the snow, where red blossomed from beneath his head. Vannia screamed. Arrows were everywhere, and all around him came more screaming and shouting. "We have to get out of here. Seredia, Vannia, this way, head for the trees where there's cover." Searing pain scraped Jader's upper arm, and he saw the arrow as it plunged into the wood and missed Tialla by a hair. Tialla was frozen in terror and breathing in a not-good way. Jader bent to draw the knife in his boot, and when he looked up—

Tialla was dead, an arrow through her right eye. Seredia was nowhere to be seen, and neither was Krista. Jader threw himself out of the sled, looked around in disbelief at the men surrounding them, attacking them—all of them wearing Shattered Wind tunics. That couldn't be.

Rage filled him, and he ran for the nearest soldier, ducking low and ramming into the man's legs. He slammed a fist into the man's face, used the bare moments he was dazed to slit his throat, and stole his sword. Climbing to his feet, he went after the next.

His ankle screamed at him, but Jader ignored it, taking down two more and obtaining a second sword. By that point, more of them were surrounding him, more than he could possibly take on his own. All of them wore Shattered Wind uniforms.

Attacking was futile, but he'd be damned if he went quietly.

Strangely, though, they did not seem to want to kill him. Why not, when they'd seemed determined to do so at Wessel's house?

Pain flashed across the back of his head, and the world went black as he dropped to the ground.

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When Jader woke, not much time could have passed because he could still see the sled, Tialla's body right where he'd left it.

He tried to sit up, but gave up with a whimper as pain rushed through. There was too much of it for him to sort out what exactly hurt.

"H-hold still, m-my lord," Seredia said.

He turned his head slowly, saw her sitting next to him, face stained with blood and tears, her hair dropping about her face in a messy tangle. "What's going on?"

"I d-don't know," Seredia replied.

"Shattered Wind betrayed us," Jader said, his eyes suddenly too heavy to keep open.

Seredia's voice was barely audible, though he didn't know if that was because she was speaking low or because he was fading. "No, I don't think so. I think they're wearing those tunics to make us believe we were betrayed by Shattered Wind, but they haven't once spoken any Harken language, and people in situations like this always fall back on their native language. All I've heard is Bentan and a bit of Carthian."

Jader tried to reply, but darkness got the better of him again.

He stirred briefly to voices, loud and angry, then passed out once more.

For what seemed hours, or maybe even days, all he did was fade in and out.

When he finally woke properly, he stared blankly around the familiar room before realizing it was the room he'd used at Wessel's house. He started to sit up, but immediately abandoned that idea as various pains flared sharp and hot.

At least this time he could sort it all out: his ankle would probably never be the same; his head had definitely taken a beating; there were some minor abrasions on his arms; and something on the back of his right shoulder had required stitches. There were also plenty of bruises and minor cuts. Clearly he'd missed some of the more important details while he'd been fighting—but that wasn't unusual in the heat of battle. Jader had seen men walking around without fingers—and even limbs—who didn't notice until someone told them.

Bracing himself this time, he slowly heaved up and got his legs over the edge of the bed. His ankle was by far the worst, heavily bandaged and it felt like it had been braced as well. This time, there was a crutch by the bed, and Jader was more than happy to avail himself.

Getting dressed almost proved to be more effort than it was worth. In the end, he settled for breeches and a dressing robe, and if anyone got offended,

they'd soon find themselves more offended by being whacked with his crutch.

He lingered long enough to pull on socks, then headed out, pausing occasionally to rest. Surely he was not this weak? He'd come away from battles far more injured than this. Had he been poisoned? That seemed unlikely, though he vaguely remembered Seredia saying something about Carthians—

Shattered Wind. Their assailants had been dressed like Shattered Wind, but Seredia had thought that was a deception.

Tialla was dead. Who else had died? Dread and fear clawed at him, but Jader tamped it down. He was High Commander, and likely the only Harken in Benta who might be able to prevent another war.

Because if Benta was responsible for this attack, and they had launched it by impersonating his guard, then something was afoot and that something could very likely lead to war if the mess wasn't sorted out very soon.

Damn it, why had Sarrica and Allen ordered him here as a politician? He would have fared much better as the soldier responsible for protecting a politician—not that bodyguard was a job issued to the High Commander.

Jader sighed as he reached the stairs, but gritted his teeth and started down them. He had to stop at the landing to catch his breath, but after what felt like hours finally reached the ground floor.

A sharp gasp drew his attention, and he turned to look at the servant gawking at him, her mouth gaping. "Lord Wessel?" Jader asked, too exhausted to muster up his feeble Benta to ask the question properly.

The woman gaped a moment longer, then gathered herself. Motioning for him to follow, keeping to a pace he could manage, she escorted him down a short hallway to a room Jader remembered was Wessel's private sitting room.

Knocking briskly, the woman pushed the door open, ignoring Wessel's angry words to hold the door for Jader.

Wessel closed his mouth, then rose and apologized to the woman and asked her to bring fresh coffee and something for Jader to eat. She nodded, bowed, and departed.

Jader looked around the room, to where Seredia sat by the fire, a blanket over her lap, a forgotten cup of coffee in her hands as she looked at him with fresh tears on her face. Wessel looked equally distraught. "What's wrong?"

"Lady Krista died not an hour ago," Wessel said, his breath hitching, eyes taking on a wet shine. "She was badly wounded, but it seemed like she might... but she didn't, her wounds and the prolonged time in the cold proved too much for her to overcome."

Jader closed his eyes. "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault."

A large hand gently squeezed his arm, and he opened his eyes reluctantly to meet Wessel's sad, but kind gaze. "No, High Commander, this was not your fault at all. Please, no one is blaming you. Right now we are terrified. You don't know just how bad the situation is. Come, sit, you shouldn't be standing." He helped Jader to a seat, propped his bad ankle on a small footstool, and spread a blanket over his lap. Reclaiming his own seat, Wessel stared at his teacup and said, "I'm not even certain where to begin."

"Are any of my guards still alive? My secretaries?"

Wessel's mouth tightened. "The only member of your party that day who survived was Captain Tsarana, and 'survive' is generous because, like Krista, he was severely wounded and being stuck in the cold and wet until I could get there did not help. But for the moment, he is alive, and I have healers watching him at all times. The other five are dead, as well as your secretaries. I am sorry for your loss. Those who were at Abernoth Manor are now here, and they are alive and well—and out for blood, but awaiting your orders, High Commander."

"I'm not High Commander while I'm here," Jader said, alarmed that Wessel was very much making a point of addressing him so.

"Yes, well, that has changed." Wessel sighed, and seemed relieved at the knock on the door. He called for the knocker to enter, and two servants bustled in to sweep away the tea setting already there and replace it with a fresh one.

Once they were gone, and Jader had a tray of soup, bread, and coffee, Wessel finally resumed speaking. "Let me start by saying this: you are currently the Duke of Abernoth."

Jader almost dropped his cup. "*What in the Mother Ocean are you talking about?*" He cleared his throat and repeated the words in Harken. Pardon. What are you talking about?"

"Captain Cherrell has long been dissatisfied with his lot. His ambition has always been greater than his means and ability. Unfortunately, none of us realized he is also one of those few remaining who despises Harken. In you, he apparently saw a chance to both make himself a Duke and deal a blow to Harken—and put us right back at odds with you. But his arrogance meant he never saw that his plans could fail, and that those few assailants who survived were more than happy to sing if it meant they avoided swinging."

"I'm not sure I follow," Jader said. "He killed his mother, his sister, tried to kill the rest of us, and did it by hiring men pretending to be my personal..." He closed his eyes, calling himself ten kinds of stupid. "If his plan had worked, it would have looked like *I* murdered one of the most powerful families in Benta, and it wouldn't matter if it had been on orders or as a rogue. Benta would have declared war, and he would have inherited the title, and looked like the tragic victim and hero all at once, since I doubt he meant to leave me alive for longer than it took to incriminate myself however he needed." Because he did vaguely remember the soldiers hadn't killed him even though they could have. They'd needed him alive for something. Jader was grateful he'd probably never know exactly what.

"Precisely." Wessel drained his cup.

Mother Ocean. In addition to all of that, what sort of chaos would his supposed actions have caused back home? Jader swallowed, his throat raw, eyes stinging as his mind filled with images of what would have happened to all the Islanders in Harkenesten as knowledge spread of what he'd supposedly done in Benta.

Swallowing, forcing his hands to stop trembling, Jader asked, "So why are you calling me High Commander?"

Seredia who replied, "I went to the frost fair to get help; no one else was alive or capable of moving. When I returned with Wessel, we brought you all here, but it seemed for hours like you were going to die. We sent word to Harkenesten of what happened. The High King said that as the agreement reached with Benta regarding the terms of your stay had been violated—grossly, vindictively violated were his precise words—that you were no

longer constricted to playing civilian and were to immediately reassume your full military role and all that comes with it."

"That's... barely one step away from war." Jader finished his coffee and wished badly he could have something stronger.

"It gets worse," Seredia said. "We also had to tell King Desmond what happened. He is currently in Jameth City, where we first arrived in Benta, for their holy ceremonies regarding the new year."

"The Turning of the Lights," Wessel said softly, looking on the verge of tears again. "The most important of all our holidays. It's supposed to be a happy occasion, intended for forgiveness and joy and starting over." He did start crying then, but angrily brushed the tears away. "We were to either take you there the moment you are well enough to travel... or deliver your body had you died."

Seredia looked up. "Harken is sending someone to sort out the mess. The High King's letter did not specify who, but I suspect it will be him or Lord Lesto."

Jader nodded. "I would like a status update on Tsarana. If I am going to travel, I prefer he be able to come along as well. I will not abandon him here, no offense to you, my lord."

"None taken. I would want the same in your position." Wessel rose and went to speak with a servant, the door closing quietly behind him.

Seredia sniffled, started crying again. "I'm so sorry, Commander. I did the best I could, but—"

"You have nothing to apologize for," Jader said. "Please, you acted with amazing skill given the circumstances. I could wish for soldiers who reacted half so well, and they are trained for situations like this. I am sorry that you were forced to deal with such an awful matter. This was meant to be a peaceful mission with a very low priority objective. Nothing like this should have happened. Cherrell is a *corpse-fucking bottom feeder who likes the taste of his own shit*."

She gave him a wobbly smile. "All the months I have known you, I've never once heard you speak anything but Harken in a polished palace accent, minus that one time at dinner, and even then, you still sounded Harken-born. Now you have a distinctly Islander accent and keep slipping into Islander. It would be endearing if not for the circumstances."

Jader swallowed, not trusting himself to speak because he was absolutely certain the words would come out sobs instead.

Until he remembered the statement that had started the conversation. "So why am I Bentan nobility now?"

"Lady Tialla and Lady Krista are dead. Lord Cherrell is not in much better shape than you, and under arrest, stripped of everything. One of the terms of your stay was that you would be made a dual citizen, which means you're able to inherit the title. That's just one more problem in this whole mess."

"I think that will be one of the easier problems to resolve."

Seredia's expression said he was wrong about that, but before she could speak, the door opened. Jader jumped, and then sighed at himself.

The look on Wessel's face eased some of his anxiety.

"Tsarana is much improved, Commander. They say that if he lasts until morning, he will more than likely survive."

Jader nodded. "Send word to Their Majesties that we will be leaving... what is today?"

"Middle-day."

"One week from today, then, unless Tsarana does not survive, in which case we will leave at the end of the week. And if they don't like that, too bad."

Seredia rose and bowed. "I'll compose the letters now and inform you when they've been sent."

"Thank you." She left, and Jader forced himself to eat his soup and bread. He was going to need all the strength he could muster.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The initial hearing for the custody challenge went exactly as Kamir had expected: the judge stated that one parent being of dubious reliability did not automatically mean that the other parent was by default acceptable, and there was sufficient doubt to merit a full investigation. The next hearing would be in one month, at the conclusion of the investigation.

Kamir submitted the papers he had prepared ahead of time to hopefully expedite the process and took his leave, grateful the order of holding meant that once again, he left while Theoren was forced to stay—and his parents could not chase him down without drawing attention to themselves, which he knew very well they wouldn't want.

They'd be far more likely to find him later, when they could be reasonably certain of trapping him in a corner without witnesses.

"Are you all right, my lord?" Charlaine asked.

"I'm fine, thank you." Kamir dredged up a smile, but it faded in the next moment.

Sadly, as anxious and exhausted as the hearing had left him, that so far had been a predictable evil.

He was more upset that he'd received not a single letter from Jader in nearly two weeks. As hard as he tried to convince himself that Jader must have gotten busy, or was otherwise unable to write, he had the sinking feeling he'd made such a fool of himself that Jader had lost all interest in writing to him.

Or maybe someone had finally told him the truth about Kamir's pregnancy and the imperial decree, and Jader no longer wanted anything to do with him.

Either way, it was for the best.

That didn't make his heart feel any less broken, but he'd known what he was in for right from the start, even before he'd ruined everything by forgetting to drink a stupid cup of tea.

"Kamir..."

Charlaine using his name was startling enough that Kamir stopped. "What's wrong?"

"That is what I'm trying to get you to tell me," Charlaine said with a faint smile. "You look more distressed than I've seen you since the day we met." He held out his hand, and after a moment, Kamir placed his own in it, and let Charlaine lead him down the hall to one of the countless little nooks that peppered the palace.

Once they were sitting, Charlaine said, "Something more than the hearing is bothering you. As upset as you've been about it, clearly you're facing a familiar evil, so I don't think it's that. What else is bothering you?"

"Nothing important. It's personal and minor."

"It's not minor if has you looking constantly on the verge of tears or screaming. My job is to protect you, and as tense as you are, you're likely to miss something or do something that will increase the chance of danger. Distraction kills faster than swords and arrows."

"Theoren isn't going to kill me. I only agreed to having a bodyguard as an added precaution at Velina's urging. He's likely to corner me and bully me—"

"And if his ego and temper get the better of him, one good hit could kill you or leave you wishing you were dead—or too broken to even know who you are, and that's only the beginning of what someone like Theoren can do."

Kamir closed his eyes, pressing his fingertips to his eyelids. "I know. You're right. But it really is stupid, and entirely selfish." He opened his eyes, stared at the table as he said, "Jader hasn't written to me. He normally writes me two or three times a week, and it's been two weeks now with nothing. I don't know what could be wrong." What he'd *done* wrong.

"Well, we haven't been in the palace for weeks. I'm certain anything we need to know could be gleaned by a twenty-minute lunch in the banquet hall," Charlaine said wryly. "Or you could go speak with Lord Lesto. I'm sure he'd be happy to tell you the High Commander has just turned his other ankle or caused an international incident by telling some important person to stop propositioning him."

Neither option was appealing, but at least the banquet hall was a familiar evil. Kamir could not stomach even thinking about the brazenness, the

impertinence, of troubling Lord Lesto with his petty concerns. Lesto was kind, but even he would be annoyed by such a thing.

"Thank you," he finally said. "Let's try lunch. Shouldn't be hard to get conversations about Jader started." He rested a hand on his bulging stomach. The whispers would start out ugly and quickly turn nasty, especially since Kamir had long been a target anyway.

Charlaine offered him a hand and helped him up, and fell easily back into step as they walked through the palace to the public banquet hall.

Kamir hadn't thought he would miss the palace, but after weeks away, he could remember the good things without being weighed down by the bad. Harkenesten was beautiful, a mix of the original palace and generations of changes and additions, making it a sprawling, chaotic maze that could never entirely decide to which century it belonged, or even which kingdom or continent. He knew so many nooks and corners and crannies, no two of them remotely alike.

Like the room where Jader first kissed him.

One thing he had not missed was the stress of dining in the banquet hall. The only table with a permanent designation was the High Table. There were informal designations, tables used by particular families regularly, but mostly everything changed with the fluctuations of power. The quickest, easiest way to get an assessment of players and where they all stood was to look over the dining arrangements.

The only time he'd ever enjoyed himself there was when he'd had the luxury of the High Table.

Avoiding it altogether, Kamir skimmed the rest of the hall and settled on an empty table near the middle of the room. Close enough to overhear all the things people would want him to overhear, and if they wanted to approach him, the empty table would make that easier.

Murmurs rose and fell as he passed by the other tables, but Kamir ignored them. He settled at the table, and thanked the servant who came up with a plate of food. Refusing the wine and beer on offer, he requested a cup of tea instead.

"I think Lord Lesto would have been the easier option."

Kamir swallowed the bite of rice he'd just eaten. "I think it would be presumptuous of me to arrive uninvited and unannounced to His Grace's office and demand answers to which I'm not entitled." He paused in taking a second bite of rice, startled by the look on Charlaine's face. "What?"

"You do recognize my tunic right?" Charlaine asked.

"Of course—" Kamir stopped at the way Charlaine's face closed off, his eyes going cold and hard as he stared at something over Kamir's shoulder.

A familiar, heavy hand landed on Kamir's shoulder in the same moment Charlaine stood, his chair scraping loudly on the marble floor, sword belt rattling. "Remove your hand."

Kamir's mother gave a sharp, offended huff. "I beg your pardon."

"Lady Tesly, remove your hand at once. I will not say it a third time."

She kept her hand where it was. "I do not take orders from you, even if you are Fathoms Deep. I am entitled to speak with my son."

Kamir tried to pull away, but his mother held firm—and before he could try harder, Charlaine closed the distance between them, grabbed her wrist, and yanked her hand away.

"You should care I am Fathoms Deep," Charlaine said, still holding fast to her hand, staring at her with those hard eyes. "Only four people in all of Harken command me. I would think very hard, my lady, about who those four people are and the orders they might have given me that grant me the authority to tell you to remove yourself. My job is to keep Kamir safe from those who threaten him and his family—"

"I am his family!" She snapped, struggling futilely to pull her hand free.

"No, you're not," Charlaine said, and finally let her go. "You filed for disownment. That means you don't consider him family, that means I consider you a threat, and that means you will keep your distance. Disobey me again and I will see you jailed and fined by order of His Majesty the High King."

Kamir was going to throw up. He braced one elbow on the table and rested his forehead in it, focusing on keeping his breathing slow and even.

Unfortunately, when his mother wanted to say or do something, very little stopped her. "He just left court so quickly, I didn't have a chance to ask him if he'd heard from Lord Jader since that awful attack everyone has been

talking about." She paused the way she always did right before striking the final blow. "They say he might yet succumb to his wounds."

Kamir shoved back his chair, and fled the banquet hall. Pushing through the crowded hallway, he raced for the nearest wash room, where he promptly heaved up what little food he'd managed to eat before his mother's interruption.

When his stomach finally ceased tormenting him, he washed out his mouth and wiped his eyes—then almost stayed right where he was, too mortified and sick to return to the stares and whispers of the palace after that horrible debacle.

Had Jader really been badly injured? Why would someone attack him? He'd gone to Benta as a civilian, on a peaceful mission that was barely more than 'spend time with family.'

Why hadn't anyone told him? Tears threatened again, but Kamir forced them back. He needed answers, and he wouldn't get them hiding in a wash room crying.

A sudden rapping on the door made him jump. "Lord Kamir?"

Giving a shaky laugh, Kamir opened the door. "I think after all you have endured from me and done for me, Sergeant, you can abandon formality."

"Only if you do the same," Charlaine replied.

Kamir nodded. "Thank you for defending me—for everything. I did not expect to enjoy having a bodyguard."

"It's not usually a job I enjoy so much." Charlaine smiled. "Would you like to go speak with Lord Lesto now? I was trying to tell you, before your mother interrupted, that the fact you were given a Fathoms Deep soldier as your bodyguard is all the permission you need to speak with him whenever you want."

"Was she telling the truth? About Jader being hurt? How could we not know something like that had happened?"

Charlaine's mouth flattened. "I am fairly certain it's not common knowledge, and I'm interested to learn how she came by it. That is something I intend to discuss with His Grace. Shall we go see him?"

Kamir nodded, and finally left the wash room entirely, some of his calm returning as he walked alongside Charlaine. He probably took more

pleasure than he should in the way some people were careful to give them a wide berth, a practice swiftly echoed along the hallways as no one was willing to risk offending anyone in the company of Fathoms Deep.

His nerves returned full measure, however, when they finally reached Lesto's office. His head secretary saw them and immediately rose and vanished into Lesto's office. Charlaine squeezed Kamir's arm reassuringly, and before Kamir could speak, the secretary returned. Bowing, she said, "Lord Lesto will see you."

"Thank you," Kamir replied, and with a slight nudge from Charlaine, headed into Lesto's office.

"Charlaine, close the door. Lord Kamir, have a seat. Would you like some tea? You look like you could use something stronger, but I doubt you'd accept it."

"The tea would be most appreciated, thank you, Your Grace."

Lesto poured him a cup of fragrant green tea flavored with resberries, then resumed his seat behind the enormous desk that took up much of his office. "I was actually about to send for you, my lord. I am truly sorry I did not get to you before court gossip did. I would have sent for you much sooner, but I did not want to tell you anything until I had firm news, be it good or bad—and it is good."

Kamir nodded, tried to still his shaking hands. "T-thank you, Your Grace. May I know what's happened?"

"Of course." Pouring himself and Charlaine cups of wine, Lesto explained the attack in Benta, finishing with, "But we did not receive word until early this morning that Jader was alive and likely to stay that way. We received word just an hour ago that Captain tel Mendi is awake and likely to recover as well. Five of his men are dead, unfortunately, as well as Jader's secretaries."

"I'm so sorry about Lady Krista and the rest of Jader's family," Kamir said quietly. "What is going to happen now?"

"We are sending someone to discuss the matter with King Desmond. Who, I cannot say. That matter is being kept private for as long as possible."

"Of course. Jader truly is recovering? He's not likely to relapse? What if they are attacked again?"

"King Desmond has sent his personal force, Bitter Frost, to ensure that doesn't happen."

"They can be trusted?"

Lesto's smile was sharp and full of teeth. "Benta is one more mistake away from dragging us back into war. You can be assured that every soldier sent to protect Jader will do so if they want to live to see their homes ever again. Desmond does not want another war—Benta does not want another war, minus these fool outliers who do not know when to quit or even really understand what they're doing. Bitter Frost is not a force to be reckoned with; they can be trusted enough. Again, I apologize it took so long to bring you up to date, and that the matter was handled so poorly. I will do better going forward."

"I am grateful to be told anything at all."

"Jader would serve me my own balls if I dared not to keep you apprised, and I would never think to keep you unaware anyway. How are you doing, this rotten day aside?"

"Well enough," Kamir replied, bewildered. He rested one hand on his stomach, finding that comforting where nothing else was. "I'll be glad when the trials are over."

Lesto lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I understand some measure of your pain, having only recently finished all the legal hassle that goes with adopting two children—two Islander children. Even for someone as powerful and spoiled as me, the courts are a slow torture. Is there anything you need, my lord?"

"What? No, thank you, Your Grace."

He felt hopelessly stupid and selfish of a sudden, so focused on himself and convinced Jader hadn't wanted him anymore when this whole time Jader had been close to dead. Kamir swallowed. A thousand questions danced through his mind, but he could not voice any of them, afraid each would sound more selfish than the last and give too much away.

"Letters right now are a tricky matter, as Jader and his retinue are traveling and the weather makes that difficult. But our diplomat is leaving in a couple of days; if you wanted to send a letter, or anything else, with them, bring it to me and I'll see it reaches him."

Kamir looked up, but immediately looked away again at the understanding and sympathy in Lesto's eyes. "I appreciate the generosity, Your Grace. I know His Majesty would prefer I not communicate with the High Commander at all."

"You've been calling him Jader all this time, you may as well continue to do so," Lesto said with a soft chuckle. "As to His Majesty, what he prefers is his friends and family happy, no matter how stupidly he occasionally goes about trying to ensure that. If he did not want you writing letters to Jader, you would not be writing them—and if he thought ill of you, it would not be one of the highest-ranking soldiers in Fathoms Deep serving as your bodyguard."

"What—" Kamir jerked his head to look at Charlaine, who stared at Lesto's desk and rubbed a finger along the bridge of his nose. Kamir huffed. "You said you were a sergeant."

Lesto laughed before Charlaine could reply. "Sergeant? Is that the ruse you went with, Charlaine?" He looked at Kamir. "This is Second Lieutenant Astor, third in command of Fathoms Deep."

Kamir opened his mouth, closed it again, then said faintly, "I don't understand."

Levity fading, Lesto leaned forward and held Kamir's gaze as he said, "A promise was made to Jader that you would be looked after and protected. We are keeping that promise, though I know we failed in many ways and I apologize for that. Even if that promise had not been made, none of us would stand by and ignore it as your family and ex-husband tried to take your children. I would have interfered a long time ago if I had thought that's what you'd wanted. But my impression has always been that you can take care of yourself."

"Thank you," Kamir replied, still numb with shock. "And thank you again for letting me know about Jader. I will write a letter tonight and have it delivered to you tomorrow. Would a small gift be acceptable?"

"Anything you want. There is no limit. If you want Jader to have it, he will have it."

Kamir stood and bowed. "Thank you, Your Grace. As always, you are kind and generous to a fault."

Charlaine laughed—and laughed harder at the quelling look Lesto cast him. He stood and led Kamir out, but lingered in the doorway. "I need to have a word with His Grace and then we can leave." He closed the door, and Kamir moved to sit in one of the chairs in the reception area, pulling out the book he'd brought along in case court dragged on longer than expected—which thankfully it hadn't.

Several minutes later, Charlaine came out of Lesto's office, calling a cheerful, "Have a good day, Your Grace," over his shoulder. Kamir stood and they departed, Charlaine falling into place beside him as they headed through the halls and out of the palace.

"Why did you lie?" Kamir asked as they walked along the road between the palace and the city.

Charlaine shrugged. "You already looked pretty close to throwing me out, and I wasn't certain admitting I was high ranking would convince you to keep me. Lord Lesto trusted the duty to me and I was determined to see it through. I should have since admitted it, but there were already so many people lying to and using you, I hated to be one more. I am sorry. It wasn't done out of anything but an earnest desire to help, whatever that is worth."

"I understand," Kamir said faintly. "I feel a bit like a fool not realizing. You seem like someone I should have recognized if you are the third most powerful person in Fathoms Deep."

Laughing, Charlaine said, "No, it's the Captain and First Lieutenant everyone knows. I'm always off in the background doing the shit they don't have time for, which is usually unpleasant, thankless work." He smiled at Kamir. "This time proved an exception."

"I'm glad," Kamir replied softly. "I have been grateful for your presence. It feels like you're wasting your time, but I suspect if you weren't here then Theoren or my parents would have tried something."

"Like your mother did today?" Charlaine's mouth flattened, eyes going hard. "Hopefully she has been dealt with by now. I spoke with His Grace at length about the matter, and he said it would be made clear to her that she'd be wise to keep her distance."

Kamir shook his head, still too bemused and overwhelmed by everything to know how to react or what to say.

Thankfully it didn't take too long to get into and through the city. As ever, warmth and excitement spread through him at the sight of his home. *His*. He'd bought it, his name was on the papers, no one could take it from him without more trouble than doing so would be worth.

As they drew closer he could hear Chiri and Chara playing in the courtyard, giggling and shrieking as they played one of their unfathomable games.

They came to a halt as they saw him, bolting over to hug him.

"How is the baby?" Chiri asked, as she did at least ten times a day ever since he'd told them the news shortly before his trip to Kyrmine.

"Doing very well." Kamir bent to kiss the tops of their heads. "Did you behave for Bremm and Velina today?"

They huffed in offense that he would even have to ask, and Chiri rambled off their whole day as they took his hands and walked across the courtyard into the house. Chara, as had become his habit, stole frequent glances at Charlaine.

"Go wash up and we'll have a snack," Kamir said as they stepped inside the house. "I'm going to put my bag away and I'll meet you in the kitchen. No dawdling!"

They would dawdle, likely get distracted playing in their room, forget what they were supposed to be doing and go back to the courtyard or into the garden.

After they'd vanished from sight, he went down the opposite hall to his bedroom. It was big and beautiful, with a patio to the garden and plenty of light. Almost too much for one person, but he was enjoying the luxury of having so much space to himself.

Setting his satchel on the trunk at the foot of the bed, he stripped off his coat, jacket, and wrap and went to wash off the city dust. Then he went into his dressing room and sat at the vanity, pulling down his elaborately arranged hair and weaving it into a simple braid. Shrugging into a plainer house jacket, he threaded through the house to the pair of rooms that had become his office and workshop. Ignoring the office for the moment, he stepped through to the workshop.

He'd finished Jader's present only a couple of nights ago, after weeks of slowly working on it in his limited free time and between other projects. He was gifting it sooner than he'd planned, but with all that had happened... well, it was only a matter of days now before Jader learned about the baby and the imperial decree. Once that happened, Kamir doubted Jader would be interested in any gifts from him.

So this was his only chance to bestow it. If Jader threw it away later... well, there was nothing he could do about that. At least the gift would have been given. Putting it back in its box and binding it with ribbon, then paper and twine for travel, he carried it into his office to compose a letter. Tomorrow he'd have a city runner take it to Lesto, and that would be that.

At least Jader was alive and well—or at least, was healing and would be well.

Looking out the window in the office, he smiled to see Chiri and Chara outside in the courtyard once more. Somehow, they'd managed to rope Charlaine into their favorite game—something involving stones and chalk circles. They'd tried to explain it to him a few times, but try as he might, the game remained incomprehensible. Charlaine appeared to be getting it though. If he wasn't careful, the children wouldn't permit him to return to his regular duties.

Chuckling, Kamir sat at his desk, pulled out fresh paper and inked his pen... and then simply stared for several minutes, composing letters in his head and immediately discarding them. What to say, what to say. Too much honesty would do as much harm as too much dishonesty... but Jader had almost died, and that thought would not stop drumming his heart and leaving him cold and afraid.

Finally he started writing, slowly at first, and having to scrap his attempts and start over twice, but eventually the letter flowed and he ended with a sad, but pleased smile on his face.

He rested both hands on his stomach, thinking about all the things he wished he could say—that somebody else would undoubtedly be saying very soon, but not remotely the way Kamir wanted to say them.

At least the wondering and agonizing would finally be over.

Reading the letter over one last time, he tucked it in the envelope and sealed it, then carried the package and letter to the front hall so he could

have a runner take it away in the morning.

"Come on you two," he called to his children. "I think there is still a snack wanting to be eaten."

They abandoned their game and ran toward him, Chiri skipping ahead down the hall as they headed for the kitchen.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jader was really damned tired of sitting. The only thing keeping him in his chair was the fact that he would not risk his ankle further. He'd been assured by the healers his ankle would never be one hundred percent the same, but he could avoid a limp on all but the worst days if he coddled the damned thing now.

At least the delegate from Harken would be arriving soon. No one had told him *who* the delegate was, which meant he probably wasn't going to like it, which meant it wasn't going to be Sarrica or Lesto, and he was terrified to think who it probably was.

He wondered if they'd had to sedate Sarrica.

Even rereading the letters from Kamir couldn't improve his mood anymore. The only bright spot, really, was spending lunch and occasionally dinner with King Desmond, who was surprisingly charming and pleasant—far, far removed from the rest of his deceased family.

A knock came at the door and Jader called for them to enter. The Shattered Wind guard on duty bowed and said, "The ship has reached port, High Commander."

"Hand me my crutches, please." Everyone kept purposely putting them out of his reach because he was surrounded by bossy bastards. When the guard had handed them over, Jader got himself up and settled. His whole damned body ached, but it was infinitely better than being bedridden the way he had been until only a few days ago. Since leaving Wessel's home, Jader had been treated like glass on the verge of breaking.

Mother Ocean, he wanted to be home. He wanted to be sitting on his patio enjoying the sight and smell of the sea, a breeze on his face, and Kamir cuddled in close, fussing over him. That probably made him bratty or weak, but Jader liked being fussed over. Growing up, the only good thing about being sick was the way his mother would bring him food, stroke his hair, sing and tell him stories. He didn't have to face the kids and adults who'd disliked him for having Mainlander skin, who'd made fun of him as

he struggled to learn one language while having no idea what language it was he still occasionally spoke.

Once he'd decided to join the imperial army, the battles had begun all over again, and when he got sick or hurt, there'd been no one to fuss. He'd settled for fussing over himself, and that had turned into spoiling himself. It was never the same as lying with his head in someone's lap while they sang or read to him.

But the sulking would have to wait until the day was over and he was alone in his room again.

Out in the hall, four additional guards waited to escort him. Two of them were Shattered Wind, and two were part of Desmond's personal guard, Bitter Frost, and reminded Jader heavily of Fathoms Deep, somber and quietly ominous in their midnight and ice blue uniforms.

He was escorted out of the beautiful inn Desmond had overtaken, and joined Desmond in the carriage waiting outside—an open carriage, infinitely easier for Jader to climb in and out of. "Good afternoon, Your Majesty."

Desmond smiled and handed off the papers he was holding to the secretary sitting next to him. "Good afternoon, High Commander." His Harken was impeccable; if not for his Bentan looks, he could have passed as Harken-born. But he was distinctly Bentan: pink-toned white skin, sharp features, dark, thick hair cut artfully short in a way only courtiers could get away with. His eyes were such a pale gray they almost seemed silver, especially against the glint of his silver-framed spectacles and the remarkably plain diadem on his forehead. The silvery eyes were eerie against his waifish build and beautiful clothes, especially when they turned hard as ice. "How are you feeling today?"

"Nervous," Jader said.

"I know you've little reason to believe me, but we are safe. Twenty guards between us around the carriage, and I've got them all over the streets as well—including more than a few archers."

Jader waved the words aside. "Not about the journey, Your Majesty."

"Ah." Desmond smiled. "Yes, your people have been quite cagey about this delegate, and the High King's missives quite a bit, hmm... direct."

"I would imagine so." Jader bit back a laugh, but only barely.

They reached the private royal harbor a short time later to greet the beautiful imperial schooner waiting there.

Desmond's secretary dismounted first, and a Bitter Frost soldier stepped forward to help Desmond out of the carriage, followed by two Shattered Wind to assist Jader.

They waited as the gangway was lowered and soldiers spilled out of the ship, all of them wearing black tunics embroidered with a scarlet three-headed dragon. Once the soldiers had disembarked and lined up, three more figures appeared: Jac, pretty and fierce and adoringly protective of her charge; Lord Rene, dressed elegantly in formal clothes, the kind Harkens wore maybe three times a year. But the long over-robe was black and embroidered in red, a brilliant red, gold, and black sash wrapped low around his hips, a gold under-robe peeking out from the thigh-high slits in the black robe. He wore a sword at one hip, and knowing Rene, there were plenty of daggers secreted away.

Standing next to him was precisely the person Jader had dreaded: Allen.

He was as beautiful and captivating as ever, draped in green and gold and snowy white furs. A gold diadem dripping emeralds and diamonds glittered on his forehead, more sparkling in his hair as he headed down the gangway and up the pier to join them.

Desmond smiled and bowed his head. "It's an honor to at last meet the esteemed Golden Tongue of Harken, though I hate such unhappy circumstances are what bring you to my kingdom."

"The honor is mutual," Allen replied, and extended his hands, where for once he wore his imperial ring, along with several others, though none were quite as dazzling as his wedding ring. Desmond lifted Allen's hands and kissed the knuckles, and Allen stepped in close to brush bare kisses to each of Desmond's cheeks. He murmured something in Bentan that made Desmond smile, then stepped away and turned to Jader. "High Commander, I'm happy to see for myself that you're alive and seem to be in moderately good health."

Jader made a face. "I am sorry I can't greet you properly, Your Majesty. Was your journey pleasant, at least?"

"Very."

Jader next embraced Rene. "You are not the Arseni I thought would be tagging along on this venture, as controlling as the other one can be."

Rene laughed. "He's busy enough doing your job, and no one could argue anyway, not when it's the Three-headed Dragons who serve our High Consort."

Allen smiled briefly. "Shall we get out of this miserable cold? I had thought I was done with snow, but it appears snow is not yet done with me."

Desmond laughed, signaled his guards, and soon they were bundled up in the carriage and headed back to the commandeered inn.

When they reached it, Jader escorted Allen to his rooms and, at Allen's indication, followed him inside. He was surprised Allen dismissed Rene and Jac, but said nothing. Once the door was closed, Jader asked, "Did they have to drug Sarrica or stuff him in a storage closet before they could get you out of the palace?"

Allen gave a tired smile as he removed his travel clothes and set them on the bed for a servant to put away later. "He wasn't happy, but in the end, there was little he could say short of outright forbidding it, and he's already learned not to do that." A shadow fell over his face briefly before he smoothed it away and turned to Jader. "Which brings me to you, High Commander. Quite a bit has happened in your absence, and it's long past time you were apprised of those matters."

Jader's heart tripped and thudded. "What's wrong? Is Kamir all right?"

"He's well enough, though certainly life has not been relaxing for him lately, and he is precisely what we need to discuss. Once coffee is brought, we will do so."

Mouth tightening, Jader moved to the little sitting area by the fireplace and settled into one of the deep, warm seats. Allen finished freshening up and came to join him just as coffee arrived, along with fragrant pastries that were both Harken and Bentan in style.

Jader poured a cup of coffee and cut it with enough cream he could drink several swallows in rapid succession. "What's wrong with Kamir?"

"I scarcely know where to begin," Allen said, then smiled faintly. "Well, that's not true. The most important part is this: Lord Kamir is pregnant, and

in a few more months you are going to be a parent—if you have interest in claiming the child, anyway."

Jader opened his mouth. Closed it again. Thoughts tumbled through his mind too rapidly for him to settle on any one. Kamir was pregnant. It must have been that last time in Jader's suite. Kamir was going to have their child. And nobody had fucking told Jader until now.

"Of course I have interest in claiming my own damned child," he finally managed. "Why in the *Mother* Ocean did nobody tell me about this until now? He must be four months along. Why did no one motherfucking tell me?"

Allen set his coffee down. "I will not presume to speak for Kamir, though if I had to guess, I would say he either did not want to bother you while you were here, or he was afraid to say."

Jader's mouth flattened at that, but he didn't argue. He didn't know everything that had happened to Kamir, but he knew enough to know both of those possibilities were equally viable. "So what about the rest of you?"

"This is the part you are not going to like, but hear me out before you get angry."

Jader poured himself more coffee and waited, though it was near impossible to focus on anything except the image of Kamir pregnant, or Kamir holding their child and smiling in that soft, sweet way of his. He had thought he was homesick before—right then he wanted to be home so badly it was hard not to cry.

"Kamir did not tell any of us—not that I expected he should have," Allen said. "But it was Sarrica who noticed, and reacted in typical Sarrica fashion."

"He got mad at Kamir for being pregnant?" Jader was going to *kill* him.

"For possibly being as much of a schemer as his family," Allen said, and lifted a hand to ward off Jader's angry words. "Hear me out," he repeated. "Kamir insisted he wasn't scheming, that it was an accident. Sarrica pushed him by threatening to issue an imperial decree that he was forbidden from marrying you."

"I will fucking kill—"

"High Commander!"

Jader subsided angrily, setting his cup down so hard coffee sloshed over the rim and spilled onto the plate.

"Sarrica only said it to see how Kamir reacted. He only would have gone through with it if Kamir's reaction had confirmed he was a schemer."

"How did he react?" Jader asked quietly.

"He asked for it in writing, more or less," Allen replied with a sigh. "I was in meetings all day; I did not find out about the matter until after the paperwork had been filed. Kamir has never said, but given all that has been happening, we believe he agreed to it to block his family's machinations. Which leads me to everything else he has been enduring."

By the time Allen had finished telling Jader about the custody challenge, Sarrica and the order of holding, the altercation between Kamir and his mother, and all the rest of it, Jader wanted to smash the coffee service then sail back to Harken and punch everyone involved in the mess—starting with Sarrica and working his way down by rank.

He was so fucking mad, he couldn't even manage to speak in Harken. *"Why the fuck did nobody see fit to tell me of any of this until now? Kamir is my lover, and he is carrying our child. I should have been informed and doing my best to help, not stuck like an oblivious, selfish fool here in Benta."*

"Sarrica and Lesto insisted we could handle the matter and have it resolved before you came home, and that telling you would add unnecessary stress to your situation since there is very little you could have done from here. I didn't agree, but Sarrica has domain in all matters military. I could not and would not go behind his back. That being said, when we realized someone had to come here, it was agreed you would finally be told. I am sorry."

Jader started to say that he didn't fucking care about apologies from bottom feeding Mainlanders, but stopped short. He didn't mean it, and it wasn't entirely fair. "I should have been told much sooner than this."

"Agreed. If it makes you feel any better, Sarrica mostly had to agree to me coming here because I've been so damned mad at him he couldn't muster much of an argument."

That drew a bare smile. "I honestly thought he'd skip arguing and go straight to forbidding."

"I think Lesto is the only reason he didn't, though neither of them will admit that to me, of course." Allen smiled, eyes going distant briefly as he lingered on thoughts of Sarrica.

It made Jader ache for Kamir.

He closed his eyes as anger and pain and guilt rushed through him all over again. Four fucking months Kamir had been writing him letters—sweet, cheerful, happy, and he liked to think affectionate letters. Even one erotic letter. Kamir had trusted him enough to write him an erotic letter. And not once had he given any indication of the troubles weighing him down. Pregnant and immediately labeled a nasty schemer looking to coerce the High Commander to temple. His despicable family. The vile ex-husband that Jader was going to turn into chum the moment he got his hands on the motherfucker.

Mother Ocean, he'd always acknowledged he was a vain and selfish person, but he hadn't thought he was so despicable he'd remain cheerfully oblivious to his lover's distress while he whined about every little triviality that made his life difficult for a handful of days—and sometimes only hours.

That people had worked hard to keep him in the dark did nothing to soothe. Kamir mattered to him; he should have noticed something was wrong.

"I truly am—"

"Don't say sorry again," Jader interrupted. *"I'm not happy, and I'm going to be mad at all of you bottom feeders for a long damned time. You can bet when I get my hands on Sarrica I'm going pitch your motherfucking husband into the ocean."*

"He and Lesto both know they're in trouble, believe me. They have been trying to make amends for their behavior."

"You promised me you would protect him. You of all people, I thought would keep that promise."

"I thought I was doing so, but it's long been clear I didn't, I know." Allen looked miserable, but he didn't say anything further to defend himself. "I will do whatever I can to make amends and restore your faith in me."

Jader sighed. At least Lesto had sent Charlaine to be Kamir's bodyguard. As apologies went, that was an adequate one. Not good enough he wouldn't break their fucking noses, but he might not break their damned limbs.

Once Jader finally returned home he would set up permanent protection with Shattered Wind.

"Am I allowed to write to him about all of this, now I have finally been told the truth?"

Allen nodded. "Of course. Which reminds me..." He stood and went to the small chest that had been set on his bed. Pulling out a ring of keys, he unlocked it and threw the top back. Lifting out a small parcel, he carried it over to Jader. "This is from Kamir. He never asked, and I did not see him again before I left—we have been trying to give him space—but he's aware you know everything by now. Whether he's mentioned any of it himself, I could not say. Anything I can do to help, you've only to let me know. I am sorry I did not do a better job of keeping my promise to protect him."

Jader sighed again. "I'm still angry, I won't lie, but I believe you did think you were doing your best. In your positions, I can't say how I would have acted. Thank you for finally telling me everything."

"I don't think that merits thanks. Certainly write to him. I'll see to it the letters reach him as quickly as possible. If you have parcels, I'll see those are delivered as well. I've brought runners and birds for precisely that purpose. Now, I must go meet with Desmond."

"You don't need me there?"

Shaking his head, Allen replied, "No, this is strictly between Desmond and me. The meeting will be long, complicated, and boring to any but the two of us. I will warn you that the situation is a delicate and tricky one, and I cannot promise we'll all be terribly happy with whatever outcome we reach—but I will do my best to resolve this matter to our satisfaction, and rapidly so we can all go home."

"You look like you're enjoying it at least a little bit."

"I like a challenge, there's no denying that," Allen said with a shrug of one shoulder. "Relax while you can. I'll be back later tonight. Don't hesitate to go to bed if it gets to be too late. This could very well take days, and there's no point in you staying up when you need rest." He smiled faintly. "That's an order, High Commander."

Jader lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "Go away, Your Majesty."

With a parting wave and laugh, Allen did just that. Shattered Wind entered as he left and helped Jader back to his own room.

Once he was alone and comfortably settled, Jader stared at the package on his lap. Finally he unwrapped the paper, revealing a long, narrow box and a letter with his name in Kamir's familiar elegant hand.

Normally he would have opened the letter first, but surprise and curiosity drew him to the box. The symbol on it was the same style as the one his desk clock had come in. Probably coincidence: the shop was clearly of the highest quality, but the mystery of his desk clock was always in the back of his mind. Now his lover sent him a gift from the very same shop? Jader was intrigued.

And if he was completely honest, he was a bit nervous about the letter. He was all too aware people usually found individuals like him and Lesto ultimately not worth the trouble. He hadn't set out to spend more than a brief time with Kamir, but the more time passed, the more time he wanted. But after all the trouble he'd already proven to be, he doubted Kamir would want anything except to never see him again.

Kamir had sent a gift though, the first time he'd done that in the four months they'd been apart.

Jader freed the silvery ribbon holding the dark blue box closed, rubbing his thumb over the silver symbol in the top right corner of the box. He removed the lid, and then simply stared at the pocket watch inside.

It was the most beautiful watch he'd ever seen, made entirely of white gold, carved all over with fish, sea horses, and other oceanic creatures. The edge was carved to look like a braid and beautifully 'threaded' with gleaming black pearls.

The face of the watch was made of translucent blue glass, with pearls carved in the shape of different creatures for the numbers, the hands swirls of mother of pearl. Behind it, he could see the gears, mesmerized by the smooth, elegant movements as he wound the watch and they started to work.

Such a watch, customized in every detail, could not have come cheap. Even Jader would not have bought himself such a nice watch, and he had roughly twenty of them on the rare occasion he was in civilian dress long

enough to bother putting one on. When he was in uniform, that kind of jewelry rarely lasted a day.

He ran his fingers over every bump and curve, turning it every which way—and only as he opened it for the third time did he notice his name engraved on the inside of the cover. In Islander.

Gingerly setting the watch back in its box for the moment, he finally broke the seal on the envelope and pulled out Kamir's letter.

My Dearest Jader,

I am certain by now you have been informed of all that has passed in your absence.

I am sorry, for my part. I never liked keeping anything from you. Part of me did not want to bother you with my own foolish mistakes. Part of me dreaded your reaction. Most of me simply did not know how to say it all.

My heart stopped when I heard that you had been hurt and might not survive. Lord Lesto thankfully explained the whole of the matter, though it sounds like you still have quite a bit to endure before they finally let you come home. But if they are sending High Consort Allen as I suspect, I think you'll be home that much sooner.

Your child is doing well, so far as I and the healer can determine. Growing strong, and far better behaved than my first two. At least for now. There are still a few months to go. I do not know what your wishes are regarding the child, but whatever you want, I will do my best to accommodate.

The rest of the mess you need not be concerned about. I never wanted more than you gave me. If I'd never spoken to you again after the night we went into the city, I would have declared myself happy the rest of my life. I am sorry everything has turned into such a mess.

Your estate is still doing well, and I am compiling thorough notes so that you can resume your duties with minimal difficulty. I've had some of your private stock shipped there so it is available whenever you visit, and ensured several other amenities will be in place before your arrival. I also sent word your ankle may not be yet capable of the stairs, so they'll prepare suitable quarters for you on the ground floor. If there's anything else you'd like done, simply let me know.

The watch was meant to be your welcome home gift. The casing was done by an artist I know well, having worked with them before on several other pieces. And this is where I confess that I am a clockmaker, largely as a source of income that did not rely on my family. Your watch should be accurate to within ten minutes a day, the best available. If you run into any problems, I'll be happy to fix it.

Jader stopped reading then, his mind going to his desk clock, how utterly perfect it was. The little card that had come with it had said similar things: best available, accurate to within ten minutes.

He wasn't remotely surprised to learn Kamir was good at such work. He was still, quiet, patient. Also practical; not the sort of person to refuse to work simply because he was nobility.

Picking up the watch again, he stared avidly at the gears behind the glass, smiling softly at the image of Kamir bent over a work table slowly fitting everything together to bring the watch to life. Jader wanted to see it. Wanted to distract him, drag him away to dinner or bed, listen to him grumble half-heartedly about needing to get work done.

Setting the watch back down, Jader resumed reading.

There are many things I wish I could say, but they feel too much like manipulation at this point.

Please come home alive and well.

Yours truly,

Kamir

Jader dropped the letter on the table next to the watch and buried his face in his hands to keep himself from screaming. He wanted to be home. He wanted to see Kamir. He wanted to fucking know if *many things I wish I could say* were anything like the things Jader wanted to say.

More than anything, he wanted Kamir to know that he didn't have to dread Jader's reaction.

Dropping his hands, Jader scrubbed one through his hair and weighed his options. A letter seemed the best short term solution, as paltry as that felt.

And the very moment this mess in Benta was over, he was going home and never leaving again.

Reaching for the crutches that had for once been left within reach, he crossed the room to his desk and sat down to write a letter.

There were at least a thousand things he wanted to say, but he kept it short and straight to the point. Sealing the letter, he took it to his guards and had them send it to Allen's chambers.

Returning to his seat, he picked up the watch again, curling his fingers around it and holding it close.

The biggest question he had now was: why had Kamir made him a clock and gifted it anonymously? He'd barely been aware of Kamir back when he'd been made High Commander upon Lesto's retirement. Lesto was the only reason he'd been aware of Kamir at all.

It was possible the clock had come from someone else, but Jader doubted it. There were too many elements in common, most especially the personal touches. Both the clock and the watch had been made by someone who knew him—someone who cared.

That realization left a squirming feeling in his gut, kicked his heart up to a rapid pace.

Surely not. There was no possible way Kamir had—

A knock on the door made him jump. "Come in."

One of his Shattered Wind guards stepped inside. "Commander, High Consort Allen has requested your presence."

"Help me up, please."

When he was up and settled, the guards helped him through the halls and downstairs to the private banquet room that had been converted to a meeting room for the rulers of the two most powerful countries on the continent.

Inside, Desmond and Allen sat at a table with cups of wine, looking like dark and light versions of each other—the Scholar King and Golden Tongue.

"Have a seat, Commander," Allen said, and poured him a cup of wine as Jader obeyed.

"I thought you said it would take longer to come to an agreement."

"There are fine details to be worked out, but the important bits were worked out faster than anticipated," Desmond replied.

The back of Jader's neck prickled. "I get the feeling I'm not going to like the decision that was reached."

"No, probably not," Allen said. "But it's the best option and will only waste a month of your time."

"Yes, Majesty."

"The key matter here is that you are now a man of two countries, and rightfully hold a title in both."

"Can't I just cede the duchy? Wouldn't the recent treason and my obvious conflict of interest be enough to strip it?" Jader stifled a sigh. "I thought the Bentan title would be the easy part."

Desmond gave a bare shake of his head, and for a moment looked tired. "If you were the only part of the problem, yes, it would be an easy matter to simply strip you of the title for all those reasons. The greater problem is that if I take back the title, there are three families who would have right to it and I would not have grounds to refuse all of them—and none of them are families that need to have the kind of power your duchy would bring. Two of them are currently being discreetly investigated for behavior and ambitions that displease me greatly. The last is... frankly, they're all a bunch of fools. Granting any of them the title would cause problems for more than Benta in the grander scheme. But snubbing them and granting the title elsewhere will cause an entirely different set of problems and waste valuable time and money."

"So you need me in order to pass the title to people you prefer to have in power."

Desmond gave a slight nod.

"I don't see how that's Harken's problem. Why can't I simply surrender the title and leave?"

"You could," Allen said. "But surrendering a title takes a minimum of six months when the paperwork goes smoothly and is expedited. Our method would be faster, and comes with other benefits."

Jader wanted to punch them both. He hadn't wanted to come in the first place. The family he'd never known, that he'd slowly been coming to like—

even love—was dead or awaiting execution. The man he loved was far away in Harken, suffering because he'd dared to attach himself to Jader.

And now they wanted him to linger in Benta and play the pawn so they could wrangle benefits that would probably never have any bearing on his life.

"Commander," Allen said gently.

But it was reminder and reprimand. The High Commander was more than a soldier. Whatever he wanted came last in the list of priorities. "Yes, Majesty."

"We'll make amends for everything, Commander, I swear to you."

"What is it you want me to do?" Jader asked, biting back all the angry things he still very much wanted to say.

Allen shared a look with Desmond, then said, "You're going to get married."

"Yes, I am," Jader replied. "To Kamir, assuming he'll have anything to do with me after all the awful things we've done to him."

"You'll marry him eventually, and I'll pay for the wedding myself," Allen replied. "First, however, you are going to marry Lady Helena Merrior."

Desmond added, "She's the last of her family, an extremely minor baroness wasted on her negligible title. She is also loyal and ambitious in ways I approve. She'll be beneficial to me, Benta, and Harken. But I need her in a position of power first. She marries you, takes your name, and you make her the controlling Duchess. It also means that when you're legally allowed to divorce in one month, she retains the title and you're left without it. Unusual, but not without precedent, especially with Abernoth, which has always been woman-controlled. Abernoth has in fact done this twice before when the family was left with no women."

Jader felt sick. "So I have to marry some woman I've never met, sit here for a month, get divorced, and then I can finally go home?"

"Yes. Six weeks more in Benta, and another for travel, Commander, and you'll be back in Harken."

"Fine. As you will, Your Majesties. But I want your word that Kamir will be informed immediately of the whole situation. I don't—" He broke off, looked away, hands curling into fists. When he finally trusted himself to

speaking again, he turned back and said, "My family has no idea how far from home I am. For months I have been told they're not my real family. The family I forgot and was starting to know again is dead. If you cost me the family I am hoping to build—"

Allen reached out to rest a hand on one of Jader's fists. "I did a poor job of keeping my first promise. I won't let you down this second time."

"You'd better not. May I be dismissed?"

"Of course. Thank you, Commander."

Jader got himself on his feet, bowed his head since a proper bow would put his ass on the floor, and awkwardly left the room.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"What?" Kamir asked.

The imperial messenger bowed his head in a failed attempt to hide the grin that danced over his lips. "The High King has summoned you to his office for a private audience, and you are to come immediately."

Immediately, he said. Like Kamir was anywhere close to suitably dressed for a private audience with the High King—the High King who hated him, and even Lesto would not convince Kamir otherwise. "I'll come at once."

The messenger bowed and departed.

Kamir pressed the heels of his hands to his temples. "Why does His Majesty want to speak with me? Why?"

Charlaine chuckled. "Why are you so upset? I've no doubt it's simply to update you on the High Commander. His Grace did promise you'd be kept apprised."

"Yes, but I assumed His Grace would be doing the apprising. Surely His Majesty has better things to do with his time?" Kamir dropped his hands and shook his head. "Nevermind. It hardly matters. I need to dress. Would you find Velina and let her know for me?"

Charlaine swept him a playful bow and strode off.

Kamir fled to his room and fretted over his wardrobe. The last time he'd been in the High King's office, he'd felt like an outdated pauper next to the beauty and fashion of the High Consort and Lord Tara. Now, with his wardrobe choices hampered by his ever-increasing girth, he was going to look downright embarrassing.

But really, if he was just going to get yelled at again, did it matter if he looked horribly out of fashion?

Sighing, he picked out his clothes, fixed his hair and affixed his jewels, then stepped into shoes and returned to the main part of the house. Charlaine was waiting for him, speaking with two of the guards who'd become a regular presence ever since he'd visited Kyrmine. No matter how

often he said multiple guards were no longer necessary, there were always at least two on the premises, and sometimes four.

Gesturing for the guards to leave, Charlaine turned to Kamir. "Ready to go? His Majesty sent a carriage along."

Kamir couldn't even protest that, though he was surprised the High King had sent it. Walking wasn't a miserable endeavor yet, but there were days that extensive walking became a chore. Pregnancy aside, he did not want to make matters worse by showing up to the High King's office covered in dust. "I'm not sure 'ready' is the word, but a summons is a summons."

It took them half an hour to travel through the city and up to the palace, the trip a good deal shorter than it would have otherwise been thanks to traveling in a carriage bearing the imperial crest.

Entering the palace took more effort than Kamir liked to admit. Why, *why* did the High King want to see him?

"Breathe," Charlaine said, resting a hand lightly on the small of his back and ever so gently nudging him forward. "I promise all will be well. If you were being summoned because you were in trouble, I promise you would know it."

Lesto had said something similar the day the High King had issued the imperial decree, but Kamir nodded, because agreeing was easier than arguing. All his energy was currently occupied with anxiety.

They walked through the palace, and though he kept his gaze up, he was careful to avoid catching anyone's eye. But whispers and mean laughs rose in his wake, and he wondered what had happened now to provoke a fresh wave of gossip and ridicule.

When they reached the High King's office, the guards there immediately opened the doors and instead of having to approach the clerk's desk, Kamir was waved on through. The second set of doors were opened, and with a last reassuring squeeze of his shoulder from Charlaine, Kamir stepped inside.

To his surprise—and alarm—there was no sign of the usual flock of secretaries, not even Myra, who was usually present no matter what.

Instead, it was only Sarrica, sprawled in a chair in the sitting area where Kamir had signed papers agreeing to oversee Jader's estate in his absence.

He bowed low as he reached Sarrica.

"Good, you've come," Sarrica replied, and motioned. "Sit, sit. I'm certain you would like to be off your feet. I've had a few teas brought, not certain which you would prefer. Nyle preferred the ginger, but there is also merr and honeydrop."

Kamir sat. "The honeydrop would be wonderful, Your Majesty. Thank you very much."

Sarrica snorted as he finished pouring the tea, and once more leaned back in his seat, sprawled in that way only someone of absolute power could in such a serious setting. "It requires very little effort on my part to make tea appear. How are you feeling? The fourth month was where Nyle really started to hate life."

Taking a sip of tea, Kamir smiled shyly and said, "It's not so bad. I will be miserable in a couple more months, but so far the baby is behaving. My twins were not so kind."

"You were so young yourself, too," Sarrica said, the words low enough they sounded more like a thought he hadn't entirely meant to voice. "Admirable, and from everything I hear, they are marvelous children. Allen posed we invite them to spend time with my children, especially Bellen, who is I think the same age or near enough. We meant to ask you, but got thoroughly distracted by problems with Benta." He sighed and drained his own tea cup. "And of course I drove you away by being a suspicious bastard, though by the end, it seemed to be what you wanted. I assume because of the machinations of your parents and that slithering ex-husband of yours."

Kamir felt like he'd walked into some strange dream. Or possibly a nightmare. He wasn't quite certain which. "I... I don't understand why I'm here, Your Majesty, though I'm grateful for your kindness."

Sarrica waved the words away. "I owe you every kindness after treating you so harshly." He smiled faintly, and a touch mischievously. "There is also that I prefer to be in my husband's good graces, and right now my place there is tenuous at best." He picked up the stack of papers set next to him on the sofa. "I met with your parents and ex-husband this morning. They agreed to the terms I offered them."

"Terms?" Kamir suddenly wished he hadn't drunk the tea.

"The important part is that the disownment has gone through, and I made them sign papers that they would never try to reclaim you—and that if they tried anyway, they would pay a fine significant enough I thought they would break down crying from sheer panic." Sarrica's grin that time was full of teeth and grim satisfaction. He offered some of the papers he held.

Kamir took them with a trembling hand, and rested them in his lap as he flipped through them. As Sarrica had said, the disownment was finalized. He was no longer Kamir Tesly. He had no idea what his new surname would be.

Hopes and dreams whispered in his ear, taunted and tormented him, but Kamir ignored them. "Th-thank you, Your Majesty."

Sarrica made a dismissive noise and lifted the second packet of papers. "The second piece of information I have for you is this: the custody challenge has been thrown out as frivolous. That was not of my doing, save that I ordered the matter be expedited."

"But the investigation was only launched a short time ago," Kamir said.

"Yes, and in that time, they found quite a bit of proof that you're an excellent father. The copies of your divorce and first custody hearing that you provided were extremely helpful, and there was more than enough evidence to prove Theoren unreliable as the challenger. You would have received word at your home by this afternoon, but I wanted to be the one to tell you." Sarrica handed over the second packet and lifted the third. "And with those two matters resolved, I of course have this."

Kamir took it, and had to fight tears as he saw it was a rescinding of the imperial order banning him from marrying Jader. "I don't understand."

"You asked that it be put in writing," Sarrica said slowly. "So even though you'd proven to me with your reaction that it wasn't necessary, I put it in writing. But all the reasons you would have wanted such a thing have been negated, so I've negated the order as well."

"I appreciate the kind gesture, Your Majesty." Jader was never going to marry him anyway, but there was no denying he felt a little less weighed down knowing it was no longer forbidden.

"Which brings me to the main reason I asked you to come see me," Sarrica said. "You're not going to enjoy the first part, but hear me through the whole."

Kamir's stomach tied itself into knots. "Majesty?"

"Lesto explained to you the situation in Benta?" When Kamir nodded, Sarrica said, "Resolutions are being discussed, but one has been finalized: a temporary marriage between Jader and a noble woman of Benta."

The papers Kamir had been holding slipped through his fingers, and he very nearly threw up the tea he'd drunk. "Oh. I see. Does that mean he's staying in Benta?" He slid awkwardly to the floor to retrieve the dropped papers—and froze as two large hands covered his own, took gentle hold of him, and got him back in his chair before Kamir could even draw breath to speak.

"Sit still." Sarrica gathered up the dropped papers and set them in a neat stack on the table beside Kamir's chair. He then refilled Kamir's cup and set a few sugared biscuits on a plate and thrust it into his hands before resuming his own seat. "Eat. Drink. You're far too thin for a man four months along."

Too bemused to do anything else, Kamir obeyed.

"I think you missed when I said *temporary*," Sarrica said. "They must stay married for a month and then they'll divorce. There will be straggling details to attend after that, but in seven to ten weeks, Jader should be home. If I know Allen, it will be seven. At which point Jader will be free to do as he pleases, assuming it pleases certain other parties to do the same thing." The smile on his face then was beyond Kamir's ability to interpret. "Which reminds me, I have one last thing for you." He reached into his jacket and then held out an envelope, Kamir's name written on the front. In Jader's handwriting. Heart clenching, Kamir took it and simply stared, terrified of what it might say.

Sarrica held out a last few pieces of papers. "Sign all these. They're simply the acknowledgement pages for all those papers I threw at you."

Kamir signed them without really paying attention, his mind entirely on the unopened letter.

Sarrica kept him there for another half hour, until Kamir ate enough food and drank enough tea to satisfy him. As he finished, Sarrica handed him another letter. "Reply at your leisure; you have enough to manage right now."

Finally dismissed, it took every scrap of control Kamir possessed not to run. By the time they finally made it home, he was ready to scream with frustration.

Thankfully the children were still with Bremm, and he was able to slip off to his room.

Sitting on the edge of his bed, Kamir stared at the letters. He opened the one from Sarrica first, laughing-crying to see it was a formal invitation to bring his children to spend time with the Imperial Prince and Princess. Pantheon, wouldn't Chiri and Chara love that. He would have to write a reply after lunch—whatever Sarrica said about 'at his leisure', nobody replied anything but promptly to the High King.

No longer able to avoid it, Kamir broke the seal on the second envelope and pulled out the letter—but several more minutes passed before he could bear to open the single sheet of paper within. Not a good sign. Jader liked to talk. His letters were normally at least two pages long, and more often four or five.

My Dearest Kamir,

I am sorry for all the terrible things you've suffered since aligning yourself with me. I was promised you would be protected in my absence, and I'm furious that Allen failed to keep that promise. If you will give me a second chance, I will do my best to make it up to you.

All I want is to come home to you. As of this writing, I don't know how much longer I'll be in Benta, but hopefully it will only be a matter of weeks.

I hope you and our child continue to do well. Have you any names in mind? I would like for the child to have both a Harken and Islander name, if you're amenable. I hope you are aware that eventually my mother will find out and she'll expect to meet you both, or Mother Ocean protect us.

Thank you for the watch—and, I suspect, the beautiful clock on my desk.

Be well.

Love,

Jader

Kamir burst into tears—then almost immediately swore as his tears smudged some of the ink. He set the letters aside before he could ruin the best part of the letter. *Love.*

Did Jader mean it? He'd never signed his letters so before, and given all that Kamir's letter had contained, it could not have been used idly.

The letter seemed too good to be true. Perhaps he really was in a dream, and would soon wake up and realize that, and be more despondent than he would ever overcome.

Standing, he stripped off his formal clothes and changed into something more comfortable, then returned helplessly to the bed to reread Jader's letter. He should have known Jader would figure out the desk clock had come from him. He'd been so pre-occupied with everything else, he'd forgotten all about that small detail.

Pantheon, what was he supposed to say? *I've been pining after you like a halfwit for years.* Kamir cringed. He would definitely have to find a better way to say it, or come up with something else entirely and hope Jader didn't press.

Retrieving his satchel, he pulled out all the papers Sarrica had given him and carried them to his writing desk to read properly. He still could not believe that after all the months of worrying... it was over. As simple as that. His children were once more safely and irrevocably his, there was no imperial order keeping him from Jader, and his family would never be allowed to trouble him again.

Part of him was annoyed the matters had been taken out of his hands. The custody and the disownment were his fights, no one else's. On the other hand, it was *over* and he had an invitation for his children to meet the Imperial Prince and Princess. It was hard to complain, even in his own head.

He sorted out the papers—and paused as he came to a set of three that were out of place, the writing across the top for a completely different filing than those mentioned. *Imperial Order of Holding*. Ordinary filings were listed by the kingdom. Rare was the case that went all the way to the imperial level, and even then, they were listed as *Order of the Imperial Court* or similar such phrasing. *Imperial Order* meant the High Throne had issued it, much like the one that forbade him marrying Jader.

Sarrica had ordered that Theoren stay away from him—permanently. And that should he violate the order, he would be in contempt of the High

Throne and subject to, well, the fancy language really came to 'Sarrica's wrath'.

But Sarrica had also been shockingly generous in dictating that since the order meant Theoren essentially could not live in Harkenesten Palace or City, he was to be given compensation totaling three thousand crowns and a horse and supplies to help him out of the city. And he was to leave by no later than the end of the week.

Mercy of the Pantheon, no wonder people fought so hard to be in Sarrica's favor. One thing to know, another to *know*. Sarrica could move mountains when he felt like it, and it was more than a little disconcerting to be the one benefitting when the mountains were moved. Maybe Sarrica had never hated him, after all.

That didn't mean Kamir would be comfortable around any of them any time soon, but... well, maybe someday. He was willing to consider the possibility, at least.

Filing the papers away in his desk, Kamir went to find his children. They were just coming out of the schoolroom as he reached it. "Papa!" Chiri threw herself at him and hugged him tightly, but carefully, ever concerned about their unborn sibling no matter how much he reassured her a simple hug would not harm anyone. Chara hugged him as well, but before they could start in with their chatter and questions, Bremm stepped into the hall carrying books and papers in his arm. He smiled brightly when he saw Kamir. "Good afternoon, my lord."

"Not lord anymore," Kamir replied with a soft chuckle. "The disownment came through today, so I don't even have a surname at present."

Bremm's grin turned into a bit of a smirk. "Oh, now, the whole palace has been whispering it will be Star in a matter of months."

"How would you know? When were you last at the palace?" Kamir asked, lifting his eyes to the ceiling, barely holding back a smile himself because that would mean he was letting hope get the better of him. *Love, Jader.*

"You vastly underestimate how well Velina and Liana keep apprised of palace happenings," Bremm replied wryly. "My spouse prides herself on the

ability. Get her drunk enough and she'll tell you that she can do it better than even the High Consort."

Kamir laughed. "I see. But I don't think a marriage will be happening any time soon; it would be presumptuous in the extreme of me to assume such a thing."

Bremm nodded, but didn't look terribly convinced.

The children, meanwhile, had grown bored with being ignored and wandered outside to the courtyard to play with the ball Chara had been carrying.

"Children!" Kamir beckoned for them to come to him as he stepped outside. "Bremm, linger a moment, please." When the children reached them, he said, "I went to the palace today, and you'll never believe what the High King asked me."

Their eyes went wide. "You talked to the High King?" Chara asked, mouth dropping.

"What did he say? What did he say?" Chiri demanded, looking ready to scream or run around madly, she was all but vibrating in place.

"He asked if the two of you would like to go to the palace and play with Princess Bellen and Prince Nyla."

Chiri shrieked and Chara just stood with his mouth still open. Launching herself at Kamir, Chiri clung tightly and said, "Please, please, please, *please*, can we go play with them, Papa?"

"My darling, why do you act like I would tell you no? If I wanted to say no, I would have. Of course you can go play with them. Chara, do you want to?"

Chara bobbed his head up and down rapidly.

Kamir kissed them both. "Then I'll write to His Majesty to arrange it. How about you go start picking out what toys you want to take along."

"Won't they have toys?" Chara asked.

"Lots of them, no doubt." Kamir smiled and tucked back a stray curl, smile widening when Chara made a face and shook his head so the curls tumbled all about. "But you should bring one or two of your own to show that you want to share and be fair, not just expect to play with their stuff and not let them play with yours."

"Oh." Chara smiled. "That makes sense. Thanks, Papa."

"Run along, then—and not more than three apiece. I'm not dragging the entire playroom to the palace!"

Given the way they were running, and the looks they were sharing, he doubted they'd heard a word. But that was a problem to be sorted later.

"That is quite the invitation, my lord," Bremm said, looking more wide-eyed than the children had. "I know for a fact they've never invited other children to play, though gentle nudges have been made by at least half of those at court who have children."

Kamir spread his hands. "I don't know what provoked the invitation, except perhaps the evening I spent chatting with Princess Bellen. I hope it works out. "

"Well I think you will soon have more invitations than any of us can handle," Bremm replied. "I think tomorrow would be a good day to refresh on etiquette? Not that your children ever really need those lessons."

"Ha. I appreciate the lie, sir, but it *is* a lie."

Bremm grinned. "They've never thrown ink in my face or informed me imperiously they will tattle to their father that I'm making them do their numbers over."

Kamir lifted his eyes to the sky. "I bet I can guess—"

"Kamir."

Whipping around, ice sliding down his spine, Kamir stared at Theoren standing in his courtyard. "What in the Pantheon are you doing here? There is an imperial order of holding in place, and you should damn well know the penalties for breaking it."

Putting on his best charming, sympathy-inducing expression, Theoren replied, "I wanted a chance to talk to you without all the noise and nosiness of the palace. Without your parents interfering."

Kamir barely noticed as Bremm slipped away, eyes only for the snake in his yard. "I have no desire to talk to you. Leave now and I won't have you arrested."

Trying for pleading, Theoren took a few steps closer. "Kamir, you have to know I only did all that because I had no choice. I'm glad you get to keep the children."

Kamir said nothing.

The barest hint of anger flickered in Theoren's eyes, but he must have been truly desperate because he tamped down on it. "I've only ever wanted what's best for you, Kamir."

Kamir started laughing hysterically, tears stinging his eyes. "What's best for me? I was sixteen. I had children when I was nineteen. I put up with neglect and abuse from you for three years. Even when I was pregnant, you still left me hungry and often bruised. What, in any of that—"

Theoren snarled and moved before Kamir could react, slamming him into the wall so hard Kamir's head ached. "You're still a snotty little—"

A roar of anger was all Kamir heard before Theoren was yanked away. Kamir sank to his knees, legs trembling too much to keep him standing.

Charlaine had Theoren on the ground. "I'll see you hanged for this."

"You can't—" Theoren's words were lost as Charlaine shoved his face into the dirt.

"Where are the children?" Kamir asked.

"Bremm is keeping them distracted in the playroom." Charlaine looked up. "You should have come straight to me. What in the Penance Realms were those fucking gates doing unlocked?"

Kamir shivered. "I'm sorry. I ordered them unlocked so it would be easier for the deliveries we're expecting for the gardens."

Charlaine grunted and finished binding Theoren's hands and legs. He hauled him to his feet and shook him hard. "You will be damned lucky if you don't hang for this. About the only reason you won't at this point is if Kamir pleads for your life."

"I haven't committed a hanging offense," Theoren snarled.

"You were issued an imperial order to stay away from Lord Kamir—"

"He's not a lord anymore."

"That's beside the point and you damn well know it. You were ordered to stay away from him, and warned you would suffer whatever punishment His Majesty saw fit to issue should you violate the order. Lord Kamir is beloved of the High Commander, friends with the High King and Consort, pregnant with the High Commander's child, and his children have a play

date with the imperial prince and princess. And you assaulted him—in front of the Second Lieutenant of Fathoms Deep, no less. Say again that you have not committed a hanging offense."

In reply, Theoren said nothing, though he looked damned close to actually crying. That wasn't something Kamir had ever thought him capable of, even as an act.

"Why did you come here, Theoren? Tell me the truth. One lie or attempt to charm me and I'll let Charlaine do whatever he wants."

Anger and hate filled Theoren's face, but he said, "Money."

"His Majesty granted you three thousand crowns in compensation."

Theoren scoffed. "A laughable amount given what he's demanding of me."

Kamir sighed. "Three thousand crowns is more than enough to live on if used smartly, and you know it. You must be in debt to some seriously dangerous people if you would still come to me for money after all that's transpired. I guess Lord and Lady Tesly were smart enough not to pay you until the job was done. Too bad for you."

Theoren started laughing, sharp-edged and bitter. "Your parents? Oh, excuse me, your former parents. They don't have money either. Why do you think they wanted to bother with you? It was the only chance they stood of getting money. Your sister is being fined so heavily she may have to leave Shadow Bell. Your brother is running the estate into the ground, and your parents..." His laugh turned mean. "Well, they will not be living in the palace for much longer. The deal was to get you married and split the money we extracted from you and your new spouse. But as per usual, you prove to be stubborn and useless."

Charlaine cuffed him so hard Theoren yelped.

"I see," Kamir said, feeling only weariness. He'd known Theoren was after money, but his family? They'd attempted to threaten and frighten him into crawling back to them and getting married because they were one step from destitute? How had they managed to pay his allowance for so long? But of course they had, because they'd rather die than ever make him aware they were running out of money.

"What do you want me to do with him?" Charlaine asked quietly.

Kamir stared at Theoren, the desperation and fear etched into his face, the pleading look. His shoulders still hurt where Theoren had grabbed him, his head aching where it had slammed into the wall. Theoren had attacked him without a second thought or any show of remorse—and while Kamir was visibly pregnant.

Part of him wanted to say let Theoren go, anyway. But he'd given Theoren a thousand chances.

"The imperial order said that if he disobeyed, he was the High King's problem. Deliver him to the High King."

Theoren shrieked. "I was honest! You said—"

"I only said what I'd do if you weren't honest. I never promised anything for your honesty." Kamir rested a hand on his stomach, thoughts flitting to the letter in his bedroom. "I'm done—with you, my parents, all of it. I won't live the rest of my life dreading that moment when you creep out of the dark again. All you had to do was leave and never bother me again. You defied the order, so you'll face the punishment you were promised. Goodbye, Theoren."

He turned and walked slowly back into the house, closing the door firmly to muffle Theoren's screams and sobs. Guilt clawed at him and bile burned the back of his throat, but he wouldn't go back on his decision.

Taking the long way around, he stepped into the kitchen, where Velina immediately motioned for him to sit at the enormous work table that took up the middle of the room. "I can't believe the nerve! I saw him just as Charlaina came out like a raging Penance beast. Mother Ocean have mercy, I hope we are done with him once and for all now."

"I think we are," Kamir replied, and thanked her for the tea set in front of him.

She folded her arms across her chest and glowered at him. "I've waited long enough. You tell me right now what that commander of yours said about the baby."

"Maybe I haven't gotten a chance to read his letter yet. I have been busy —"

"You tell me now!" she shrieked, and playfully thwacked his knuckles with the cooking spoon she was holding.

Kamir laughed. "He asked if I had any names in mind, and warned me I would probably have to meet his mother at some point because she'd want to see me and the baby."

Velina screamed and darted around the table to hug him tightly. "I knew he'd be pleased! I bet he's telling everyone and being completely tiresome about it." She hugged him again and kissed his cheek. "And warning you of his mother—practically a marriage proposal, that. Nobody meets the matriarchs idly. At the very least he's declared you are family, and not simply because you're having his child, so don't try that."

"I don't—" Kamir choked, swallowed. "Marriage isn't necessary. I wish everyone would stop harping on it."

"Maybe it's not in the Islands, but we all know the unwritten rules of the High Court, and those say very clearly that a man as fine as you should be courted and married. I think your High Commander has finally come around to seeing reason, and long past time he should."

"Oh, stop it," Kamir said, but couldn't help the wobbly smile that overtook his face. "I think he has plenty of other things to worry about. But at the latest, he'll be home in ten weeks, and His Majesty said it would likely be closer to seven."

At which point Kamir would be a good deal larger and less attractive, but there was nothing he could do about that. Hopefully the reason for his altered appearance would make up for it.

She hugged him one last time then returned to the cooking, which she was doing because Liana had been called away to help a friend who'd recently given birth.

Kamir finished his tea and left her to her work. He was nearly to his bedroom when he crossed paths with Charlaine, who'd clearly been headed there. "Are you all right?"

"I should be asking you that. I apologize I was not to hand when he showed up."

"Please don't. You shouldn't need to shadow me in the house. Not locking the gate was my error. Where is he?"

"I had two of the guards here haul him to the palace, with orders to deliver him straight to Sarrica, along with a letter I wrote detailing what

happened."

Kamir opened his mouth, closed it again, but after another moment made himself ask, "Did I send him to his execution?"

"You didn't do anything. He brought punishment down on his own head. But no, he probably won't be executed. Sarrica is a firm believer in getting rid of such problems, but execution is his last resort. Nobody would lose sleep if Theoren was executed, but he'll probably be given to a ship and made to work on it the rest of his life."

"Thank you for telling me, and for coming to my rescue. I wish I had been capable of fighting him off myself—"

"You aren't trained to fight, and you shouldn't be sorry about that." Charlaine smiled faintly. "Leave that to those of us who do have the training. Do you need anything else right now? Because I'm likely to be summoned as witness soon. His Majesty will send replacements, of course, but is there's anything you need before I leave?"

Kamir shook his head. "Nothing at all. I think I'll go lie down for a bit, I do not have the energy I usually do and today has been a long day." He stepped in and gave Charlaine a brief hug. "Thank you for everything."

"Thank you," Charlaine replied gruffly. "I'm sure you'll no longer need me in a few weeks, when the High Commander returns and Shattered Wind takes over the honor, but should you ever require my assistance again, you've only to ask and I'll come."

"It won't be the same around here without you," Kamir admitted. "If you ever get bored with Fathoms Deep, you'll always have a place here, bodyguard or not."

Charlaine hesitated, started to speak, but then only nodded, and finally bid him sleep well before striding off.

Kamir almost called out for Charlaine to tell him what he'd almost said, but in the end let him go and headed into his bedroom.

Stripping off his jacket and shoes, he crawled into bed, pulled up his blankets, and was fast asleep moments later.

CHAPTER TWENTY

It took eight weeks, all told, for Jader to make it home, though part of that was his own fault, and he couldn't be sorry, not when he'd delayed his return to ensure the family he'd never really known had gotten the burials they deserved. Except, of course, for his traitorous brother, whose body had gone in with the nameless to be lost and forgotten in a mass pyre.

They were further impeded by a spring storm that delayed the ship by nearly two days.

When they did finally make it home, it wasn't even a proper arrival. It was so foggy, the schooner couldn't safely make it into the harbor. Instead Jader, Allen and their retinues were put on a smaller boat to be taken home.

If they'd arrived on time, they would have been heralded with at least a little fanfare, but as it was, Jader was grateful for the quiet and the lack of people. He stifled a yawn as someone wearing Fathoms Deep colors helped him out of the boat, and swayed slightly as his legs tried to readjust to being on land.

Lesto came out of the mist and briefly hugged him, Allen, and Rene. "Welcome home."

"I'm surprised my husband isn't here," Allen said, pushing back the hood of his cloak, breath misting in the chilly spring air.

"He tried," Lesto said.

Allen laughed brightly, the sound rippling across the dark, mostly deserted harbors. "Let's be on our way then, for I would much like to be properly home, and if I keep Jader away much longer, he will pitch us all into the harbor."

Not bothering to deny that, Jader took the satchel Tsarana handed him and let the bodyguards close in around them as they were escorted to a large, heavy carriage. Once they were settled and moving, he asked, "How is Kamir?"

"Six months along, more or less," Lesto said, "and handling it far better than poor Tara. He is due any day now, and if the baby does not come, I

think he will remove the child himself with whatever happens to be closest to hand."

Jader chuckled. "Who is more distressed at this point: Tara or Rene?"

"Oh, be quiet," Rene groused. "I am not *distressed*."

Lesto gave a sharp, bright laugh. "You're almost as bad as Sarrica when it comes to fussing. Certainly you're the most ridiculous I have ever seen you, and you'll probably be even worse now you're home again and Tara is due to give birth within the month," Lesto said, and it was too dark to see his smirk, but plain enough in his voice.

Rene made a low, rough noise, his bad hand curling into an awkward fist in his lap.

Huffing, Lesto reached out and punched him lightly on the shoulder. "Tara is fine, and will be fine during the birth, thanks to all of Kamir's advice and friendship and Sarrica's endless doting." He turned to Jader. "Speaking of Sarrica and doting, nobody has fussed over Kamir more, and the way the High Court behaves, you'd think they'd forgotten he was even more ridiculous with Nyle."

"I'm not certain it's possible to exceed that," Rene said, and Lesto snickered.

"Making amends, is he?" Jader asked. He wasn't angry anymore, but he wasn't precisely feeling charitable either.

It was Allen who replied, "Sarrica was always disappointed that Nyle did not really care for children, and he always hated that Nyle insisted on carrying them anyway. I think he enjoys having friends and family to fuss over who do not hate every second of the ordeal. I'm fairly certain that if everyone keeps having children, he'll get it into his head to have more of his own—our own, I guess."

"I'm fairly certain if you sire a child, there will be no living with Sarrica after they're born," Jader said with a snicker. "That child will be swaddled in silk and never allowed to leave his sight."

Allen huffed in the dark. "He can certainly try."

That certainly sounded like new additions to the imperial family were a strong possibility, though Jader wasn't convinced Allen realized he'd

already accepted—liked—the idea. To judge by Lesto's silence, he'd come to the same conclusions.

They rode the rest of the way to the palace in silence, though as they drew closer, Jader asked, "Where is Kamir right now?"

Lesto chuckled. "His children have become fast friends with Bellen and Nyla, and the four conspired to harangue their parents into letting Chiri and Chara sleep over a few nights until you came home. Kamir is staying in your suite, though it took a great deal of effort to convince him to do so."

"I see," Jader replied, hot satisfaction running through him. Maybe it was arrogant to be pleased that Kamir was in his space waiting for him, but he was pleased all the same. "I hope nobody is expecting me to do anything tonight other than go to bed."

"If Sarrica tries to make us work at this hour, I'm throwing Allen at him and running," Lesto said.

Allen cast them a look as the carriage came to a halt and light from the palace slipped through the windows. "If my husband tries to do work instead of greeting me properly, you may have to separate us."

"Ha," Lesto replied. "Any distraction works for me." He threw open the door and climbed out. Jader followed him, then Rene, and last came Allen.

Predictably ignoring Lesto's orders to stay inside, Sarrica stood on the front steps and flew down them the moment he saw Allen, sweeping him up and making it very clear that nobody would be made to work that night—except perhaps Allen, in ways he probably would not protest.

When Sarrica finally tore himself away from Allen, he turned to greet Jader. "You've been sorely missed. I'm sorry for all you've suffered. Welcome home."

"It's good to be home," Jader said quietly. "Thank you for looking after Kamir these past few weeks."

"He looks after himself, really—probably more than any of us realize. I am sorry for my terrible mistake in issuing the imperial order. But speaking of Karmir: he claimed he was going to bed, but I am fairly certain he's been doing his best to wait up for you every night. Run along, High Commander. Take a few days to settle in. Next week is soon enough to put you back to

work. There should be a bath waiting; I ordered them prepared when we heard you were on your way."

"Thank you." Jader bowed and swept off, most of his misery sliding away as he lost himself in the familiar, desperately missed, contained-chaos labyrinth that was Harkenesten Palace. The late hour thankfully meant those halls were deserted of all but guards and a few servants stuck with late shifts.

"Welcome home, High Commander," greeted the guards outside the doors to the imperial wing. They bowed low, then clapped his back and shoulders. "It's good to have you back. The Deputy High Commander is doing well, but..." The man shrugged, and the woman next to him nodded.

Jader smiled and thanked them, then stepped through the doors and barely kept from bolting to his room. The guards there greeted him as well, their voices pitched low. "You're a happy sight," one of the women said. "I think Lord Kamir is asleep by now, but he'd like it if you woke him."

"We'll see," Jader said. "Thank you." Hugging them both, he dragged out the keys he hadn't needed for months and unlocked the door.

The suite was dark when he stepped inside, strange and aching familiar all at once. So much was precisely as he'd left it six months ago. But there were little touches that were not: the empty tea tray a servant had not yet collected, a cheap pin book next to it. Someone had left a beautiful printed silk scarf draped over one chair, and the area close to the patio doors had a few toys scattered across it.

He swallowed and removed his outer layers, dropping everything in a pile to deal with later. Walking quietly through the room, spying the bathtub that had strangely been left in the main room, he pushed open the bedroom door—then lingered there, too captivated to move.

Kamir lay in bed fast asleep, a book on the floor where it had clearly been dropped. A cup of tea was on the bedside table. The footboard was draped with a dressing robe, slippers on the floor beneath.

If there was a better homecoming to be had, Jader couldn't fathom it.

He approached the bed and simply drank in the sight, keeping his hands to himself only by tangling them together behind his back. But oh, how he wanted to touch. Trace that familiar face, touch the unfamiliar rise visible

through the layers of blankets. Jader swallowed. One thing to be told, to know, quite another to see. In just a few months he would be a father.

Pulling up the blankets more firmly around Kamir, Jader then went into his dressing room and quickly discarded his remaining clothes. Taking a dressing robe with him, he returned to the outer room and the bath waiting for him there.

He scrubbed and cleaned and shaved slowly, not dragging himself out until the water ran cold and the need for food won out. Belting on his robe, he went to the door and asked the guards there to bring him food.

When it came, Jader nearly cried to smell and taste all the foods he'd been missing. Nothing was better than the food of Harken—and wine from his own stores. Though he tried to go slowly and savor it, the food was gone within minutes.

Refilling his wine cup, Jader strolled out to his patio and leaned against the wall to watch the sea. He'd missed this view along with everything else, missed his aquariums, the smell of the sea tangling with the scents of Harkenesten.

He took a few sips of wine and set the cup aside, leaning more heavily on the wall as his mind spun with everything he needed to do now he was home: the army would be the most strenuous of his tasks. He needed to shift Shattered Wind from mercenary to his private guard. Shadow Bell needed to be dealt with, according to what little he'd been told so far. He needed to become properly acquainted with the estate he'd never seen. But before all of that he—

"J-Jader?"

Jader whipped around, barely noticing the cup he knocked to the ground, sending wine splashing across the patio stones. "Kamir." He flew across the patio and stumbled to a halt barely a pace away, all his pretty, carefully rehearsed words failing him. "How—how are you?"

"I'm glad you're home," Kamir said, staring at Jader like he was cool water on a boiling-hot day.

The look finally jarred Jader into movement. Closing the space between them, he gently cupped Kamir's face in his hands and bent to kiss him.

He'd been wrong before; *this* was the best possible homecoming, having Kamir close, warm and loose from sleep, fingers clinging as he kissed Jader back like it was all he wanted to do.

Jader drew back only when Kamir shivered. "It's too chilly to be out here dressed as you are."

"Dressed as you are?" Kamir countered.

"Fair enough." Jader dragged him back inside and resumed the kissing, maybe trembling a bit himself as it really settled that he was home and would never have to leave home again—at least not for the foreseeable future. "You never answered my question."

Kamir blinked at him. "What question?"

"How are you?"

"I'm fine," Kamir said, smiling that sweet, shy smile Jader had missed so fucking much. "We're fine, Commander." Before Jader could react, Kamir took hold of one of his hands and rested it on his swollen stomach. "See for yourself."

Jader gave a shaky laugh. "I still cannot believe it. Of course I was ordered to leave right as everything got interesting around here." He looked up. "I... I am sorry I did not have more care. I know this was the last thing you needed with everything else weighing you down."

"I have no regrets," Kamir said softly. "My only fear was that you would be angry."

Jader tipped his chin up and kissed him again. "I could never be angry about a child. If nothing else, I have far too much ego."

Kamir laughed.

Taking his hand, Jader led him further into the suite and settled him on the sofa with a blanket. Once Kamir was comfortable, he built up the fire and went to fetch his satchel from where he'd left it in the entryway. "Most of my belongings are still on the ship and won't be here until morning, but I did bring a couple of gifts for you with me tonight."

"You didn't have to bring me gifts," Kamir said, but the blanket fell from his shoulders as he leaned forward slightly and watched as Jader sat and pulled out the velvet box.

"They were bought long ago, but I could hardly not try to keep pace with that beautiful watch—and don't think I've forgotten I have questions about my desk clock." Kamir's cheeks darkened and Jader was helpless against leaning over to kiss one and chased more kisses along his soft skin until he once more took that delectable mouth. "I've missed you."

Kamir stroked his cheek, combed through the fine strands of hair that had fallen against it. "I've missed you, too."

Stealing one last kiss, Jader drew back and offered the box. "This was the first gift I bought for you."

Looking equal parts excited and nervous, Kamir set the box gingerly on his stomach and opened it—and gasped. "They're beautiful." He stared a moment, looking hesitant. "They remind me of that day in the hallway. I was so upset. I'd just wanted..." He shook his head. "Then those guards."

Jader tilted his head up. "Just wanted what?"

Kamir looked at him, then looked away and ducked his head. "I... I'd just wanted you to notice me, if only for a moment. I'd seen you around the palace for years, but we hardly move in the same circles, even if my family was trying to throw me at Lord Lesto. But that morning, suddenly I had a chance to talk to you. Then the guards reprimanded me for the flowers, and I felt so hopelessly stupid."

"I barely remember the guards, to be honest," Jader said. "All I remember is how beautiful you looked coming down the hall, bathed in sunlight, with flowers in your hair."

Kamir sniffled, then started full out crying.

Jader blanched, shoved his satchel out of the way, and pulled Kamir close. "Oh, no. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"You're—" Kamir gave a wobbly laugh. "You're ridiculous. Do I look *upset* to you?" He smiled through wet eyelashes. "I thought High Commanders were more observant than that."

Jader huffed playfully and kissed away the tears. "I think you look perfect, but I still wasn't expecting you to cry."

"Sweet words like that are why you get in so much trouble."

"None of this feels like trouble."

Kamir smiled and shook his head. "I hope you're not this soft on your child; they'll turn into a spoiled brat."

Jader started to protest he'd never be a soft parent, then thought better of it, given he had no idea what kind of parent he would be. "Speaking of spoiled brats, I know very well I've been one. But I hope you know by now that whatever my intentions when we began our affair, I very much intend for this to be something that will someday end in marriage. You have enough to deal with for now, and we've spent more time apart than together, but I would like that to be the path we walk, even if in the end we decide to part ways."

Kamir opened his mouth, closed it again, fresh tears spilling down his cheeks.

"That being said, Allen said he would be paying for the wedding, and the whole continent knows how much he and Tara enjoyed planning Lesto and Shemal's, so I'm not sure you'll be allowed to refuse."

"I'm not letting the High Consort pay for our wedding!" Kamir said—then clapped his hands over his mouth, face flushing a deep rose as he tried to pull away.

Jader held fast, happiness and satisfaction rushing through him. "Oh, no. You've done it now, no taking that back." He kissed Kamir's brow, laughed into his hair as Kamir continued to push and squirm to get free.

"Let me go."

"Only if you promise to stay right where you are," Jader said, but let him go. He grinned and bent to retrieve another box from his satchel. Like the first, it was velvet, but red instead of green, and marked with a different symbol. It was also small and square.

Kamir stared at it, then up at Jader. "Is that..."

"I just told you I was hoping you'd agree to marry me someday. Of course it is." Jader thrust the box at him.

Fingers trembling, Kamir undid the gold ribbon holding it closed and pulled off the lid—and started crying harder than ever at the ring inside.

Jader had taken forever to settle on a design, to the point he'd been certain the poor jeweler stuck dealing with him had nearly murdered him on at least seven occasions. But the end result was worth it: a single circle cut

sapphire surrounded by a ring of opals and pearls on a wide gold band with Kamir's name inside.

"I-i-it's beautiful," Kamir whispered. "I never thought... I was happy you saw me at all."

Gently taking the box, Jader removed the ring and put it where it belonged, kissing Kamir's hand and holding it fast. Tilting Kamir's head up, he said, "I've gotten the distinct impression you've noticed me far longer than I've noticed you."

"Everyone notices you," Kamir said. "Even the ones that whisper hateful things about Islanders and share gossip about you only being picked so the High King would look good for favoring Islanders—you can tell in the tone and the look in their eyes that they want to be the next one invited to your bed."

"There's only one person I ever took to my rooms," Jader said. "I'm sorry I didn't have the sense to do it sooner."

Kamir looked back down at the ring on his finger, then looked up and smiled in that way that undid Jader every time. "Worth the wait, Commander, never fear."

Threading a hand through Kamir's hair, Jader drew him into another kiss, savoring the feel and flavor him, the familiarity and rightness. "I will try never to keep you waiting again, *sunshine*."

"Stop making me cry," Kamir said, throwing arms around Jader's neck and kissing him hard.

Jader made a noise that might have almost been a growl and hauled Kamir into his lap. "It is terrible how much I want to fuck you right now?"

Kamir laughed against his mouth. "Terrible? No, though I'm not certain I'm capable of much right now. A few more weeks, I definitely won't be. You should have come home sooner, instead of marrying someone else."

"Not like I wanted to, and *Mother* Ocean do I wish that trip had ended any other way."

"I am sorry," Kamir said quietly. "I wish everything had gone differently as well. I know things with your family were difficult, but..."

Jader shrugged, nodded. "It's over, at any rate." Kissing him again, biting and sucking at Kamir's lips, Jader then tore away and lifted Kamir into his

arms as he stood.

Yelping, holding fast, Kamir said, "Put me down!"

"No," Jader said. "I'm enjoying this far too much."

Kamir scowled. "I know I weigh more than you at this point."

"You're not that big yet," Jader said with a grin, laughing when Kamir's scowl turned into an outright glare. "You've also never gone into battle with full armor, sword, and shield while controlling a horse. This is easy."

Kamir's mouth twitched. "Yes, that is what I'm usually called."

Jader lifted his eyes to the ceiling as he gently set Kamir in his bed—their bed, and helped him out of his robe. "Only by morons and fools, who will choke on resentment when they learn you've had the last laugh. Not that I am much of a prize, but I'm content if everyone else thinks so and sulks that you won it."

"Come to bed, Commander, and leave that preening ego on the floor."

Snickering, Jader stripped off his dressing robe and climbed into bed. He skimmed a hand over Kamir's bare stomach. "Three more months and I'll be a father. How did Chara and Chiri take the news?"

"They've always wanted more siblings. I'm worried one will just lead to a demand for two and three and four."

Jader growled and kissed him, pressing close against Kamir's side and skimming down body to tease and press where he was already growing wet. Kamir's breath hitched, the finger's curled around Jader's arm tightening. "Mm, I have missed this." Jader pressed kisses over his face, nipped at his jaw, hard cock rubbing against Kamir's side. But as eager as he was, he was more than content to keep to a lazy pace, kissing and nipping, propped on one arm while using his free hand to finger fuck Kamir until he shuddered and came, his cries muffled against Jader's shoulder.

Kamir was still trembling when he reached out to wrap a hand around Jader's cock. Jader groaned and fell on his back, wrapping his hand around Kamir's and stroking with him. He whined when Kamir let go, but before he could protest, Kamir sat up and turned to sit next to him, knocked Jader's hand out of the way, and went to work with both of his own.

As much as Jader would have liked to make it last, there was no chance of that being possible now that he finally was back where he wanted to be,

when he was surrounded by the smell of sex, his hand still wet and messy from fucking Kamir, that beautiful face watching him so openly and intently. He reached up and dragged Kamir down into a kiss, completely uncaring of awkward angles, and came apart with one last hard stroke.

Kamir pulled back after a moment, looking flushed and thoroughly pleased. "Is that a suitable welcome home, Commander?"

Jader settled him on the bed and kissed him. "A pleasant bonus, to be sure, but the only welcome I needed was seeing you."

"You can stop laying on the flattery."

"Only the truth."

Kamir made a dismissive noise, but did not protest further, simply smiled and settled more comfortably in bed.

Jader rolled out of bed to fetch a cloth to clean them both up. When that was done, he tossed the rag in the hamper and crawled back into bed, snuggling up close to Kamir, who'd already fallen back asleep.

Holding him gently, Jader settled in and closed his eyes, but the stinging in his eyes was not so easily banished, nor was the rawness in his throat.

Eventually, though, Kamir's even breathing, the steady rise and fall of his chest, and the simple warmth of his presence, enabled Jader to relax enough to sleep, still clinging tightly to the heart who'd called him home.

FIN

COMING 2018 – *THE MERCENARIES OF THE STOLEN MOON*

For twenty years Myra has served the High King, so familiar, respected, and envied the rest of the palace calls him the High Secretary. For twenty years he has kept his secrets buried, and after so long he dares to believe he has left his past behind. But during the Festival of Harmony, tragedy strikes, and Myra's past is dragged into the present.

Once third in command of Fathoms Deep, Charlaine is used to shadows and secrets, but even he is shocked to learn what his best friend, and the man he secretly loves, has been hiding all these years. In the wake of a terrible tragedy, he doesn't know what to do—except whatever it takes to help his friends.

Though Jac is a member of the Three-headed Dragons and primary bodyguard to the High Consort, she is used to being overlooked and underestimated. But she didn't earn her spurs by backing down, and she's not about to do so now—even if she must defy the High Throne itself to save the man she's falling in love with.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Megan is a long time resident of LGBTQ romance, and keeps herself busy reading, writing, and publishing it. She is often accused of fluff and nonsense. When she's not involved in writing, she likes to cook, harass her cats, or watch movies. She loves to hear from readers, and can be found all over the internet.

maderr.com

maderr.tumblr.com

meganaderr.blogspot.com

facebook.com/meganaprilderr

meganaderr@gmail.com

@meganaderr



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