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About the Author

<u>Coming Soon – The Final Tale of the High Court</u>

# The Mercenaries of the Stolen Moon

#### TALES OF THE HIGH COURT 4

### MEGAN DERR

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. Then 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.

The Mercenaries of the Stolen Moon

Tales of the High Court #4

By Megan Derr

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To the immigrants, who should be made welcome in whatever place they seek to call home

Special thanks, and all my love, to A.M. Valenza, who has edited these past two books in ways no one else could, and made them better than they ever would have been otherwise.

# CHAPTER ONE

Twenty years ago, Myra killed a man. It was, on the surface, a simple if brutal action, but it resulted in several things: saved the life of the High King, ended Myra's time in the imperial army, and set him on the path to becoming Imperial Head Secretary. It was not a life he'd ever imagined for himself, but it was a life he loved.

He'd hoped to never kill another person after that day, but if Sarrica forced him to change the day's schedule one. More. Time. Myra would face execution for murder of the High King without a second of regret. There was work to be done, and Sarrica's inability to stick to a schedule was ruining any chance of getting it done.

Of course, such a long, prominent presence had earned Myra a reputation. Most of the palace—residents, staff, and military—called him High Secretary behind his back, and not in a respectful tone. Myra didn't give a damn. He'd fought hard for his life, and if that was the worst he had to endure because of it, he was grateful.

"It must be bad if you're showing your irritation."

Myra looked up from the headache that was the master schedule, flicking back the braid that had snaked over his shoulder. Piru, his best and favorite undersecretary, smiled, yellow-brown eyes bright with mirth. Without Piru and Corrint, the clerk in charge of the antechamber, to help run the imperial office, Myra would have lost his mind a long time ago. "I will be glad to fall into bed tonight, that's for certain."

Piru snickered. "Even the Pantheon would be exhausted doing just half your job. And it's only going to get worse in two days, not including today."

"Don't remind me," Myra muttered as he looked back down at the chart that laid out where and when Sarrica and Allen were each day. He had the charts filled as far out as a year, with copious notes in an accompanying notebook for things even further out that would be added later on, and spent hours each day adjusting them and filling out new ones. Maintaining the schedule was nearly a full-time job on its own, and he was also in charge of all the paperwork that went through the imperial office: sorting, delegating,

hunting down Sarrica to make him sign it and about a hundred other things. He had ten undersecretaries, eight clerks in the antechamber, plus a fleet of messengers, and still the place was always three steps away from collapsing into chaos.

Mostly because Sarrica forced him to change the schedule practically every hour.

He bit back a groan of frustration as he looked over the schedule for *anything* that would let him untangle this latest snarl. The last thing he needed was some stiff, pompous delegate from Treya Mencee getting offended at a breach of protocol—never mind all the protocol they'd broken a few years ago when Lord Lesto had been kidnapped. Kin del Kar...well, if Treyans were pompous and expected everyone to follow protocol to the very letter, and Harkens were nosy and flummoxed by people who didn't want to know everything about everyone, Kinnish were apathetic and overly casual. This left all three parties constantly frustrated with one another.

Myra sighed as he finally saw a way to adjust the schedule to both appease Treya Mencee and finally squeeze in the meeting with Kin del Kar—and in time for both Allen and Sarrica to attend dinner like they wanted, so Allen could spend more time with his eldest brother, Crown Prince Larren of Gaulden. Unfortunately, that meant Myra would have to give Allen the new Kin del Kar contracts after dinner, which meant he needed to find time to do them, since they were too high a security to be given to an undersecretary. Myra had intended to start them tomorrow, once the festival schedule was off his hands, but that was clearly no longer an option.

Of course, all of this would be a good deal less stressful if he'd been able to hand over the final schedule last week as he was supposed to, instead of *three days* before the festival began.

These latest changes also meant no lunch break, and probably dinner at his desk or after he was finished with the contracts.

If someone else wanted to be Head Secretary, right then would have been the perfect time to persuade Myra to retire.

He swiftly wrote out the revised schedules on slips of paper, sealed them and sent them off with clerks to be delivered to Allen and Sarrica. That done, he returned to the task he'd been trying to accomplish all day so he could finally be done and move on to the Kin del Kar contracts. The Kinnish might be relaxed in manner, but that didn't mean they slouched on business matters. If the contracts weren't perfect, they'd complain.

But before the contracts, his primary task was the final schedule for the Festival of Harmony—the hundredth celebration no less, which was even more fun than the Harmony usually was, which was no fun at all when it came to the organizing. Thankfully, once this schedule was finalized, it was highly unlikely to change again, given the festival was only days away. Large portions of it relied heavily on the High King and Consort being where and when the schedule said they would be.

The whole affair gave Fathoms Deep hives trying to oversee the security, but that wasn't Myra's problem. His problem was merging where Sarrica and Allen had to be, together and separately, with what each of them disliked and favored, and coordinating all of that with the various guests and such they should or wanted to spend time with.

The High King and Consort were expected to attend all the major performances together—dancers, singers, mock battles, and more. Then they split up to attend smaller events. Sarrica generally attended various arms competitions, while Allen spent most of his time judging events like food and drink contests. If it involved children, Sarrica was adamant about attending, and Allen always paid favor to the many businesses and entertainers invited to participate.

Reading over the list of events one last time, Myra started marking out the non-negotiable ones. Most of them fell to Allen, but that pleased both Sarrica and Allen—and everyone else. That was the easy part. Next was all the optional stuff, which had to be balanced with the wants of various nobles and foreign dignitaries. At least Allen had given him detailed notes.

Even better, both Sarrica and Allen were out of the way for a couple of hours. All Myra's undersecretaries had been drowned in work so they'd stay out of his way as well. Myra had a three-hour span to get the festival schedule done—which meant he really had approximately twenty minutes, because that was the record on successfully stolen free time.

He was just starting to pencil in the optional events when a warm, familiar, always-welcome laugh broke his concentration and made his heart lurch.

Myra looked up and smiled at his best friend: handsome, quiet, and deceptively mild-mannered Charlaine Astor. Only months ago Charlaine had still been wearing the teal of Fathoms Deep, Sarrica's personal guard headed by Lord Lesto, which he'd been a part of for as long as Myra had known him—which was mere days after he'd saved Sarrica's life.

Now, however, Charlaine wore the blue and gray tunic of Shattered Wind, having transferred in order to resume his duties as Lord Kamir's bodyguard, since Shattered Wind had become the unofficial personal guard of High Commander Jader.

Charlaine was tall, broad but not enormous, with light brown skin and black hair that was beginning to grow out for the first time in at least ten years. Myra was glad. He'd always hated that Charlaine kept it shaved close, even if that made the most sense for a soldier. The left side of his face had a nasty scar cutting down the length of it, and that eye had been left a filmy white by the same poisoned blade. "Merry morning, Lieutenant."

"You're looking remarkably stressed for so early in the day."

Myra gave a brittle laugh. "You're the second person to say so—must be bad. The Festival of Harmony is in three days. Don't I always look this way by this point? Nevermind the Crown Prince of Gaulden is in residence, and he's only the top of a very long list of important guests." He smiled. "What brings you here, when normally you know to avoid me this close to the festival? Without Lord Kamir, even."

Charlaine smiled faintly as he always did when Kamir was mentioned. Charlaine did not make friends lightly or give loyalty easily, but once he did, very little could break those bonds.

Myra and Charlaine had met not long after Myra had become part of Sarrica's secretarial pool. Charlaine had been a trusted runner for classified information between Sarrica and Fathoms Deep, and Myra had somehow become the secretary he worked with most—and then exclusively, as Sarrica trusted Myra more and more and Charlaine climbed his way steadily from runner to the shadowy third in command of Fathoms Deep.

All these years later, Myra still didn't feel he deserved a friend like Charlaine—but he would treasure their friendship until the day he died. "Kamir won't be leaving their suite anytime soon, not with the baby so

recently born. The Commander told me to take a few well-earned days off and not to return to duty until after the festival."

"You? Days off? Plural? In a row?"

Charlaine made a face. "Yes, it's strange, but I am trying. Not that you have much room to talk."

"Maybe not, though Piru is practically ready to run the office himself, so I may get more days off in the future. All that's left for him to learn, really, is to boss Sarrica around."

"Oh, is that all?"

Myra snickered. "So you still have not told me why you are here, though I'm not complaining. I always enjoy visits from people who aren't going to give me more work to do."

"In an effort to do less work and more fun, I came to see if there was any chance you'd be available for dinner tonight, since we haven't done that in months."

"That sounds wonderful, but I doubt it will be possible," Myra replied with a sigh. "Unless the whole rest of my day goes according to plan and there are no further imperial interruptions."

Charlaine laughed loudly enough to startle a couple of nearby secretaries. "Well, I'll figure something out. I hope you'll at least keep me company for a day or two of the festival."

"I'll be free for the whole three days, barring disaster," Myra replied. He laughed at Charlaine's expression. "I know, we both have the same days off. The gods are being kind or mischievous. I've had to work during the festival for the past five years. I told His Majesty I wanted off this year or else." That drew another laugh, and Myra smiled. "Now take your pretty face somewhere else, Charlaine, so I can get back to work and maybe actually have time for dinner."

Charlaine swept him a courtly bow, to the snickers of various undersecretaries, and left with a parting wink.

Myra returned reluctantly to his work, pushing aside wistful thoughts of Charlaine, dinner, wine and nowhere either of them had to be. Thankfully, he was only interrupted by his undersecretaries occasionally to ask a question or clarify an assignment. By the time they all began to take their

lunch breaks, and the office quieted down for a short time, Myra had the final festival schedule drafted and ready for final approval.

He put it aside, glanced at the little clock on his desk that had been a birthday present to himself five years ago, and rang for one of the clerks in the antechamber to have tea brought.

The tea arrived just moments before Sarrica blazed into the room, a brilliant sun that could burn and blind, but most often warmed and brightened. "Myra, cancel my meeting with Treya Mencee. I am going—"

"To attend that meeting," came Allen's cool, faintly amused voice as he stepped more sedately into the office. If Sarrica was searing sunlight, Allen was cool shade: relieving, refreshing, but only fools thought being in the shade meant they were safe from the heat.

Right behind Allen came Jac, his bodyguard, as fierce and pretty as ever.

Myra's heart gave another unwelcome lurch.

He'd always paid attention to the various persons who wandered in and out of the imperial offices—especially anyone who looked out of place or could be a serious threat, like the endless parade of soldiers. Jac had stood out because the first time he'd ever seen her, she'd been beaten nearly to death, held up by two soldiers, and had used the last of her strength to relay information about the Three-headed Dragons and a traitor in the palace before passing out.

Sarrica had departed with Fathoms Deep shortly thereafter to rescue Allen, and Myra had taken it upon himself to check on Jac from time to time—discreetly of course. He hadn't wanted to trouble her, and she'd had friends aplenty coming and going once she was fit enough for them. When he was content she was, or at least would be, well, he'd faded off.

He hadn't expected her to reappear as Allen's personal bodyguard, given she was part of the Dragons rather than Fathoms Deep, and young for an imperial bodyguard. At that point, he'd paid close attention out of habit, the way he did anyone new to the imperial offices. It had taken less than a minute to establish she belonged entirely to Allen and could not be bought or blackmailed. Normally, that was where Myra's interest in the matter would have ended. He was a secretary, nothing more. But Jac...

She'd seemed adrift one day, after Sarrica and Allen had vanished into the private office to finish an argument. Myra had been sick of work and happy for a distraction and struck up a conversation. He hadn't expected anything to come of it save that he'd become more familiar with someone who'd be a permanent fixture in the office for the foreseeable future.

But one conversation had turned into several, whenever there was a lull that allowed it. On the surface, Jac was quiet, innocuous, easily overlooked by most—a perfect bodyguard, despite the occasional unkind comments Myra heard about her age and background.

Her carefully crafted innocuousness was only that, however—crafted. Looking past it revealed a captivating woman who was far too easy to look at, admire, and want.

The few idle moments of conversation he'd anticipated had instead wound up being the start of a friendly acquaintance and a hopeless desire for much, much more. Hopeless because Jac was at least a decade younger than him, and that aside, who wanted to get into a relationship with a man who could barely find time to have dinner, let alone spend significant time with another person?

All his friendships were wrapped up in work, and he rarely saw any of those persons outside of work. Charlaine was the only exception, the sole friend who understood and was willing to make the best out of whatever time they could manage.

For better or worse, Myra and Charlaine had chosen to focus on their careers. Myra didn't regret that choice, and to his knowledge, neither did Charlaine, but he was looking forward to Piru being fully trained so he could take more time off. If Sarrica could split his workload with someone and manage to have a touch more free time, why couldn't his primary secretary?

At least Myra was long-used to admiring from afar. Stifling another sigh, he dragged his eyes back to his paperwork, listening with half an ear to the bickering between king and consort.

"I am doing no such thing," Sarrica said. "I am long past tired of enduring those Pantheon-damned bastards and their attitude problems. When they show you proper deference, I'll meet with them. It would behoove them to remember they are the reason for the lost accord between us, and it does not help their cause that they constantly demand I essentially forget how they murdered the crew and passengers of an entire ship,

kidnapped Lesto and almost murdered Shemal—amongst other crimes. Nevermind this most recent debacle with Kin del Kar and trying to regain the sugar contracts they lost *and* the ongoing matter of slavery they keep expecting everyone to overlook. Until they cease to act like cretins, Myra, I want all meetings and meals currently scheduled to be canceled, and nothing else is to be scheduled until I say otherwise."

"Yes, Majesty." Myra jotted himself a note, then stood and gathered the papers at the top right corner of his desk. "These need to be reviewed and signed right now, and if they aren't, I'll add private dinners with Treya Mencee to your evening schedules for the foreseeable future. When you're done with those, the festival schedule needs to be reviewed and signed off on."

"As you command," Sarrica said with a sigh, taking the papers like he was being handed a severed head. "Call for—oh, you already did. Thank you, Myra." He strode off to the sitting area and started helping himself to tea and food, dumping the papers on a side table to be ignored for a few more minutes.

Allen glanced at Myra and shared a brief look of fond amusement before crossing the room to join Sarrica, pouring a cup of tea then deftly taking the papers in hand and setting himself and Sarrica to work.

Smiling, Myra returned to his desk. Of all the things he'd expected to come of Sarrica's second marriage, it was not to form an easy, quiet friendship with the High Consort. Myra had always savored the quiet couple of hours he had to himself in the office before the day officially began. When Allen had first started arriving to get work done in the peace and quiet as well, Myra had been leery and resentful, even if he'd generally liked Allen. But Allen's presence had only added perks and treasured conversation about books, poetry, and other interests Myra rarely got to discuss with anyone else.

The pitfall of being Head Secretary was that he was exposed to things that would normally be well beyond his sight or means, and it left him with few friends who shared those interests—and a great many people who took him for a posturing snob.

But for all he felt estranged from most of the rest of the staff, and even fellow secretaries in the other offices, Myra had Sarrica and Charlaine, and now Jac and Allen as well. Sarrica alone made the price he'd paid to become a Harken citizen worth it, but it was nice to have a small group of real friends—family, even, though that word had always carried a negative connotation for him. One of the things he loved best about Harken was that they were not rigid in their definitions of words like *family*. Look at the imperial family: Sarrica, who had considered Lesto and Rene brothers long before they legally became his in-laws. Allen, who'd come all the way from the southern end of the continent. Sarrica's children with Nyle, Lady Genna and the children she would bear...

When it wasn't infuriating, it was hilarious how much court life actually resembled the Islanders they sneered at—though the sneering was steadily lessening as closed minds aged and open minds grew, and the presence of Shemal and Jader drew more and more Islanders to Harkenesten.

Harken could sometimes be slow to change, but they were always *willing* to change, in the end.

Myra glanced over at the group and smiled again. The office was lively and almost frantic in its energy with the arrival of the imperial monarchs, everyone bustling to carry out requests and errands, friends and appointments trickling in and out. Myra had to change the master schedule four more times and make changes to several others, but between doing that he managed to get through one of the Kin del Kar contracts, leaving just two more to have ready for Allen that evening.

Jac wandered over as Allen and Sarrica vanished into the private office to continue a disagreement rapidly turning into an argument. "You look tired."

"I must look like I'm at Death's Gate. You're the third person to mention it to me," Myra replied, but smiled as he lifted his eyes to meet Jac's. The same mean gossips who snidely called Myra 'High Secretary' loved also to chatter at length about the 'silly little girl' who had been named Allen's bodyguard.

But fool them if they thought Jac was incapable because she was small and pretty. People should better remember that Lesto was on the lithe side, and Jader was made entirely of sticks.

Jac might be small, but she'd survived more than one grievous ordeal—including the one that had forged the bond between her and Allen. There was also the fact she was one of the best marksmen in the palace, but

gossips didn't bother with details like that. More fun to mock her appearance and slight stature than acknowledge that nobody simply joined the Three-headed Dragons. They weren't what was called an entry-level mercenary group. Those who applied to join had to undertake a rigorous, even brutal, skills test and go through interviews with the captain and first and second lieutenants. The Dragons didn't have the most difficult entry requirements—that dubious honor was shared by Jagged Edge and Penance Gate—but they were close.

Myra wouldn't normally know so much about the various and sundry mercenary groups of Harken, but it was hard to work for Sarrica and not know them, simply because he was more involved in the military than the high monarchs typically were. Sarrica's father certainly hadn't cared about anything but reports of victory.

Jac was also beautiful, sweet, and charming. He liked best she was almost always smiling and rarely let anything bother her. Loved the raunchy sense of humor she occasionally let show. That she'd clearly had a hard life but hadn't let it consume her or turn her hard and bitter.

But there was a decade between them, so he preferred not to think about Jac and her smiles too much. It was for the best Myra never had enough free time to his days to ask her to tea because he shouldn't, but he just might anyway. He certainly didn't mind when she took a few minutes here and there to chat with him. So few did. Secretaries were for giving work to and screaming at when he refused to let people near Sarrica like they wanted.

Jac flushed. "Sorry. You're like Allen in appearing unflappable. It's rare to see either of you show anything by accident."

Myra tried not to be pleased at being compared to Allen and failed miserably. "Nothing sleep won't fix. The days leading up to the Festival of Harmony always make life especially difficult around here." He smiled, and Jac returned it. "Will you be enjoying the festival, Sergeant? Or working?"

"Working, but I've lived here for years. After a while, they stop being exciting." She shrugged. "It's more interesting working it, at least so far. That might change in another year or so." Her eyes glittered with mischief. "I may take off next year, when the new member of the imperial family must be shown off."

Myra chuckled. "How is Lady Genna?" A couple of months after Allen and Jader had returned from Benta, Sarrica and Allen had contracted Lady Genna to serve as a dame for Allen's children. Though it hadn't yet been made public knowledge, she was a few weeks pregnant—with what would hopefully be the first of two children.

"Doing well, according to the healers. She's enjoying how surprised and offended the court was that she was chosen as imperial dame over so many other possibilities. Not that I blame her. In her shoes I'd be doing everything in my power to remind them every minute that I'd been chosen, invited to a place they would never be." She grinned and winked, making Myra laugh. "The High Court is *frothing*, especially after the drama with Lord Kamir and the High Commander. Though when it comes to ridiculous, I'm not sure which of Their Majesties is worse about—"

Jac stopped as the door to the private office swung open and stepped back slightly from the desk. She smiled at Allen, who looked pleased and faintly mussed. Sarrica looked pleased and more noticeably mussed. Neither spoke as they returned to their tea and paperwork.

Myra rolled his eyes at Jac before she slipped away to resume her post and he went back to work.

Sarrica and Allen departed again shortly thereafter, and Myra availed himself of some of the remaining repast on the table before he settled in to start work on the remaining contracts. Between the various secretaries, all languages were covered. Some languages were harder than others, the countries so closed off and strict regarding foreigners that silver tongues rarely bothered to learn them.

Kin del Kar was one of those countries. Soltorin, Jithinir and Odon, known collectively as the Triumvirate in Harken, were three more. That Myra spoke all four of those was not common knowledge. He would prefer to be fluent in Harken languages like Allen, but the languages he did know had their uses.

He'd just started work on the second Kin del Kar contract, regarding a trade deal for their famous rums that would be the first time they'd traded such to Harken, when shouting came from the antechamber. The secretaries looked up from their desks nervously but didn't move. Myra set his pencil down, rose, and crossed the office to the door. He pulled it open just in time

to see a man in ornate Treya Mencee dress punch Corrint, who went tumbling back behind the desk with a pained cry.

Fathoms Deep guards surged forward from their stations along the wall and made swift work of the man—only to be pounced from behind by more Treyans.

Myra bolted across the room and grabbed one of the Treya Mencee assailants by the arm, jerking him around and slamming a fist into his nose. As the man dropped, blood spilling everywhere, Myra turned to the rest of the disaster, but by that point Fathoms Deep finally had everything under control.

"Sorry, Myra," one of them said. "Wasn't expecting such a ruckus from this lot."

"I would save your apologies for His Grace when he finds out." Lesto might have retired from his position as High Commander, but he was still the sponsor and lord commander of Fathoms Deep.

The guards heaved a collected sigh as they finished tying up the prisoners.

Myra gestured to a clerk who looked like she had her wits about her. "Summon the High King." He motioned to another one. "Fetch a healer." He went around the desk to help poor Corrint, who was huddled on the floor trying to stop his bleeding nose with an already soaked handkerchief. Myra pulled out one of his own and showed Corrint how to hold his head to help staunch the bleeding. Gently helping him around the desk, he settled Corrint on a sofa before turning to the guards again. "What in the world was this about?"

One of the remaining clerks stepped forward. "They were angry about a meeting being cancelled and His Majesty snubbing them. Never said exactly who they were, but they're right mad. We didn't think they were this upset, though. Corrint was trying to placate them, but..." She shrugged and spread her hands.

"I see." Myra sighed. "I never thought I'd miss the delegates responsible for the hostile relations with Treya Mencee." After the whole fiasco with Lord Lesto being kidnapped and the additional kidnapping of Lord Shemal, not to mention a long list of murders and other assorted crimes, the delegates had been packed off home.

Their replacements had not been an improvement.

"What in the Pantheon's is going on here?" Sarrica roared, and everyone in the room flinched to see Lord Lesto at his side.

Stepping forward, Myra explained all that had transpired, and went gladly when Sarrica dismissed him shortly thereafter before departing to deal with Treya Mencee himself after the guards had hauled them down to the cells. Myra sent a secretary for tea and began revising the master schedule yet again.

One of the things that shocked new secretaries and clerks most was learning just how tightly controlled life was for the High King and Consort. Though in theory Sarrica and Allen could do as they pleased, when they pleased, the reality was that they had a thousand responsibilities and obligations and nowhere near enough time to see to them all. On any given day, there was some combination of meetings with foreign delegates, meetings with the council, balls and other affairs to attend, general court, executioner's court, public meals that must be attended, private meals, holidays, religious ceremonies, imperial ceremonies and more. On top of all that, there was also the never-ending paperwork: contracts, correspondence, trade agreements, military reports, private reports. Amidst all that, they had to find time for their personal lives. Pantheon forbid emergencies cropped up. Throw in a war and everything got twenty times harder.

Some days, Myra couldn't remember how any of them had managed before Allen arrived.

He wasn't even half done with his latest revisions when he received further notes from Sarrica and Allen that necessitated starting all over again, and by the time that was finally accomplished, it was time for dinner and he still had piles of work yet to conquer.

So much for enjoying a meal with Charlaine.

Myra dismissed his staff for the night and locked both doors before settling once more behind his desk to work on the Kin del Kar contracts.

By the time he was finished, it was just in time to deliver them to the imperial wing himself, where a guard took them to give to Allen. That accomplished, Myra walked the short distance to the private hall where he and several other high-ranking staff lived, their roles too vital for them to live in the wings of the castle allotted for staff since they needed to be close

to hand for emergencies—and because there was every chance they could be kidnapped or otherwise harmed for information.

It hadn't happened often in twenty years, but even once was too much.

One of the few perks of being Head Secretary was his room—a full four-room suite, more than was generally allotted unmarried, childless staff. There was a sitting room, bedroom, office, and a spare room he'd long ago converted to a private library. His books were a mix of texts he'd needed for work at one time or another, and stories he simply enjoyed reading. They were a mix of half a dozen languages: Harken, Soltorish, Jithinirth, Odon, Kinnish and Bentan.

But as Myra stepped into his suite, all thoughts of choosing a book and relaxing in bed for an hour or so fled, his attention solely for the dinner laid out on his table and the man quietly reading a book in the sitting area.

Charlaine closed the book and set it aside before standing. "There you are."

"What's all this?" Myra asked, unbuttoning his long, stiff jacket and laying it aside before loosening the top buttons of his high-necked shirt.

"You must be even more overworked than I thought if you no longer recognize dinner."

Myra laughed as he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. He smiled warmly as Charlaine crossed the room to join him. Despite himself, he admired just how lovely Charlaine looked casually dressed and bathed in firelight. They'd always been friends, but sometimes Myra wished they could have also been lovers. Given their respective occupations, however, there'd been times when he hadn't seen Charlaine for months, and when Charlaine had finally appeared, Myra was either off somewhere with Sarrica or simply too busy to do more than have a quick coffee. So it was probably for the best they'd never tried lovers—even pretending Charlaine would have shared his interest.

Myra was happy enough with their relationship as it was, whatever his occasional fanciful thoughts.

Charlaine rested a hand gently against his cheek, so close Myra could smell his cinnamon and clove cologne. Since when did Charlaine wear cologne? "You look tired, and I've seen you look unruffled after getting punched by bratty nobbles after going twenty-three hours without sleep."

"I was a good deal younger when that happened," Myra said with a laugh. "Mersen Field, that feels like a lifetime ago now. We'd been planning to celebrate surviving that wretched battle." It had been only six months after he'd saved Sarrica's life and first met Charlaine. Myra had technically been a civilian by that point, one of the three secretaries in Sarrica's pool that was assigned to manage communications between Sarrica and the mercenaries, primarily Fathoms Deep.

The nobles in question hadn't been pleased that 'some upstart' was preventing them from seeing the then-crown prince. They'd insisted it wasn't Myra's place, though as the secretary on duty it very much was. They hadn't cared a whit that they were visiting only moments after a battle had concluded, that everyone around them was battered, bruised, and bloody. That people were still finding and counting the dead. Grieving. That Sarrica couldn't see them because the aftermath of battles was nearly as brutal as the battles themselves. No, they'd just wanted the imperial crown prince to say yes where the High King had said no.

Worse, they'd shown up inebriated, as though on their way to crash a picnic instead of a brutal campaign against Benta that had just cost at least five hundred Harken citizens their lives.

Myra had not been polite in refusing them an audience. They'd been even less polite in their reaction.

It was Charlaine and Sarrica's guards who'd finally stopped them, and an enraged Lesto who'd had them hauled back to the palace in chains. Sarrica had not learned of the matter until hours later, but he'd reacted by fining all of them—one of the earliest instances of what would become his preferred and most dreaded form of punishing the nobles of the high court.

Six months later, the rest of the secretarial pool had been dismissed, imprisoned, or killed, and Sarrica trusted no one but Myra until they returned to Harkenesten a few years later as Sarrica's father worsened. Sarrica had insisted that Myra choose all the new undersecretaries, which was a typical Sarrica way of telling him he'd been promoted to head secretary—the most powerful secretary in the empire. Most nobles, and even the working-class citizens, were not much impressed by secretaries. They flitted about offices shuffling papers, pouring coffee, and making appointments.

After Sarrica and Allen, Myra probably knew more about Harken, and to some extent the rest of the world, than anyone else in the palace. He was often aware of problems weeks, even months, before they became public knowledge. He knew things people would quite literally kill to learn. He was one of only five people with a key to the imperial offices. Even Corrint didn't have a key; Myra was the only staff member who possessed one. The others belonged to Sarrica, Allen and Jader.

"There are days I wish we were young again," Charlaine said. "But mostly I'm glad to have left that nonsense behind." He slowly withdrew his hand, but his good eye remained fixed on Myra like he was incapable of looking away.

Myra swallowed. "You seem remarkably intense for something as simple as dinner. Is something wrong?"

"No, but something has been weighing on my mind," Charlaine said. "Come on, I don't want dinner to get cold."

Myra followed him to the table, heart beating rapidly in his chest, and took his usual seat. Wine had already been poured, a dry gold they both favored. The spicy scent of curry filled his nostrils, making Myra groan as his hunger finally made itself known. "You're my favorite, Charlaine."

Chuckling, Charlaine sipped his wine and ate more slowly, seemingly content to watch Myra enjoy the meal.

Though Myra had hoped the food would revive him, with every bite his eyes grew heavier, until he was doing more yawning than eating all through the dessert course.

"I think it's time you went to bed," Charlaine said, finishing his wine and setting the cup aside. Pushing away from the table, he pulled Myra to his feet and nudged him toward the bedroom.

Myra yawned again. "But you wanted to tell me something, and—"

"And it can wait until tomorrow. Go to bed."

Myra started to protest again, but at a last admonishing look surrendered. "As you wish, then. But you will tell me?"

"I will."

"You'd better." Myra stepped in close to hug Charlaine tightly, enjoying as always how big and warm and strong he was. Like as long as he was

close, the rest of the world would never be able to interfere. Myra hadn't recognized the feeling the first time it had swept over him. Hugging was one of the Harken customs he'd found most disconcerting when he'd first arrived. Most Harkens, especially those in Harken Kingdom itself, were extremely tactile, and the Triumvirate very much was not. He'd nearly stabbed people the first few times it had happened. "Sleep well, my friend."

"And you." Charlaine smiled and stepped away, nudged him toward his room once more, and only after Myra closed the door did he hear Charlaine leave.

What had all that been about? Was he completely addled by exhaustion or had Charlaine been different tonight? Well, there was nothing he could do about it now, short of chasing Charlaine down and demanding answers. Myra did not have the energy for that. He would simply make certain Charlaine talked to him tomorrow.

Removing his jewelry and clothes, Myra snuffed the lamp a servant had left lit for him, climbed into bed, and fell immediately to sleep.

# CHAPTER TWO

Charlaine beat his head against the wall for the five thousandth time. Try as he might to distract himself and think of other things, all he'd been able to focus on all day was how completely and utterly he'd turned coward and fled the night before. Instead of behaving like an adult and telling Myra he would like to try being lovers in addition to friends.

"Stupid, stupid," he muttered.

"Who are you calling stupid this early in the day?" asked a cheerful voice.

Charlaine looked up and smiled as he saw Terrag, Captain of Fathoms Deep. "Myself. What are you doing all the way over here, Ter?"

"Hiding from His Grace, who is still on the warpath after yesterday's debacle. No longer being High Commander gives him time aplenty to put all his energy and exacting nature into Fathoms Deep, and after yesterday... let's just say I hope he doesn't find me." Terrag dropped down onto a nearby bench and motioned for Charlaine to join him. When he had, Terrag knocked shoulders congenially. Unlike most soldiers, who kept their hair cut short, Terrag's hair fell to just past his shoulders and was heavily threaded with wooden and stone beads carved with various animals and flowers, an affectation from the mountains of Gearth where he'd been born. "He'll find me soon enough, but I'll take however many minutes of peace I can manage."

Charlaine chuckled. "Fathoms Deep has had better days."

"We've had worse too," Terrag replied, stroking his long beard, which was nearly as decorated as his hair. "So why are you calling yourself stupid?"

Shrugging, Charlaine said, "Merely frustrated with my own inability to act."

"You? Usually my problems with you involved making you *not* take action."

"War is a far simpler matter than this mess I've gotten myself into," Charlaine said. "I think all this newfound free time is bad for me."

Terrag snorted. "No, it's good for you. The sensation is just so unfamiliar that you're panicking, rather like you did the first time we—"

"Don't say it."

"Threw you off a cliff."

Charlaine sighed and gave him a look. "I was fourteen." He'd been a fresh-faced cadet, only days finished with the juvenile training he'd been going through since he'd been fostered to the imperial army at ten. Terrag was a sergeant then, not yet part of Fathoms Deep. Whatever family he'd lost or been denied because of his birth, Charlaine had found in the military. He and Terrag had worked together, in one capacity or another, for a long time. When Terrag had joined Fathoms Deep, he'd asked Charlaine to come with him, and Charlaine had agreed immediately. "Am I ever going to stop being teased for that?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. You hit the water with a splat that echoed all the way to the Penance Gate. At least you got it right on the second try. Most have to take that test at least four times. Now enough avoiding the matter at hand. What is this about you hesitating to act?"

"It's a bit more intimidating than a long drop," Charlaine replied. "I'll muster up eventually."

Terrag stared at him, gaze pensive and too-knowing, mouth quirked faintly. "Uh-huh. Who has my stoic former lieutenant smitten?"

"None of your Pantheon-damned business," Charlaine said.

"You may as well tell me. I'll have it from palace gossip before the week is out."

Charlaine scoffed.

"You're Lord Kamir's bodyguard, and he is the second most talked about subject in the palace. Do you really think you're still immune to gossip? You're not my shadowy third in command anymore." He punched Charlaine's thigh lightly. "No matter how much you wish you were still invisible, you're not. So let's have it."

Heaving a sigh, Charlaine said, "Myra."

"Oh, really?" Terrag's brows shot up. "All this time or is this a recent development?"

Charlaine shrugged and looked at his hands. "I have the time to act on it now. Just not the courage, apparently."

Terrag laughed and nudged his shoulder. "Have a stiff drink first."

"The wine didn't help last night," Charlaine muttered.

"Wine. Please. I said a stiff drink, boy. Or you could stop sulking and overthinking and just go speak with him now. I think Their Majesties are occupied, and Lesto is busy looking for my head, so take the opportunity while you can." When Charlaine didn't stand, Terrag slapped his thigh sharply. "Move it, soldier."

"I'm not one of yours anymore. Also, ow." Charlaine heaved to his feet though and clapped Terrag on the shoulder in gratitude. "Good luck with Lord Lesto. If you die this day, we'll see you're given a magnificent pyre."

"Don't let my wife and sire throw His Grace on it."

Charlaine laughed and clapped him on the shoulder again before departing.

He was nearly to the imperial offices when the hurricane himself came storming down the hallway, no less intimidating for being in ornate court clothes rather than his armor and uniform. "Lieutenant. Have you seen Captain Terrag?"

"No, Your Grace, I've been in the art gallery most of the morning."

Lesto huffed. "Thank you, anyway." He strode off, and Charlaine slumped in relief. Terrag owed him.

Presuming Lesto had believed him, anyway, and it was always a gamble. Usually a gamble everyone lost, but occasionally luck favored them.

He resumed walking but was almost immediately waylaid again as someone crashed into him. "Oof. Oh. Merry morning, Jac."

Jac's brown skin flushed rose as she stared up at him. "My apologies."

"No worries. You didn't knock me to the ground like the last halfwit." Or 'accidentally' slam into him in a crowded hallway, like Kamir's mother had. She'd managed to leave a bruise, but she'd also been convinced not to try anything like that again. One would think after their first confrontation that she'd have already known better, but the woman was as stupid as she was mean. "What has you running about so? You're usually more observant."

She was, in fact, dangerously observant. Immediately after her appointment as Allen's primary bodyguard, Lesto had assigned Charlaine to observe her and determine whether or not she was in fact suited to the duty. But watching her unobserved had proven to be more difficult than he'd anticipated; she'd spotted him on no less than three occasions, though he'd been able to contrive reasons he was around that allayed suspicion. His final report to Lesto had received a grunt, which was high praise indeed.

That should have been the end of the matter, but Charlaine had, for whatever reason, always continued to notice Jac on the odd occasion their paths crossed.

His words just brightened the flush, which was cuter than it should be—and definitely not something Charlaine should be making such note of. "It's stupid. There's someone I want to ask to tea, but I'm fairly certain they'll laugh in my face or pat me on the head or something." She huffed. "No one really takes me seriously outside of the Dragons and High Consort Allen. I think even His Majesty and Lord Lesto are ever watching for an excuse to replace me with a proper bodyguard." She shook her head, making a face. "Sorry, none of that is your problem. Don't tell Lord Lesto."

Charlaine laughed and gripped her shoulders. "We're coworkers, aren't we? After a fashion, anyway. You can always vent to me. As to your current worry, it seems to be a morning for such matters. I do not think anyone would laugh in your face at a request to go for tea. But if that is what you expect, then you're already braced for the worst, so what is there to fear? Better to ask and be turned down than to never ask."

Jac smiled. "That is very true. Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll stop taking up your time now."

"Take it, by all means," Charlaine said. "I hardly know what to do with it. The last time I had leave, it was one day, and I spent it doing personal errands. What do people do when they have several days of nothing?"

"Some sleep through it all." Jac laughed. "I certainly did, back when I was in training, and then later when I applied to the Dragons. I think half the mercs I know take whatever money they've saved up and go spend every last pin of it on booze and whores." She grinned and winked. "I've heard that can be fun."

Charlaine lifted his eyes to the ceiling. "I am well past my 'booze and whores' days."

Her grin turned teasing. "Why Second Lieutenant, I'm shocked you had booze and whore days."

Giving her a playful shove, Charlaine said, "I'm not *that* married to my job." At the look she gave him, he grumbled, "I wasn't. Plenty of people have no interest in sex, but I'm not one of them. I'm usually only interested in people I already know well first, but I was as bad as any merc on leave in my day."

"In your day." Jac snorted and swatted him. "You sound like you're approaching eighty—you can't be more than forty, if that."

"Forty-two, no need for flattery," Charlaine drawled. "If you're looking to curry favor, good old-fashioned bribes work fine."

Jac laughed. "The Penance Realms will welcome sunlight before a Dragon needs a favor from Fathoms Deep—even one who's Shattered Wind now."

Charlaine gave her another shove, then asked, "So where are you headed?"

"To the imperial offices."

"So am I. May as well walk together. Not working today, I take it?"

Jac shook her head. "No, since I'm going to be working the whole festival, His Majesty bid me take a couple of days off beforehand. It was generous of him."

"The High Consort is exceedingly generous from what I'm seen." Charlaine snickered softly. "Except to his spouse when His Majesty has done something wrong again."

Jac muffled her giggles with one hand, but most of them spilled out into the hallway anyway. "I'm—I'm certain I don't know what you mean."

Charlaine grinned but said nothing further as they reached the hallway that led to the imperial offices. They were lined with Fathoms Deep guards who would be certain to spread tales of anything he said further regarding Their Majesties.

The office was unusually quiet when they arrived. Myra was the only secretary present, and over in the sitting area was Sarrica, Allen, Kamir, and

Jader—and their baby, not quite two months old. Charlaine smiled at Myra, who briefly returned it before bending back to his work and ventured into the circle. Kamir looked up with a warm smile, eyes rimmed with exhaustion but as bright and happy as Charlaine had ever seen them. "Merry morning. Don't tell me you've already run out of things to do?"

Jac snickered, but at his look, closed her mouth before she could voice whatever smartass retort she'd come up with.

Turning his attention back to Kamir and Jader, Charlaine replied, "Not at all. I didn't know you were here. How are father and babe?"

"Wandering around despite admonishments to stay put, from me *and* the healer," Jader said, but his grumbling was undone by the adoring look on his face as he stared at the baby in his arms.

Kamir rolled his eyes. "I'm fine. I've done this before, and I'm much better off now than I was at nineteen."

Jader shifted his gaze from babe to father then, and the look they shared made Charlaine feel like he was intruding. He shook his head and withdrew slightly, looking up in time to see Sarrica smiling fondly as he looked over the group. Allen, in the chair in front of him, was bent over some papers muttering to himself.

Charlaine opened his mouth to tease Kamir, but the word *tea* caught his ear, spoken in Jac's familiar voice. He turned, curious to see the object of her interest.

His heart dropped into his stomach as he saw her standing over Myra's desk, a flush to her cheeks and a happy smile on her face. Myra looked equally pleased and more than a little surprised.

Jac had wanted to ask Myra to tea? Charlaine didn't know whether to laugh or cry. That was what he got for being a coward.

"—Charlaine?"

Charlaine snapped back around and stared blankly at the group, who were all watching him. "What? My apologies."

"I asked if something was wrong," Kamir replied, frowning and tilting his head. "You looked upset."

"No, I'm fine. My thoughts got away from me. I should probably be going, though; there are errands I need to run before the day grows too hot."

Kamir's frown didn't vanish, but he nodded. After bowing to Sarrica and Allen, Charlaine fled the office.

He'd only just reached the hallway when Myra called his name. "Damn it."

Myra came through the door, mouth turned down. "Why did you leave so suddenly? I thought you were coming to tell me whatever it was you didn't get to tell me last night. Instead you left without saying a word."

"I—" Charlaine stopped, recalling that happy look on Myra's face that Jac had asked him to tea. How selfish and mean would it be of him to ruin that? Myra was his friend; nothing would ever change that. He would get over his disappointment. It was his fault for not asking last night when he damned well should have. "It's nothing. A moot point. You looked busy, so I thought I'd get out of the way. I wasn't trying to ignore you."

"You're lying," Myra said. "Don't make me—"

"Myra!" Corrint poked his head out of the office. "Sarrica is looking for you."

Groaning, pressing his fingers to his temples, Myra said, "I'm coming." When Corrint had vanished again, he jabbed a finger into Charlaine's chest. "We are speaking later, you and I, and I want to know what you had to tell me that you're now refusing to. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Majesty."

Myra jabbed him again, then turned sharply around and practically ran back into the office.

Charlaine fled back to his own rooms, which were all the way across the military pavilion in the officer barracks of Shattered Wind. He'd lived in the Fathoms Deep barracks for years, and still was not used to living in a different set of rooms. Nothing was the same, everything felt and smelled and looked so different that sometimes when he woke in the dead of night he was confused at first, even if on the surface one barracks looked much like another.

There was also the strange limbo that came from having been Fathoms Deep for almost all of his military career, and now he was Shattered Wind. Most considered it a step down, even if he'd taken his rank with him, and weren't certain how to treat a man who would give up the prestige of Fathoms Deep for an oddity like Shattered Wind.

Charlaine had always admired Shattered Wind, however. Not every mercenary group needed to be as flashy as Fathoms Deep or as notoriously brutal as Penance Gate. Shattered Wind had certainly never deserved all the mockery and disdain they were subjected to—or had been, until they'd returned from Benta and become Jader's informal guard, and Jader considering Captain tel Mendi a close friend.

Also, it was far less stressful answering to Captain tel Mendi and Commander Jader than it had ever been reporting to Terrag and Lesto, but he wouldn't be saying that aloud, even on pain of death.

Several fellow mercs lifted hands and called out greetings. Charlaine returned them but didn't linger to chat, his steps not slowing until he was finally alone in his room. They weren't much, just a bedroom and a front room, but it was more than most soldiers saw. If he occasionally thought about what it might be like to live in the palace proper, with an entire suite to himself or to share with a lover...

He certainly could live in the palace if he chose. All he had to do was say something to Kamir, who would ask Jader, who gave Kamir everything he wanted and then some. Why anyone thought that marriage was anything but a love match was beyond him. It only took *looking* to see that Kamir thought Jader hung the stars and that Jader thought Kamir was the moon.

But Charlaine was not going to abuse his friendship with Kamir, unexpected but deeply treasured, for something as mundane as fancy rooms. What would he do with them? He'd spent most of his life in tents, on the ground, or at inns—both good and some requiring he shave everything to get rid of the vermin. What in the world would he do with fancy palace rooms, even if he could afford them these days?

Best to stop thinking about it, since the only lover he'd had in mind was going to tea with Jac.

Charlaine couldn't even hate her or be especially bitter about the matter. Jac and Myra would get along well. It was easy to see once the idea had been put in front of him. Myra was probably hesitant about a lover so much younger than him, but he was so serious and acted older than his years all the time that a younger lover would be a good fit. Jac was always so

cheerful, but she understood the way duty often had to come first—and given how their jobs overlapped, they'd see each other often anyway.

The more he thought about it, the more depressed he became, but it wasn't like Jac and Myra being lovers would take away his friendship with Myra. Charlaine would get over his disappointment. Eventually.

All right. That was enough sulking. Time for a distraction.

Moving to his writing table, Charlaine picked up the playbills he'd left there and shuffled through them until he found a couple of shows that were happening that day: one at the Marla Theatre, the other at the Zelle Theatre, which was only a few streets over. Both were cheap theatres, the floor only went for a pin, and the best seats were a mark. If he was still feeling sorry for himself after all that, he'd dress up and go to a show at the Bellandra.

He might not have his own suite in the palace, but he had a permanent box at Bellandra Theatre and owned two horses that he could afford to keep in the imperial stables. He might not know how to spend large amounts of free time, but he'd always managed to find a few hours here or there to see plays. It was all the other hours of the day he was struggling to fill.

Thinking of the ongoing struggle reminded him of his conversation with Jac, drawing a smile to his face. He really couldn't begrudge her or Myra, in the end. He didn't know Jac nearly as well, but it wasn't hard to see she'd walked a hard road in life and deserved just as much happiness as Myra.

Pulling on a jacket and hat that would keep off the road dust, Charlaine headed out of the barracks and across the palace grounds to the enormous stables that were practically an entire city all their own. Thousands of horses were kept in the imperial stable, not counting the military stable that kept the horses for officers and cavalry. Charlaine had never seen the stables anything other than busy, and given the influx of visitors for the festival, right then everything was barely contained chaos.

Not bothering to flag a groom, Charlaine dodged and weaved his way through the mess, the smell of horse and hay and manure filling his nostrils and making him sneeze. Stupidly, the assault on his nose reminded him of the cologne Kamir had given him, that he'd worn to dinner last night in hopes of...something. The last time he'd tried courting anyone, it had ended in failure and he hadn't been nearly as disappointed as he probably should have been. He'd always been happiest with his work.

He probably still would be, likely, if not for the peculiar assignment he'd been given: assume the role of court-ordered bodyguard, observe Lord Kamir, and protect him at all costs. It was not an assignment anyone would normally give him, as it was a waste of his time and skills to reduce him to bodyguard. His missions were more likely to entail getting *past* bodyguards.

But Jader was involved, and so the task had to be given to a trustworthy officer. Since Captain Terrag and First Lieutenant Rinnark were only moderately more subtle and contained than Lesto, to Charlaine the duty had fallen.

Civilians were not normally the type of people Charlaine spent much time around. He had the same loathing for most of them that nearly all soldiers carried. Even soldiers who were also nobles, like Lesto, held most of their peers in some measure of contempt. Though he was always honored to serve the High Commander, he hadn't expected much more than the usual nonsense that came with nobles.

But Kamir had been nothing remotely like his peers, and his children were adorable, and Charlaine increasingly found he'd not wanted to return to his regular duties. He hadn't been sure what that meant, and he wasn't much clearer on the matter now.

Finally reaching his allotted section of the barn, Charlaine led his roan mare out and got her saddled. When she was ready, he led her outside and mounted up, nodding to the grooms who waved at him as he rode off.

Several decades ago, the city of Harkenesten had possessed multiple gates. In an effort to better contain and control the various problems that plagued the city, High Queen Sarrica—the current Sarrica's namesake—had ordered all but two of the gates closed. Most of them had been torn down and the walls joined. A few were now archways that led to expanded parts of the city, though those expansions were not nearly enough.

But closing those gates had helped immensely with controlling who went in and out of the city, curtailing the efforts of smugglers and other criminals. Most importantly, it had made it far more difficult to smuggle people *out*. It was impossible to stop human trafficking completely, but the efforts started by Sarrica's grandmother and continued by Sarrica had significantly reduced the number of people who went missing each year. But it also created a problem of congestion, as thousands of people went in and out of the city every day. Charlaine was not remotely sorry he had been granted permission to use the smaller, special access gate alongside the main one. Riding up to it, he displayed the medallion at his neck, waved to the guards, and rode through as they raised the portcullis.

Unfortunately, getting into the city was the easy part. Like the palace, the city was overstuffed with visitors from across Harken—and even further abroad—eager to attend the Festival of Harmony. Maybe going to see a couple of plays hadn't been his smartest idea. He was there, though, and had nothing else to do with his day as he hadn't anticipated being given so much time off.

Though he was friendly with countless soldiers, especially within Fathoms Deep and steadily more within Shattered Wind, Charlaine had very few friends. That was partly by his nature, partly by the nature of his job. It was hard to trust and befriend the man who might be stealthily gathering information to incriminate you or your friend. Nobody liked the people responsible for finding the enemies within.

As he was a bodyguard now, he had more free time in one year than he'd possibly seen in a decade during his time with Fathoms Deep. Only so many hours of his day could be filled with plays and talking to those few friends he did have.

He could be spending some of it with Myra, but it was his own fault that wouldn't be happening—at least, not the way he'd hoped it might happen. Charlaine set his jaw and pushed onward, carefully negotiating his horse through the crowded streets. The ordeal would have been infinitely easier if he were in uniform—though Shattered Wind did not inspire the low-level panic that Fathoms Deep did—but he didn't like to use it that way. It came too close to bullying for his taste.

He reached the Marla Theatre just in time, hastily handing his horse over before darting inside and up to his permanent seat in the balcony close to the stage. It was a box he shared with two others, but they almost never visited, and the few times he'd crossed paths with them, he'd gotten the impression they liked the idea of it all rather than the reality.

Which was fine by him. Settling into his box, which as usual was empty, Charlaine pulled out his flask and sipped leisurely at the potent brandy inside as he watched the comedy performed below. The Marla didn't boast

the best actors, but they were far from the worst and many went on to better theatres. A couple of the best actors in the city had started at this very theatre.

His mother had never had more than bit parts in various performances all over the city, but she'd enjoyed it, and Charlaine had enjoyed tagging along and helping out where he could behind the scenes until he grew old enough to take up acting himself.

Until his mother had died, and his father had reluctantly taken custody of him and promptly put him in the imperial army, the most expedient method for dealing with an embarrassing bastard child who dared to stop being invisible. Not that it mattered in the end. The man had died only a couple of years later in a drunken riding accident. His daughter and heir had taken over, given Charlaine a generous settlement, and they'd peaceably agreed to cut all familial ties. On the rare occasion their paths crossed, they were cordial acquaintances. Charlaine was two years the elder and could have easily fought for the title and inheritance, but he'd rather stab out his remaining eye than get tangled up in the high court.

After a few years, Terrag had brought him into Fathoms Deep—with Lesto's approval, of course. He'd considered getting back on stage, but it had been so many years since he'd done that sort of acting, he was fairly certain he didn't have it in him anymore. Not to mention he was far too scarred for it. There were only so many roles that could be given to an aging, half-blind soldier with more scars than skin.

When the play ended, Charlaine rose to clap and cheer. As the actors cleared the stage, he tossed down a handful of pins along with the rest of the audience for the performers and crew to collect and split among them.

Heading back out and retrieving his horse, Charlaine worked his way through the streets to his favorite tavern. Handing the horse off to a girl to watch for him, he stepped inside the cool, dark building and walked up to the bar.

The woman behind the counter saw him and smiled, pouring a beer before she wandered over. "Haven't seen your ugly mug for a while, Laine. How'd you slip free of the fancy folk?"

"They told me to go away for a few days," Charlaine said with a laugh, and leaned over the counter to kiss her cheek. "Merry day, Midoki."

"I wish somebody would order me to stop working." She swatted his arm and went to take care of some other customers.

Several minutes later she returned with a second beer and a bowl of soup. "Eat up. Anything interesting up your way?"

Charlaine shrugged. "Not really. Everyone is busy with the festival, you know how that goes. I'm glad it starts tomorrow. A week or so and this place will start to quiet down. As much as it ever does, anyway."

"Tell me about it," Midoki grumbled. "After I'm done with this place, I have to go across town to help my sister. Her inn is so overrun with guests, she can't sit still two minutes. She swears up and down that some of them are from Soltorin, but she can barely tell the difference between Delfastien and Rilien, so I don't know what she's going on about."

"Soltorin? Why would any Soltorin come here at all, let alone during the Festival of Harmony? The Triumvirate hates us."

Midoki rolled her eyes. "They're probably from Rilen, mark my words. This lot can barely tell formal Harken from informal, most days, how would they recognize a language that even the Golden Tongue can't speak? You want more soup? You ate that fast."

"No, but thanks. I've another play to catch before I need to get back to the palace."

"Take care of yourself, then. Come by sometime and stay for a bit, hey?"

"I will." He kissed her cheek again, left a mark on the bar, and departed.

He arrived a few minutes late to the second play, and one of the seats in his box was occupied by a woman, but she only nodded briefly before putting her attention fully back on the play.

Unfortunately, it seemed the understudies had needed to fill in for most of the roles, and the play, normally one of his favorites, suffered severely for it.

Charlaine sat back with a sigh at the interlude. "This is rather disappointing."

The woman, Kala if he recalled her name correctly, wafted a fan in front of her face. "Yes, quite. I should have listened to myself and not come when I heard the actors had been pulled from the play for the festival. Some ladee-da performance is to be put on for the High and Mighty King and his

Golden Tongue." She clucked. "As if they don't already have plenty of fancy entertainment in their stuffy palace. They could leave the rest of us our middling actors."

Charlaine bit back a smile. "In their meagre defense, I'm certain they would be happy to do so if they knew. My impression is they seldom know about such things until it appears on their schedules."

Kala scoffed. "One wonders what they do with their days that they can't even be bothered to learn what they're meant to be doing until it's shoved in their faces."

"One wonders," Charlaine agreed with a laugh, though he hated to hear such comments. He might only recently have been spending large amounts of time around the imperial couple, but he'd heard stories from Lesto and Terrag for years about the way Sarrica pushed himself even when he was vomiting from pain. How Nyle had attended court, dinner and more while recovering from a broken leg. It wasn't exactly hard to see how exhausted Sarrica and Allen always were, but if they complained at all, it was goodnatured and teasing. They had more luxury and wealth than the whole of the empire, but they paid a dear price for it.

Thankfully, before she could say more, the bells rang and the theatre refilled. The lights were dimmed, and the dreadful play resumed. He could have left, but it was the kind of terrible that was hard to look away from. Normally this theatre put out better actors, even in understudies. Perhaps the original understudies had been stolen away as well.

When it finally came to an end, Charlaine bid Kala good day and departed. Dusk was falling as he rode back to the palace, where he was happy to hand his horse and a couple of pin to a groom. Slipping into the palace, he stopped by the dining hall used by soldiers and staff to fix himself a plate of food to take away, and then slipped out a side door and across the military pavilion to his barracks.

He'd barely stepped through the doors when someone called his name. It was the urgency in the voice, though, that stopped him more than anything. "Charlaine," Rella said again as she hurried over to him.

"What's wrong?"

She hissed, "The High Secretary, that's what!"

"I told you to stop calling him that."

"Whatever!" She waved her arms frantically about. "He's here! In your room! We tried to make him stay down here, but he wasn't having it, and you don't exactly tell the Head Secretary to fuck off. That's like smarting off to the High Commander. And he looks *mad*. The Head Secretary I mean, not the High Commander. I don't know what you did, but if you're the praying sort, you might want to do that now."

Charlaine sighed. "I see. Well, I led a good life. Throw a beer on my ashes, eh?"

Rella giggled. "Good luck."

Bracing himself, Charlaine headed for his room. The smell of the food he was carrying soured his stomach, appetite completely ruined by the dread of a pending argument. He and Myra argued so rarely, it made him sick every time it happened. The last time Myra had been this angry with him was the day Charlaine had lost his eye because he'd been stupidly reckless and cocky. Myra had told him so, loudly enough for the whole camp to hear. His comrades hadn't stopped teasing him about it for weeks.

He really should have seen this coming. Myra was not the sort to mince words. When he wanted something done, it got done. When he had something to say, it got said. That was one of the many reasons he and Sarrica got along so well. Most people made the mistake of stepping carefully and mincing words with Sarrica, never realizing they'd fare much better if they just got directly to the point and avoided flowery language.

The first time they'd met, everything had gone well. Charlaine had been pleased with himself for so successfully completing the assignment when he'd been dreading going anywhere near the crown prince after all the rumors of his short temper and blunt manner.

But his second encounter with Myra, he'd forgotten a form. Normally it was easy to wheedle the secretaries into not caring or allowing him to bring it later. Myra had eviscerated him. Charlaine had never forgotten the form again. He'd gotten teased mercilessly for that incident too.

Pushing open the door to his room, Charlaine strode over to his desk and set the plate of food down before turning to where Myra was lying on his bed with a book he must have brought, because it wasn't one of the few Charlaine owned.

He closed it and sat up. "So are you done sulking? Are you going to tell me what had you so upset earlier today? So upset you're backing out of whatever you were going to say last night?"

"I told you, it's a moot point now. Let it go. I don't want to be pushed." Charlaine picked up a piece of bread, then dropped it with a sigh.

Myra rose and closed the few steps between them. He was only slightly taller than Charlaine, but right then he seemed to tower. "Shall we walk? Unless you want to have this argument where everyone in the barracks is going to eavesdrop."

"Can we just not argue?"

Myra smiled, sweet and razor sharp. "Tell me what's bothering you and what you were going to say last night and we won't have to."

"I don't know why it's a mystery to anyone why Sarrica loves you so much," Charlaine muttered. "Fine. Let's walk."

Sighing, not looking particularly pleased with his victory, Myra led the way out—where Charlaine wasn't remotely surprised to see a handful of people who suddenly had a list of reasons to be standing around a hallway. It was little wonder Harken had a reputation for nosiness with the rest of the world. Rolling his eyes and giving them looks, he followed Myra out of the barracks and back across the pavilion.

But instead of heading into the palace, Myra took one of the stone paths that led to the public gardens, until they reached a garden filled with small, flowering trees and a little artificial waterfall and brook. Walking over the arching bridge spanning the brook, Myra headed for the ivy-strewn gazebo tucked into one corner.

Was this better or worse than going to Myra's rooms like he'd expected? Charlaine couldn't decide.

Once inside the gazebo, Myra whipped around, the long tail of his hair tumbling over one shoulder. Most days he braided it, but today he'd simply bound it with ribbon at regular intervals. It would be so very easy to unbind it, set it free, enjoy the rare sight of Myra with his hair loose. In all their years of friendship, Charlaine had only seen that five times, and each had been far too brief.

Crossing his arms over his chest, Myra asked, "So why are you being such a brat?"

"Me?" Charlaine's brows rose. "I have said repeatedly I don't want to talk about it. That the point is moot. You're the one who won't take no for an answer."

"I'm not taking your childish behavior as an answer," Myra said. "You walked into my office in a perfectly good mood and left like somebody had murdered your horse. Why?"

"Nothing!" Charlaine burst out, making Myra jump. "It's over. The matter is closed. If I have nothing else, I have my privacy. Leave me that."

Myra's posture closed off, but the hurt on his face was plain. "As you wish. Sorry to have bothered you." He strode past Charlaine, head down.

Charlaine lasted a few more seconds, then groaned, turned, and ran after him, catching Myra's arm right as he reached the bridge. "Look. I'm sorry. I just—I need time, all right? Give me a few days and I'll tell you everything."

"Fine," Myra said with a sigh. "I don't see what good stewing and brooding will do, but fine. I'm sorry for getting tetchy. It just hurts that you don't want to talk to me when you *always* talk to me."

Charlaine smiled. "You're always my first choice when I need to talk. I promise I'll talk your ear off soon." After he saw how tea between Myra and Jac went, because no way was he going to interfere in that. He wanted Myra happy, not so lonely, even if that meant Jac instead of him.

"You had better."

"You could talk my ear off for a change," Charlaine said. "Did I hear wrong that a certain pretty Dragon asked our High Secretary to tea?"

Myra rolled his eyes, but a smile overtook his face. "Yes, she did. I'm way too old for her—"

"Oh, please. I'm sure most people her age seem too young. Anyway, you and I are only a couple years apart, but you look closer to Jac's age than mine."

"Oh, please," Myra mimicked, and reached up to trace the scar on Charlaine's face. "You wear the wounded soldier look at least as well as His Grace."

Charlaine shook his head and forced a smile, trying not to be bitter and sad that his wounded soldier look couldn't compete with a younger, prettier soldier. Clearly it was for the best he hadn't spoken up last night when he should have. "Come on, I'm still hungry. Have you eaten yet?"

"What do you think? I only managed to escape because Prince Larren showed up and insisted on Allen leaving off work the rest of the day to spend time with him."

"I see. How is that going? Must be a difficult visit for all of them, given that His Majesty dislikes Captain Chass, but both want to spend time with Prince Larren."

Myra shrugged. "Thankfully, that is not my problem to deal with. I believe you mentioned food, Lieutenant."

"Yes, let's go before they close the buffets. We can eat on the balcony in the back southeast corner. I don't think it's been overrun by visitors yet."

"It will be nice when the palace is back to its normal levels of chaos. I hate this time of year. Let's go, then, and see if we can smuggle out a whole pitcher of wine."

Laughing, Charlaine offered his arm, and off to the banquet hall they went.

## CHAPTER THREE

Jac pulled on her clothes and went to pull her armor from its stand before she remembered she wouldn't need it. She would tomorrow when the festival began and she was back on duty. Today, however, she had another whole day free.

A day she'd intended to spend in town, buying some little token to give to Myra when they went for tea. Now, however, she was plagued with doubts. She'd spent the whole night tossing and turning, trying to get that moment in the garden out of her mind but worrying it like a bad tooth.

Why had Myra agreed to tea with her if he was already with Charlaine? Why hadn't she heard anything about them being lovers? Everyone knew they were good friends, but she'd never heard a whisper of anything else. They had definitely looked like lovers in the garden. The way Charlaine had chased after him, the way Myra had touched him, how comfortable and close they'd looked walking arm in arm. They should have reminded her of Allen and Tara, who often walked the same way, but something about them had instead reminded her of Allen and Sarrica.

Maybe their relationship was open or something. Could she handle that? Jac snorted. She could definitely *handle that*. Pantheon, she should be so lucky. Myra was beautiful, and Charlaine hardly a chore to look at, never mind his ridiculously perfect ass. It had been entirely too easy to tease and flirt with him the other day. A man his age should not look flustered saying things like *booze and whores*. It was adorable, and that wasn't a word she'd ever expected to associate with Charlaine, of all people.

Filthy mind aside, though, she was fairly certain neither was the open or poly relationship type. Then again, she'd completely missed they were lovers, so what did she know?

Jac gnawed at her thumbnail as she recalled that moment in the garden for the thousandth time. She'd only been taking a shortcut, trying to dodge that damned cook who wouldn't stop nattering at her every chance he got, when she'd seen them. She'd been on the verge of going to say hello when she'd realized they were arguing or something. Then Myra had stormed off, Charlaine had gone after him...

She changed into civilian clothes, yanked on her boots, and stood, sliding various daggers into their hidden sheaths before picking up her short jacket and shrugging into it as she headed out, grabbing a wrap for her head at the door.

Like other imperial bodyguards, she'd been moved out of the barracks and into the wing allotted to high-risk staff like Myra. She shared a three-bedroom suite with the two Dragons who filled in on her days off. On either side of them were the bodyguards that regularly protected—or at least tried to protect—Sarrica and Lesto. Even after years of being there, it was still strange some days to be living in the palace proper, where a month of room and board cost more than she made in a year.

All this simply because she'd befriended a silver tongue who'd looked lost and a little bit sad. A few years ago, before any of this, she never would have imagined she'd dare ask someone like Myra to tea and he'd accept.

Why, though? That was what bothered her. If Myra and Charlaine were lovers, why agree to tea with her? Maybe Myra was planning to explain whatever was going on at tea. Though Jac couldn't see why he'd bother with her when he had Charlaine. Pantheon, she could think of fifty people easy who would lay dragon eggs to hear that Charlaine had been snatched up by Myra after all this time. He'd been an unattainable catch for years. Jac had always laughed and been grateful she didn't seem to get as easily smitten as everyone else. She was perfectly happy playing and having fun and never settling down with anyone.

Then she'd somehow become friends with the High Consort and been introduced to Myra, and now she was probably getting what she deserved for secretly laughing at all her friends.

She cringed at the thought of being laughed at. Pantheon knew how silly she must seem, getting romantic advice from the lover of the man she was smitten with. Why hadn't Charlaine just said something?

Ugh, it was too early in the day for this nonsense.

Pushing away her tumultuous thoughts, Jac focused on her immediate goal: breakfast.

Avoiding the main dining hall used by nobles, which was still somewhat intimidating despite all the times she'd been in it now and the permission she had to use it freely, she went to the staff hall, where long tables were

piled with all manner of food. Like the public hall, it was never really closed, as staff had to be present at all hours of the day and night to accommodate the palace residents.

When she'd piled a plate with her favorite lentil pancakes and snagged a cup of coffee, she darted out of the palace and into the public gardens. Normally they were fairly empty that time of day, and it was a nice, peaceful start to her days—infinitely better than waking up in the always-raucous barracks where soldiers were stacked on top of each other.

But of course, given the festival began tomorrow, 'normally' wasn't the case.

Finally locating an empty bench, Jac sat and made quick work of her breakfast, eager to be away from the overcrowded palace even if she had no idea now what she'd do in the city—which was also going to be overcrowded, but it wasn't the palace where she'd be reminded of Myra and Charlaine every five minutes.

Her plan to buy Myra a gift seemed stupid now. What was the point when she was obviously going to be a momentary distraction, or he was just being kind in saying yes and would let her down gently later? He'd seemed so pleased, though, that she'd let herself believe she really and truly had a chance...

Sighing, Jac returned her dishes to the kitchen and headed for the stables, where she'd notified them the previous day that she would need a horse. There were definite perks to being the High Consort's primary bodyguard. Before, she'd only had access to the Dragon's horses, and only for business. Horses could be rented from the imperial stables, but walking was cheaper. Thanking the groom, who smiled and waved goodbye, Jac headed into the city.

The crowding was even worse than she'd anticipated, reminding her of the ongoing discussions with the council and the city that Sarrica and Allen were having about allocating funds to city expansion. Allen had let them table the matter until the festival was over, but Jac had seen him up at night preparing his killing blows. However reluctant the council might be to shift money to the project, Allen was going to have his way. It gave her hope that his next project would be to install pipes in the palace, which would make things easier for the nobles who wanted hot baths at all hours of the day and

night—and a thousand times easier for the staff that had to accommodate them.

Despite her ambivalence on the matter of a gift, she still rode to the shopping district on the cheaper side of the city she'd been planning to visit before that horrible moment in the garden.

Though what she could get that would impress Myra, she still didn't know. She refused to buy anything secretary-related. He never seemed to wear more than ribbons in his hair, didn't seem overly fond of jewelry—too expensive anyway—and didn't seem to care about perfume either. Despite surreptitiously watching him the past couple of years and quietly tucking away every tidbit of information Sarrica and Allen dropped, she knew next to nothing of Myra's interests or hobbies. The one thing she knew he liked was books; on rare quiet mornings Allen and Myra discussed books, authors and poets at length. They both enjoyed sonnets, but Myra preferred the Outland style sonnet, whereas Allen unsurprisingly favored the Gaulden style.

Jac had no idea what either of those things meant, but clearly poetry merited strong opinions.

She didn't even bother trying to keep track of the books they enjoyed. She could read and write now, thanks to Allen and the tutors he'd generously provided, but she was a long way from fully proficient and would likely never be at their level of ability. Even if she was, she doubted she could buy him a book faster than he could buy it for himself—or borrow from Allen.

They also frequently discussed languages: Myra seemed to be fluent in all the Triumvirate languages, which had been a surprise. Silver tongues who bothered with the Triumvirate were few and far between. Of the few who did, most were children of native speakers who'd chosen to stay in Harken, usually after traveling there for years as merchants or the like. Myra *looked* like he could be from one of the Triumvirate countries, but that didn't mean anything in Harken—Jader was a prime example of looks meaning nothing.

She'd always had the impression Myra was Harken-born, and he could still be, but maybe not. Not that it really mattered. She wouldn't care if he came from Treya Mencee, and that was about the only country she completely despised—at least, the ruling portions of the country. If the

slaves ever managed to rebel, she'd be happy to help them. Growing up an orphan wasn't much above slavery, not where she'd come from, anyway. Being from Outland, she'd seen firsthand how horribly the Islanders were treated by everyone on the mainland.

Not so long ago, the military hadn't been much better about how it treated people, though once upon a time Harken had possessed the finest military in the world. Under Sarrica and Lesto, that was almost true again, and their efforts also ensured people were treated like people, not animals. If not for those efforts, Jac wasn't sure where she'd be—dead, probably, or wishing for death.

Instead, she was here, happy and healthy, and fretting about what gift to buy Myra, a man who not so long ago would have been completely out of her reach.

Dismounting, she left her horse at a special post at the end of the street and started walking, determined to find *something* in one of the countless shops in Harkenesten.

But each one she came to was immediately discarded. She had no idea what kind of sweets he liked. The teashop was tempting for a moment, but she didn't know what kind of tea he liked either. Myra always ate and drank whatever was brought to the office, which generally catered to Sarrica, Allen, and whatever guests were present. And he always drank from the palace china, never anything of his own. She hurried past the bookshop with her head down.

Her steps slowed as she reached a store that sold hats and other such accessories. Like hair ribbons. Was that a stupid gift? After nearly two hours of walking, it was the only one she could come up with. Well, the only *appropriate* one. She'd passed a shop where she'd certainly be comfortable picking out something, but their first tea was not the right time for that kind of gift. Her lips twitched briefly in amusement at the thought of presenting Myra with a sex toy.

Argh, why was it so easy to be raunchy and so hard to find something suitable? She'd really thought it would be easier once she was here and had all the shops right in front of her.

She should have just swallowed her fear and asked Allen for help. He would have had plenty of good ideas and would have suggested things she

could afford because he was kind and considerate like that.

Well, she couldn't think of anything else, and this was all probably a waste of time anyway, since there wasn't a chance she could possibly compare to Charlaine.

Myra had agreed to tea, though. That had to mean something.

Stepping into the shop, sighing at the cooler air and the merciful quiet, Jac pushed back her hood and let her eyes adjust to the dim light.

"Can I help you?" asked a pretty young person with dark skin, dark curls, and who smelled like silk and coffee.

Any other day, Jac might have tried some gentle flirting. Instead, she smiled politely and said, "I'm looking to buy some hair ribbons. As a gift, not for myself." Her smile widened into a grin as she rubbed a hand over her short hair. "I obviously don't need them."

The clerk giggled. "I suppose not. I'm Miss Edra. Come this way and we'll see about your gift." She led Jac through the shop to a large table arrayed in ribbons of various lengths and widths. "Tell me more about the individual—the hair—involved, good..."

"Miss, though Jac is fine," Jac said. "His hair is dark, thick, nearly to his hips. He almost always wears it in simple braids, though sometimes he'll bind it at intervals." She'd never seen it loose, though she'd thought about it plenty: unwinding it, running her fingers through it, feeling it on her skin, gripping it tightly while Myra ate her out or she fucked him senseless with one of her strap-ons.

"What does he do?"

Jac swallowed, shoved back her errant thoughts. "Uh. He's a secretary in the palace."

"Ooh, la," Edra said, pressing a hand to her chest. "I wish I had someone in the palace to court. They make fine money, and all the fancies they must know! But here, look at these. They're two to three pin each, all sorts of colors and patterns. Insects are all the fashion now, so we've plenty of those. This one with dragonflies is a favorite of mine." She picked it up with delicate, pink-lacquered fingers and offered it.

Jac gingerly took it, half-afraid she'd tear or muss it. The ribbon was pretty, pale pink with green and silver dragonflies flitting along the length

of it. "I like it."

"Splendid! How many ribbons were you looking to buy?"

"Five? Is that a good number?"

"Oh, definitely." Edra beamed and picked up another two.

An hour later, Jac had five ribbons prettily arranged in a little blue box. Her pocket was two marks lighter, but hopefully the expense would be worth it. Too late now, anyway.

Sliding the box into the large pouch at her right hip, Jac headed back down the street to where she'd left her horse.

Halfway there, rough hands shoved her from behind, sending her stumbling into a dark, narrow alleyway. Jac let herself fall, landed firmly on her hands and knees, twisted around, and kicked out the feet of the man who'd followed her. As he toppled, she saw the two men behind him.

She shifted to her knees, grabbed one of her hidden daggers, and threw. The dagger, specially made for throwing, sank into the throat of the leftmost man, who gulped desperately for air as he fell to the ground. The last man turned and ran. Jac stood, drew another dagger, and let fly. The man went down with a pained scream, the dagger lodged in one thigh.

By that point, the first man had regained his feet and drawn his sword. Jac drew two more daggers. In the tight confines of the alleyway, the sword was a disadvantage. She dodged a swing, threw herself further into the alleyway, rolled to her feet, spun, and threw another dagger as he charged. That one missed, but it distracted him long enough the second found a home in his eye.

Leaving the dead men in the alleyway, she went to retrieve the injured one. "Come here, you rancid goat testicle." A group of people had gathered around him, but at her words they scattered like startled cats. The man made a feeble attempt to run, but Jac lunged forward and grabbed him easy. "I'd hold still if I were you, because it won't ruin *my* day to send you to join your comrades."

The man said something she didn't understand, but was clearly rude, and went still.

She'd just bound the wound and secured him when city guards came running up.

"What is going on here?" the man in the lead demanded, a lieutenant by his markings. "Why are there two men dead and one wounded?"

"Because they tried to kill me," Jac said, standing slowly and carefully reaching beneath her tunic to pull out her imperial medallion. "I'm Sergeant Jac Denali, primary bodyguard of His Imperial Majesty the High Consort. These men attacked me, tried to trap me in an alleyway to either hurt or kill me."

The guards gaped at her a moment. Then the lieutenant shook himself and sent them to secure the dead men, his curt tone turning deferential. "We'll have them all delivered to the palace, Sergeant. I assume that's what you want done?"

"Yes, please. My superiors will want to question this man themselves, and we'll search the bodies as well. I appreciate your assistance."

"Of course. We'll need an official statement from you for our reports, but we can get that at the palace, if you don't mind."

Jac nodded. "Happy to. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to get my horse and then I'll travel back to the palace with you."

"We'll secure a cart to haul them and meet you at the end of the street—I presume that's where you left your horse?"

Nodding again, Jac strode off, reluctant to let her assailants out of sight but willing to trust the city guards.

Thankfully, there was no further incident getting to her horse. The guards appeared as promised on horses of their own, hauling a small, rickety cart that held the bodies. The man Jac had managed to secure was thrown over the back of the lieutenant's horse.

Jac led the way out of the city and all the way to the palace. The guards and residents and guests filling the pavilion moved well out of their way as they passed, whispering in their wake, more than a few scurrying off to be the first to spread the gossip.

Reaching the palace steps, Jac motioned to one of the guards. "I need the High Commander immediately."

"Yes, Sergeant." The guard slipped inside, while his partner blew a whistle that immediately brought another guard from the nearby guardhouse.

Thankfully, it didn't take Jader as long to appear as it sometimes could, given he was often required to be ten places at once. His brows rose as he took in the sight before him, and he came down the stairs with a hand resting on the hilt of one of his swords. "I'm afraid to ask what they did. You don't usually pick fights unless they're twice your size, Sergeant."

Jac didn't roll her eyes, but only barely. "These men attacked me while I was out shopping. I killed two of them, secured the third. Though I can't say for certain, I don't think the attack was random. They were a standard kill team and seemed to know how I'd attack and tried to disable that."

"Not a very good kill team if they failed so miserably, but I prefer that to them being excellent at their job." Jader motioned to the city guards. "Take the bodies to the execution grounds. Tell them I'll want a look at them. Have they been searched?"

"We gathered everything they had here," the lieutenant said and tossed Jac a leather bag that clinked and rattled as she caught it. "What do you want done with the live one, Commander?"

"We'll take him." Jader motioned to the guards who had followed him outside. "Put him downstairs." Looking back at the city guards, he said, "Thank you for your assistance. Leave your names with the head executioner and you'll be compensated for your trouble."

"Commander," they said and bowed their heads.

"Jac, with me." Jader turned and swept off back into the palace.

Heaving a sigh at High Commanders and their dramatics, Jac ran after him.

Jader led the way through the palace to his office, where he told his secretaries he was not to be disturbed until further notice. Draping his sword belt over the back of his chair, he sat and motioned for Jac to hand him the leather bag and then for her to take a seat on the opposite side of the desk. "Tell me everything in detail. Were you able to glean anything about the men?"

"Not much, Commander," Jac said, and once more told her story. "They seemed mid-rate assassins at best, and definitely weren't familiar with the city. There were much better places to have attacked me just on that one street. They also didn't talk, which seemed strange. The one I captured muttered something at the end, but I didn't catch what."

"Probably foreign and trying to hide that fact," Jader said, mouth flat. "I've heard more than a few rumors that I don't like, and this makes me think a few of them are all too true. It's standard procedure to cripple defenses by taking out the best bodyguards. Make certain you're well-armed and armored tomorrow and remain in the palace the rest of today."

Jac nodded. "Yes, Commander."

"Report to Captain Sheva so the Dragons are fully apprised, and I will take the pleasure of informing Their Majesties."

Mouth twitching, Jac replied, "That's kind of you, Commander, but I'm certain Allen will have me summoned all the same."

"Probably, but I'll try to soothe ruffled feathers before you arrive." Jader winked. "Dismissed, Sergeant."

She stood and bowed. "Commander."

Leaving his office, she headed for the Dragon barracks and hunted down Sheva to give her report. That took another two hours, and she'd only just made it back to her room when she got the expected summons from Allen. Stifling a sigh and several choice curses, she nodded at the waiting servant. "I'll be right there."

Once she left, Jac settled for changing into a clean tunic and boots, resettled all her weapons, and headed out. The bath she'd been hoping for would just have to wait.

"Jac!" Allen burst out as she entered the imperial offices, racing across the room to hug her tightly. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," she said, smiling at how quickly and easily Allen did such things. When they'd met, he'd been much more closed off and rarely touched anyone. Drawing back, she squeezed his shoulders reassuringly. "Like a handful of cheap assassins had any chance of hurting me, let alone killing me. All they did was get my clothes dirty."

Allen frowned. "Cheap or not, I don't like you being attacked by *assassins* because of me."

"I'm a bodyguard—it was always a risk, and it will be again. Don't get fussy now, Majesty."

Allen opened his mouth but closed it again and relented with a nod. "You're certain you're all right?"

"Yes, I promise." Jac hugged him again, and Allen finally seemed content.

Sarrica joined them, his thunder and lightning scowl on his face. As she had expected, he demanded the whole story that Jader had probably already told him twice. Nearby, Lesto leaned against Myra's desk, chatting quietly with Charlaine and casting her sympathetic looks.

Behind them, still at his desk, Myra was hard at work. Jac looked away, refusing to be hurt. What had she expected? For him to panic and fuss? She hardly required fussing, and there was still plenty of work to be done, and he could hardly make a production in the middle of the High King's office.

By the time she was finished recounting the attack yet again, Jac was ready for a nap.

Instead she was dragged over to the sitting area, pushed into a chair, and had tea and food all but thrown at her.

"I'm glad you're all right."

Jac looked up and smiled faintly at Larren, Allen's eldest brother. He had Allen's stunning blue eyes and gold-toned skin, but his hair was a reddishblond and slightly curly even trimmed short. He had a crooked nose and a long scar on his neck, like someone had once dragged a knife across it but not deeply enough to kill him. He was dressed plainer, more like Sarrica favored, fairly typical of royals and nobles who also served in the military. Jader and his lavish clothes were an exception. Larren also had Allen's contained demeanor, along with the military mien Sarrica and Lesto possessed. The only jewelry he wore was the famed Gaulden torc of braided gold, an emerald at each end, resting in the hollow of his throat.

Allen had told her about it one night. Back when Gaulden, Mesta, and Gearth were still the kingdom of Pemfrost, the royal family had possessed three divine treasures, gifted by the Temple of Lenaara as a show of support, implying the royal family had the approval of the gods: a crown, a torc, and a ring. When Pemfrost split into three during the War of the Last Rose, the first king of Gaulden wound up with the treasures. As a show of peace and good faith, he gave the ring to the newly established Mesta and the crown to the newly established Gearth.

A few decades later, a civil war erupted in Mesta and somewhere in the strife the ring was lost. A century after the end of Pemfrost, war returned to

Gearth as well, and the crown was destroyed in the struggle. Gearth was eventually split in two, the new kingdom becoming Outland.

That Gaulden had retained the torc and never suffered an internal war (had only ever gone to war to help allies), built into a superstition: so long as the royal family possessed the torc, Gaulden would always know peace.

The torc was worn by the crown prince or princess as a promise to the people that the next generation would strive to maintain that peace. It was a promise so far kept, and Larren showed every sign of continuing it.

From what little Jac knew, Larren was greatly admired in Gaulden and throughout the imperial army. Rumor had it he was soon leaving the military to take up his duties as crown prince full time, but Jac had not yet had the chance to ask Allen if that was true. "Thank you, Your Highness."

Larren scoffed at the formality but did not say anything, merely leaned toward the table to refill his own cup of tea. "So who do you suspect is behind this?"

"Hard to say," Jader said. "I'm going now to see what examination of the bodies has turned up. I'll return when I have answers. Jac, did you want to come?"

"Yes, Commander, thank you." She finished her tea hastily as Allen's worried frown deepened again, took a spicy chickpea samosa for the walk, and made her escape.

Myra looked up briefly as she passed and smiled. Jac smiled back but couldn't slow as Jader continued walking faster than was really necessary.

She nearly had to run at his side to keep pace and was grateful he didn't seem to require conversation at the same time because she would have been biting it out between pants. Instead she hastily ate her samosa and longed for a good beer.

The dungeons were as damp and depressing as ever, lit only by torchlight and the way it reflected off the stone. Jader led the way down a narrow hallway to where two Dragons stood guard. "Jac," they greeted, clapping her on the back and shoulders. "Heard your knives flew as perfectly as ever. Way to hit'em."

Jac playfully punched their arms before following Jader into the cell.

The man she'd wounded was chained to the wall, and another Dragon stood nearby guarding a table where the belongings of all the attackers had been gathered, including the contents of the leather bag she'd left with Jader.

"Has he said anything?" Jader asked.

"No, Commander," the Dragon, Tomer, replied.

"Thank you." Jader motioned for him to go. He turned to Jac once the door was closed. "What do you make of all this?"

Jac looked at everything on the table. Unfortunately, there didn't seem to be much to their possessions. Daggers that could have been bought anywhere, swords the same. The clothes were old, probably bought second hand. Only the shoes were of excellent quality, but she knew the maker's seal on the heel. "This is all local."

"Every last bit made right here in Harken City, or one of the nearby towns that come into the city to sell their wares. Mercenaries and assassins are much more piecemeal than this, unless the job requires they dress a certain way and this one didn't. These men definitely are not from Harken. I doubt they're from Treya Mencee, though I wouldn't be surprised if Treya Mencee paid them. They could also be working for Benta."

"I thought we were on good terms with Benta now."

Jader made a face. "We're on good terms with Benta, but the Bentan rebels are another matter entirely, and they are still after Harken blood." He picked up a piece of paper neatly placed at one end of the table. "No identifying marks on the bodies, so they were somewhat professional, I suppose." He finally glanced at the prisoner. "Do you speak Harken?"

The man replied in rough, guttural informal Harken, "I don't speak to Harken birds."

"And yet you speak passable birdsong. Unfortunately, you aren't good enough to leave off your accent. He's from Soltorin."

Jac swore softly.

Going to the door, Jader said, "Find me a silver tongue who speaks Soltorish. The High Consort will best be able to help."

"Yes, Commander!" replied one of the soldiers, followed immediately by the sound of him running down the hall. Jader returned to the table and examined the weapons.

"I'm surprised Lesto and Sarrica aren't here," Jac said.

"Lesto considered it, I think, but he is retired, and I think Shemal would have had a few words if he'd gotten involved—especially as he filled in for me while I was stuck in Benta. Sarrica is generally content to leave such things to me. If the assassins had attacked Allen, it would have been a very different matter."

"Well that goes without saying," Jac said with a laugh. Movement caught her eye, and she turned slightly to see the sneer on the assassin's face.

Jader shook his head slightly. Someone rapped on the door, and he went to open it. "Yes?"

"Silver tongue for you, Commander. His Majesty said he was the closest and most capable person for Soltorish."

Jader pulled the door open—and they both froze in surprise to see Myra step into the cell. "I didn't know you spoke Soltorish."

"It's not a skill I boast, for various reasons," Myra replied quietly. "How can I be of..." He trailed off, staring at the man chained to the wall, a look coming over his face that Jac didn't understand.

The expression was gone in the next breath, though, as Myra stepped forward.

Jader shot a hand out and caught his arm right as Jac did the same on his other side.

"Don't get any closer," Jac said. "We like to think the prisoners are secure, but they've escaped before. Their Majesties could tell you that."

Myra nodded. "Thank you." He stared at the man again, then started speaking in the rolling, almost musical words of Soltorish. If he struggled or faltered at the language, Jac couldn't tell.

The man on the wall froze, then seemed to bristle like an angry cat—and then started snarling and shouting, the words spitting out like venom.

Myra's breath hitched, and he flinched back as though struck, but then set his shoulders and started replying.

The conversation—argument—continued for some time, until the man finally snarled a last few words, snapped his mouth shut and half turned

away, ignoring everything Myra said thereafter.

Finally, giving a sharp jerk of his head, Myra led the way out of the cell once Jader pounded for it to be opened. They left the dungeon entirely and walked in silence back to Jader's office. Once the door was closed, Jader took his seat and said, "What in the world was that all about?"

Mouth flattening, Myra said, "I'm from Soltorin. That is not something I have ever shared with anyone but Sarrica and Lesto. I ran away a long time ago and landed in Harken. I have lived here ever since and prefer to think of myself as Harken. He recognized my accent, though, and I don't have to explain to anyone here what Soltorin thinks of so-called traitors."

"Pantheon," Jader said. "Did he say anything useful?"

"Not much, but more than he meant to because he was so angry. There is definitely an assassination planned, though of the High Throne or someone else, I could not say for certain. But given they went for Jac today..."

"Marvelous. And right in the middle of the festival, no doubt, to make the greatest and most damaging show of it." Jader stood. "I must go speak with Their Majesties. I'll walk back with you, Myra."

"There's a book or two I wanted to fetch from my room that might be useful," Myra said. "I'll fetch them quickly."

Jader nodded. "Jac, you're free to go for now, though it's likely you'll be summoned before the day is out to be dragged into security plans." He smiled sympathetically. "But I'm certain you would like a moment to bathe and catch your breath, so I suggest you take it."

"Yes, Commander. Thank you."

Nodding again, Jader swept off, pausing only to speak with his secretaries.

Myra and Jac departed at a more sedate pace, though they still walked the halls quickly. Silence reigned between them until they reached the imperial wing and turned down the hall where their rooms were located.

"I'm glad you're all right," Myra said softly as they slowed to stop in front of her door. "I wanted to speak with you in the office, but you already had so many people fussing over you, I didn't think you needed one more."

"I wouldn't have minded," Jac said with a smile, eyes crinkling. "At least you don't seem likely to forget I can handle myself."

"No, I'm not likely to forget that," Myra said softly. "Still, even Lord Lesto does not come out of every fight feeling like a victor. Whatever happens during the festival, I hope you are not harmed." He leaned down then, and Jac's breath caught.

The soft, whispering kiss was over nearly before it began, and then Myra squeezed her hand and was gone.

Jac yanked open her door and dashed inside, closing it behind her and leaning against it, face hot with disbelief and elation. Myra had kissed her. He'd been worried about her and he'd kissed her.

Maybe her infatuation wasn't so hopeless after all.

She looked across the room to where she'd left her dirty clothes and satchel on the sofa, smiling at the thought of the box of ribbons still safely tucked inside it.

All she had to do was get through the festival, and then they'd have tea—and hopefully that would be the start of so much more.

Humming softly, Jac went to get cleaned up.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Myra closed the door behind him and leaned against it, thoughts in tumult. He would love to linger over the brief, barely-a-kiss he'd given Jac, and how badly he'd wanted to properly kiss her.

But it was impossible not to think about that awful encounter in the dungeon. He'd stepped into the cell and as simple as that, his whole life was falling apart. He wanted to cry. He looked around his chambers feeling like someone had carved a hole in his chest. Was this the last time he'd see this place? His books? His furniture? This little space that had been his home in a way Soltorin never came close to.

Twenty years. Such a long span of time, and yet now it felt as though it were only yesterday that he'd arrived in Harkenesten.

Myra had been inserted as a cadet in the Harken Imperial Army, his identity stolen from a man who would never be missed. He'd left the man's body in the night-soil dump of a small town where nobody would find it for months—if they found it at all. That was the day he'd become Myra, unremarkable citizen of the Harken Empire.

Not long after joining the army, he'd manipulated his way to the forward camp, where the imperial crown prince himself was located. The best way to get access to the whole camp was to be a runner, so that was what Myra had done, while the rest of his team gained access and gathered information by other means.

He'd always planned to never return home, to use Harken to escape and then flee somewhere no one would think to look for him. His initial plan had been to see the mission through and vanish in the aftermath. Such a high profile hit would result in untold chaos—the perfect time to disappear. For all he had no taste for assassination, he also wasn't going to lose sleep over a monarch dying. One was much like another, and they were all, at best, awful. At worst, cruel tyrants.

He hadn't expected Sarrica, who treated people like *people*, instead of like tools or animals. A man who was genuinely kind and whose biggest fault was a tendency to say or do the wrong thing with the best of

intentions. Sarrica never ate unless he knew for certain the soldiers had food. When circumstances required rough sleeping, Sarrica didn't demand special treatment. Myra had heard countless tales of Sarrica being put in stocks for misbehavior the same as everyone else. His closest friend was a man of like integrity.

Then he'd actually *met* Sarrica, and everything had truly changed.

He was only supposed to have been delivering a message to one of the generals, but he'd reached Sarrica's tent to find everything in upheaval because the only secretary who was fluent in Odont had died of a stray arrow to the head and his replacement would not arrive for two weeks—which would be far too late.

Myra had volunteered his own skills without hesitation, and found himself a temporary fill-in.

A week later, his father finally gained the position of temporary bodyguard he'd been working for and given the signal the assassination would take place the next day. That had left Myra with two choices: he could stick with his original plan of letting Sarrica die and escape in the resulting chaos.

Or he could save Sarrica's life and see what came.

The decision had, in the end, been a remarkably easy one. Two decades later, he could still recall the look on his father's face as he realized Myra had betrayed him—killed him, with a dagger to the gut, followed by a swift slice across the throat. Exactly as he'd been trained.

Not once had he regretted his choice, and it had resulted in a life better than any he'd ever dreamed.

He loved Harken. He loved Sarrica. Charlaine. His job. His *life*.

He'd had twenty years of happiness. It was more than he had ever dared hope for. If his life as a Harken citizen was finally coming to an end, he had no real cause for complaint. After everything he had done, twenty years of a life he'd once only dreamed of was far more than he deserved.

Still, he went around the room one last time, touching his books, his jewelry case, his beautiful clothes, his writing desk, and all the other little things he had loved so fiercely through the years.

When he was done, he shut it all away, pushed back fear and depression and a resentment he had no right to, and returned to the High Office.

Sarrica was speaking quietly with Jader but turned as movement caught his eye—and his eyes sharpened as he took in Myra. "There you are."

Myra set his shoulders. "I need to speak with you, Majesty."

"As you wish." Sarrica motioned for Jader and Allen to stay where they were and preceded Myra into his private office, locking the door behind them before moving around the desk to take his seat. "You look as though someone has died. What about this assassination matter has you so upset?" His eyes regarded Myra shrewdly, though knowing Sarrica, it was Lesto or Allen who had told him about Jac and Myra. "Not Jac, she's perfectly fine."

"Not Jac," Myra said. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Do you remember the day we met?"

Something knowing flickered in Sarrica's eyes. The High Court, and so many others, thought Sarrica a fool, but though he could be foolish about many things, Sarrica was one of the smartest, sharpest men in the palace. "It would be hard to forget. How does that relate to this?"

"The man I killed that day was only the primary assassin. There was a secondary." Myra fought back tears, gnawed at his bottom lip briefly, then finally forced out, "I was the secondary. I was there to gather intel and if the primary failed, I was supposed to finish the job."

Sarrica leaned back in his seat, twirling a penknife expertly through his fingers. "Lesto suggested it once. That was one of the reasons he hated you so much back then. He's always been a suspicious bastard. Sadly, he's proven right nine times of ten. So I can't say I'm entirely surprised, though I wasn't expecting an admission twenty years after the fact. Why do you bring this up now?"

"You don't—you don't hate me?"

"No," Sarrica said quietly. "You've proven your loyalty a thousand-fold, Myra. When you saved my life that day; when you accompanied me to every military campaign thereafter without complaint. You could have led a different, likely better and fuller life, if you'd chosen practically any other occupation than being my secretary. You've had more chances than probably even I know to use the Harken throne to your own ends, make deals or feed information to other places and Pantheon knows what else. It

would take a lot more than a twenty-year-old assassination attempt *you* saved me from to make me hate you. I'm certain Lesto will be Lesto about this, and Jader not much better, but you've always had my faith and trust. Why are you telling me the truth now?"

"Because that man in the dungeons is from my former clan, but he doesn't have the tattoos on his chest, which means he—and probably the dead men—were trainees, not full assassins. They were given a minor target that would be useful to have out of the way, but if they failed to complete their assignment, the mission wasn't compromised. Far deadlier assassins are waiting to strike, probably at a peak point of the festival where they'll do the most damage by killing you, Allen, or possibly his brother—or any combination—in front of a large audience. The trainees would be add-ons to the primary kill team, which is comprised of at least six, sometimes up to nine assassins, for a job like this."

"Damn it," Sarrica muttered, rubbing his temples. "Thank the Pantheon we have you to tell us this. Can you repeat all this to Jader and the others?"

Myra nodded. "Of course. I just wanted to tell you first."

Sarrica smiled briefly. "You had nothing to worry about, but I understand why you thought you might. I'll deal with Lesto. Empty the office. Cancel everything. Summon Captain Terrag and Captain Chass."

"Captain Chass?" Myra's brows shot up. "I don't generally question you, Majesty—"

"Yes, you do. All the time." Sarrica smiled when Myra smiled sheepishly. "I definitely meant Captain Chass. If this is going to get as ugly as I fear, then I want him involved."

"Yes, Majesty."

Sarrica stood, gripped his shoulders, then unlocked the door and threw it open. The office fell silent as they reemerged. Myra quickly cleared the office and sent his secretaries scattering to spread word of canceled meetings and dinners and teas. He sent Piru to fetch Terrag and Chass.

Then he repeated all he'd told Sarrica to the others.

"What!" Lesto bellowed, and it was only Sarrica who held him back. "You—"

"Have served me faithfully and flawlessly for twenty years," Sarrica said. "Lesto, knock it off or I'll knock you down."

"You couldn't knock me down if you had an army behind you," Lesto snapped, and shoved him away. He turned his full attention back on Myra. "I always knew there was something sneaky about you."

Myra didn't flinch, but only because he'd expected those words or something very like them. "In my meagre defense, I never wanted to be any sneakier than was required for being Sarrica's head secretary. I stopped being an assassin the day I killed my—the primary assassin."

Lesto's eyes narrowed, and before Sarrica or Jader could stop him, he barreled into Myra's space, grabbed his jacket in two fists, and hissed, "The day you killed your *what*."

"Father," Myra said, voice shaking. "That primary assassin's name was Karl, and he was my father."

Lesto let him go, anger replaced by unadulterated shock. "You killed your own *father*."

Myra's mouth twisted as he looked away, memories long buried stirring at the bottom of his mind. "Soltorin isn't like Harken. Believe me when I say his death was no loss to the world, and certainly no loss to me. Killing him saved Sarrica and freed me. It was a price I was willing to pay."

"I..." Lesto shook his head and didn't protest when Jader dragged him back.

"I'm sorry," Allen said while everyone else continued to stare. "Even if you say it was no loss, that cannot have been an easy thing to do. There's no love lost between me and two of my brothers, but I would still mourn their passing."

Sarrica coughed. "Speaking of your brothers..."

Allen looked at him, and some silent conversation passed between them before he sighed. "I'll manage."

Closing the space between them, Sarrica kissed Allen softly.

Myra turned back to his desk as they continued to talk and plan, trying to organize everything as best he could so Piru would not be too overwhelmed when he took over, as Myra had no doubt he would be relieved of duty.

Possibly losing his job was bad enough, but now there would be no tea with Jac. There would certainly be no Charlaine to keep calling him friend, not when he learned what Myra had hidden all these years. Charlaine did not suffer such secrets and lies. Those that came with the job were one thing, but keeping such a terrible secret from a friend?

Someone pounded on the door and Myra went to get it, pulling it open as he stepped back to admit Captain Terrag of Fathoms Deep and Captain Chass of Penance Gate.

He was as beautiful as his brothers, with the same gold-toned skin and sky-blue eyes, but Chass had hair more the color of dark, antiqued gold, cut close to his head, just long enough the ends feathered out slightly, like it would turn into a fluffy mass if he allowed it. Like Sarrica, his face was covered in scars, like claws had raked down his right cheek and neck, another wound cutting his left cheek almost exactly in half, and a bit of his right eyebrow was forever gone from whatever had cut and burned it.

If Allen was the imperial songbird, and his brother Larren a raptor, then Chass was a bone-eater. He was dressed in the Penance Gate surcoat: scarlet with slashed claw marks that seemed to indicate there was nothing beneath the surcoat but a dark void. He was also wearing armor, though not full plate, and carried his spiked helmet in one hand.

Chass bowed low as he entered the room, keeping his eyes on the floor as he rose. "Your Majesties. You summoned?"

"Yes," Sarrica said, standing not quite in front of Allen where he'd taken a seat on the sofa. "Sit down, Captains. There's much to tell you and a lot we all must do to prepare. Myra, have tea brought."

"Already done, Majesty. It should be here shortly."

Sarrica smiled briefly at him, then turned his full attention to repeating all Myra had told him—leaving out, thankfully, that Myra had been the one to tell him. That was some relief. Myra hadn't even bothered to ask; he'd just assumed it would become common knowledge within a limited circle.

By the time he was done, Terrag looked ready to retire and Chass looked ready to start removing heads. "Captain Terrag, I want Fathoms Deep doubled up. Pull from the Dragons if necessary. Captain Chass, augment the personal bodyguards with your own, and I want your men pairing with the imperial guards on festival duty. Especially at all entrances, and anywhere I,

Allen, and Prince Larren are going to be. If your numbers are insufficient, pull from whatever mercenaries you feel would best suit. I want people taken alive if possible, but absolutely kill if that seems necessary. I will not have Allen or Larren harmed."

"I suppose making you stay in the palace and foregoing the festival entirely is out of the question?" Chass asked.

Lesto let out a single, sharp laugh. Sarrica sent him a venomous look. Ignoring him, Lesto said, "I have tried such things a thousand times, up to and including locking Sarrica in his room. Trust me when I say: you're better off not wasting your time. Anyway, Allen and Sarrica will just insist there are things that must be done, threats notwithstanding."

"It's true," Allen muttered.

"That doesn't make it any less stupid," Lesto said.

"What good would hiding away do?" Sarrica asked. "If we canceled events every time there was a threat to our lives, we would never leave our rooms. The only difference between this attempt and every other one is that we know about it. Pantheon knows how many assassins will be skulking about the festival that we don't know about. It's the risk every ruler takes. I don't like it. Thinking about everything that could go wrong makes me sick. But hiding away just gives them a victory of a different sort."

Allen added, "Every time we leave our private chambers we're at risk of being killed. If we hide away in the palace, eventually they'll find a way to get to us here. So we may as well continue as planned and take every precaution we can."

"Necessary and stupid aren't mutually exclusive," Lesto replied. "Sarrica's life is a litany of doing stupid but necessary things. As you say, this isn't the first time he's gone out in public knowing full well someone intends to kill him. Never mind all the times he's gone to war." He heaved a sigh. "Let's just hope all our precautions will be enough."

Jader, Terrag and Chass sighed in unison, and nearly as one they turned and strode out the door, talking too quickly to keep up with as they started to fine tune their plans to keep the imperial couple and their royal guest safe.

As they reached the doorway, however, Jader stopped and turned back. "Myra, with me."

Feeling sick but wholly unsurprised, Myra bowed to Sarrica and Allen before following Jader and the others out of the office. He ignored the curious looks of the secretaries and clerks as they filed back, save to look at Piru and gesture he'd be taking over for a time.

Looking pained and slightly panicky, Piru nevertheless nodded in reply before slipping into the office.

Terrag and Chass split off with a confirmation they'd meet up with Jader again later. Jader motioned to Myra, and they walked through the halls to his office, where he told his secretaries they weren't to be disturbed before closing and locking the door.

"Sit." Removing his swords and hanging them from the back of his chair, Jader then poured them both cups of wine before taking his own seat.

Myra sat, tightly clutching the delicate porcelain cup, staring without really seeing the glossy violet wine that filled it.

"So tell me more of this clan of yours and that man in the dungeon. I sense that for all you told Sarrica there is still much you haven't said."

More unpleasant memories stirred, and Myra gulped down the wine. "I don't see how any of this is relevant. I've told you everything you need to know to be on alert for the assassins. My personal history hardly factors."

"Who is the man in the dungeon?"

"I don't know, but he bears a passing resemblance to my youngest brother, so I would not be surprised to learn he is a nephew."

"Seems strange your family, of all the clans in Soltorin, would be the ones here now."

Myra shook his head and drank more wine, desperate for the numbing buzz that would not come. "Not really. I come from the Iron Moon Clan. We have always provided the Triumvirate with spies and assassins—especially assassins. The best men in the village are those who pass the tests to become assassins."

"The men? What of the women?"

"Soltorin—the whole Triumvirate—is nothing like Harken, Commander. Women stay in the home. Keep the house and bear children."

Jader looked even more baffled. "Men can bear children and keep a house as well."

Myra laughed and finished his wine, setting the cup down with a hard clack on the edge of the desk. "As I said, they are nothing like Harken. Everyone here considers me a man because I am one, but were I to go home, they would say I was a woman who gave up being so to live 'like a man' so I could be an assassin, since my family had too many daughters and not enough sons to bring the family honor and prestige."

"I..." Jader shook his head, stood, and poured them both more wine. "That is very old-fashioned thinking. Even Treya Mencee is not so backward, and they are more like beasts than humans."

"It's one of the many reasons I left. I traveled here to Harken fully intending to make my escape once the job was completed...but Harken was nothing like they teach us in Soltorin. It was like being told you were going to walk into a living nightmare and finding instead your every dream come true. I cannot describe it."

"Oh, I've had some small taste of that," Jader said quietly. "For what it's worth, I do believe you to be the ally you've always been. I merely want to understand as much as I can, in case it helps me to see something I might miss otherwise. I appreciate your sharing so much with me."

Myra just drank more wine, hoping it would still his trembling hands. "It did not take me long to realize I did not want to leave—and I already knew what we did was wrong. I'm not naïve enough to think there were countries that never got their hands dirty, but that didn't mean I had to be the dirty hand. So I killed my father, our liaison with the rest of the team, and made them think I was dead as well. I've been Myra, secretary to the High King, ever since. Until today."

"Well, we appreciate you coming forward. It has probably saved lives," Jader said. "Speaking of saving lives—you are off duty until the festival is over. If you've been recognized as you fear, then I assume they do not plan to leave you alive."

"No." Myra didn't bother to explain that if he had been recognized, then his fate wasn't as simple as being killed by the assassins. Traitors were always captured and taken back to their clan for punishment and execution. Given the nature of his crimes...

He shuddered and drank more wine.

"You are confined to the palace until the festival. I would prefer you remain here during the festival as well, but I won't ask that. I *am* going to assign a bodyguard; you're far too great a weakness to let someone like the Triumvirate cause you harm or murder you—especially since I would not put it past them to be working for someone else, or to know full well they can sell you to the highest bidder."

"Yes, Commander." Myra finished his second cup of wine and set it on the desk again, then rose and bowed. "Unless you've further need of me, I am going to retreat to my rooms for the day. I'll remain there until the bodyguard arrives, though I don't really have anywhere to go. I'm not used to being anywhere but the office most days."

Jader finished his wine and rose with him, buckling his swords back in place. "I'll see to the bodyguard now. I hope the office is not too severely demolished in your absence."

Myra made a face and tried not to think about it. Piru would manage well enough, and the rest he could do nothing about until he returned to duty.

After he left Jader's office, Myra walked slowly through the palace to his rooms, ignoring the curious looks of the court and staff he passed along the way. Safely in his own chambers, he locked the door, then slid down it to sit on the floor, bending his knees and draping his arms across them, then resting his forehead on his arms.

His heart had not stopped pounding in his ears since he'd made the decision to tell Sarrica the truth—since he'd seen a man who looked eerily like his youngest brother staring back at him, spewing poison at him, bringing back a thousand memories Myra had hoped would stay buried. *Knowledge* he had hoped he'd never have to care about again.

Like the knowledge of what would happen to him if Iron Moon captured him. He'd be dragged home, put before the entire village while his crimes were listed out, and then the chief—and unless things had changed, his eldest brother would be chief by now, as his uncle had not possessed heirs—would sentence him to being tied to a stake and left to the elements. Some clans preferred stoning, but not Iron Moon.

But he'd done the right thing. He'd ensured the safety of those who mattered. He'd enjoyed his stolen life for twenty years. He refused to hope

that he'd be left alone, that they wouldn't take him. The attack on Jac had gone awry, but the real kill team wouldn't fail the way the trainees had.

Climbing to his feet, Myra unbuttoned his long jacket as he headed into the bedroom. Shrugging out of it, he tossed it onto the bed and sent his shirt after it. Bare chested, he ran his hands over the long-faded scars where breasts had been removed a couple of weeks before he'd passed his tests and sworn himself to the Shadows of the Iron Moon.

Emblazoned on his chest, almost hiding the scars, was the tattoo that marked him a full Shadow: an intricate pattern of slashes and whorls, incomprehensible to most, but denoting family and history and other details to the clans. Had he continued on, more and more of his body would have been covered, a reckless, stupid thing for a person whose greatest skill was passing unremarked—but that was the clans, clinging to poisonous traditions, arrogant to a fault. All too often they had reason aplenty to support that arrogance.

Fleeing the mirror, Myra slipped into his dressing room and found more casual clothes to wear—looser pants that tightened at the ankle, soft slippers, and a loose, long-sleeved tunic that he cinched in place with a plain, dark green sash. Pinning his braided hair into a knot, he chose a book at random from his shelves, poured another injudicious cup of wine, and settled on his sofa.

He'd been there perhaps half an hour when a familiar knock came at his door. Gulping down the last bit of wine in his cup, struggling to ignore his fuzzy, spinning head, Myra went to open it.

Charlaine blew into the room the moment the door opened, nearly knocking Myra over. Closing the door, bracing against it until the room stopped spinning, Myra stared at him. "Merry afternoon."

"What is this about your life being in danger?" Charlaine demanded. "All this talk of assassins? Why is everyone being so cagey about where the information came from—and they're not hiding very well it came from you, given that all of a sudden you're here while Piru looks ready to cry and Lesto is mad he's not allowed to murder anyone. Why didn't you say anything?"

Myra scrubbed at his face. "Laine, it's been a *very* long day and I haven't had the chance to talk to you. I've only barely finished speaking with Their

Majesties and everyone else. Would you please stop yelling at me?"

All the anger went out of Charlaine. "I'm sorry." He closed the distance between them and pulled Myra's hands down, holding them tightly in his warm, firm grip. Myra fought the urge to lean in closer, fear and loneliness and alcohol encouraging him, guilt and shame and thoughts of Jac holding him back. Why did every part of his life have to spin out of control at the exact same moment?

"Hey, there," Charlaine said softly, resting one hand against the side of his face. He was so warm, so steadying, Myra was helpless against closing his eyes and leaning harder into that reassuring touch. "What's wrong?" A thread of laughter wove into Charlaine's voice. "Other than the fact you've had a touch too much wine. That won't help anything."

"I disagree." Right then, the wine was the only thing keeping him from losing his mind.

Charlaine chuckled. "Let's get you—"

Another knock came at the door. Myra sighed and moved enough to open the door without letting go of Charlaine's hand, not certain what would happen if he did.

"Are you all right?" Jac asked. "I—" She stopped, eyes staring past Charlaine, hurt and embarrassment flickering across her face before her stern bodyguard expression returned. "My apologies, I didn't mean to interrupt anything. I only wanted to make certain you were all right. I'll cease bothering—"

"You're not a bother," Charlaine said. "I was checking on the fool too. Come in, Jac."

She hesitated.

Charlaine let go of Myra to step past him, grab hold of Jac's wrist and reel her inside. He closed the door behind them. "Now then, Myra, how about you tell us what in the Pantheon is going on around here?"

"Nothing that different than usual," Myra muttered, stepping hastily away from them, the wine making it all too easy to think about how nice they looked standing next to each other and all the lovely ways the situation could be improved if his life was not currently falling apart.

He returned to his place on the sofa and poured more wine—then scowled when Charlaine took it away.

"What's wrong?" Charlaine asked. "You are not generally the sort to drink your problems away. I've only seen you this upset on two other occasions—not long after we met and the following year. Around the same time of year on both occasions, and it's not that time now."

Myra grimaced. "The matters are not unrelated, but I do not want to discuss them. I did so with Their Majesties only because I had to—because people could die if I didn't. Please, I've had enough for one day." He was in no way ready to see Charlaine and Jac hate him for the terrible things he'd done, from killing a man and stealing his identity to living a lie for the past twenty years—never mind all the people he'd killed before he'd managed to escape that life.

Charlaine and Jac were the kind of people born with honor and integrity in their blood, with kindness and loyalty in their bones. It never occurred to them that some people had to learn those traits, and that they often did so only after making a thousand terrible, tragic mistakes.

Sighing, Charlaine sat down beside him, drinking the wine he still held before handing the cup to Jac, who then sat in the chair close to Myra. "If that's what you want, so be it, but we're your friends, Myra. We only want to help."

Myra wanted desperately to lean into him, let Charlaine hold him. Charlaine had always been so delightfully tactile, especially for a man in his line of work. He wanted to pull Jac into his lap and rest his head on her shoulder, let her humor and cheer improve his mood. It felt wrong, though, asking for things they would gladly give him only because they didn't yet know the truth.

"You can't help, but I appreciate and am grateful you want to, never doubt that." He smiled wanly at both of them, then stole back his wine and drained the cup.

"Enough," Charlaine said, and took both cup and pitcher well out of his reach. "If you won't tell us what's wrong—"

"That man in the basement looked a bit like you," Jac blurted out.

Myra jerked as though he'd been slapped.

Charlaine's eyes widened. "What?"

Jac kept her eyes on Myra. "He looked like you, and I'm guessing he recognized you. That's why you're upset—or part of it, at least. It's also why you know so much about whatever is going to happen at the festival."

Myra pushed to his feet. "It's time for you both to go. I want to be left alone."

Charlaine rose and took his arm. "You're drunk and on the verge of tears, I'm not—"

"Let me—"

"I don't think—"

All three of them stopped at another knock on the door.

"Who is it now?" Charlaine groused.

Myra pulled away and went to answer it, ignoring both of them when they admonished him not to because were they serious?

He opened the door on a tall, broad, imposing woman with dark, black-brown skin and short, curly hair wearing the uniform of Penance Gate, including the rather alarming spiked armor. "Master Myra?"

"Yes. Come in, please. You must be the bodyguard? I wasn't expecting Penance Gate to trouble themselves."

Jac groaned.

Charlaine rolled his eye. "Ugh. Who sent you."

The woman in question smiled fleetingly, toothy and amused, as she stepped into the room and firmly closed the door. She had a sword at her left hip, and he could just see the pointed end of a war hammer strapped to her back. "It's never trouble to do the High Throne's bidding. We rarely get something as easy as protection detail. I'm Second Lieutenant Riker Delamora, assigned as your bodyguard until Captain Chass says otherwise."

"I appreciate it, Lieutenant. I'm going to go lie down. I'd be grateful if you'd see my friends out."

Riker glanced at him, glanced at Jac and Charlaine, then back at him with a faint smirk. "As you will it."

Myra bowed his head in thanks, then turned around slowly and headed into his bedroom, where he shut the door on Riker, Charlaine, and Jac arguing loudly and colorfully. Removing his slippers, he climbed into bed and fell asleep even as the bickering grew louder.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Charlaine leaned against the wall directly across from Myra's closed door and waited. They should have been enjoying the festival together. Should have been something other than soldier and secretary for a few days. He'd been looking forward to trying that out, seeing if it was something he could do for more than a few hours.

Instead, he was dressed in armor and weapons—though not uniform since he wasn't on duty—waiting to make a fool of himself before heading off to face unknown violence. At least it was assassins, not an army.

Once all this was over and he could breathe again—and not feel like his heart was about to give out from worry and stress—he was going to lock them in Myra's room and shake some sense into that halfwit's head.

Why couldn't everyone be more like Kamir? Why did they all have to make everything so needlessly difficult?

Why didn't he listen to his own advice more often?

Maybe this was a bad idea. But every time he thought that, the memory of Myra's haunted face returned. Charlaine would do *anything* to banish that look forever.

He was just about to start pacing the hall when Myra's door finally opened. Charlaine pushed away from the wall, ignoring the warning look Riker gave him, focused entirely on Myra, who looked worse than ever. Gaunt. Tense. Like he hadn't slept, or at least not well, and was going to jump out of his skin at the slightest too-loud noise.

"What are you doing here?" Myra asked.

That hurt, but Charlaine took a breath and pushed it away. Myra was acting exactly like everyone else would in his situation. "Supporting a friend, why do you even have to ask?"

Myra flinched. "Sorry."

"Would you just tell me what's wrong?"

"No," Myra said flatly.

Charlaine gathered up his courage, wishing he were anywhere but in that hallway, and finally said, "I was going to confess I wanted us to try being lovers. That's what I didn't want to admit in the garden. Because I backed out at the last minute during dinner, and then Jac asked you to tea, and I didn't want to ruin that or complicate matters."

Myra's mouth dropped, and for a moment he seemed to be his old self.

Then it all collapsed, and he looked closer to tears than ever.

Well, this wasn't going at all the way he'd been hoping. "Damn it. Riker, back off a bit, eh?"

Riker laughed. "Gladly. Anything is better than watching you confess your *feelings*."

"Like we don't all remember your sappy proposal." To her adorable baker spouse who helped make all the bread that kept the palace fed, in front of nearly every soldier in the military pavilion. No one had let her live the moment down for months, but they'd also chipped in, every last one of them, to make certain the two had a grand wedding.

Riker bared her teeth, gave him a friendly shove and strode to the end of the hall.

Charlaine turned back to Myra. "I'm sorry. I thought if I admitted that, maybe you would open up to me. You look like you're going to your death." Myra gave a brittle laugh, and Charlaine closed the distance between them. He pulled Myra into a tight hug. "Just tell me what's wrong. I hate to see you in so much pain."

"I used to live a very different life," Myra said quietly. "I escaped it and have lived a lie ever since. Now that old life has come back."

"Is that why the bodyguard?" Though it wasn't hard to guess—and Charlaine could make several other guesses, given it was Riker who was protecting him, or was Myra forgetting she wasn't the only second lieutenant who'd been made a bodyguard?

Sometimes Charlaine wanted to throw every last person in the palace into the ocean. Except Kamir and his children, they could stay. Maybe Jader, but only because Kamir would be sad otherwise.

"Yes. I fervently hope she does not die when they come for me."

"Stay here in your room! I'll remain as well and we'll protect you. No one will get past the two of us."

Myra shook his head. "They know of me. They will not rest until they reclaim me. I'd rather face them head on, not hide in my room like a damned coward. The more I hide, the more lives I risk."

"You're a fool. Why don't any of you stubborn asses ever listen to your bodyguards? Kamir listens! So clearly it can be done—why won't the rest of you follow his example?"

A faint but true smile curved Myra's mouth, and then suddenly he was in Charlaine's space, cupping his face and pulling him into a kiss.

And oh, what a kiss. It was worth every moment of agonizing and wondering and hoping and second guessing to feel Myra's mouth slotted against his, the way he so quickly took control of Charlaine's mouth, licking and sucking, pressing deep as though determined to taste and mark all he could. Charlaine groaned and kissed back just as heatedly, wrapping his arms around Myra's waist and holding fast.

When they finally drew apart, flushed and panting, Charlaine nipped at his lips and said, "Does this mean you're going to listen to me, you stubborn ass?"

"It means I'm saying goodbye." Myra kissed him again, hard and biting, then shoved Charlaine hard enough he landed on his ass. "I'm sorry." He strode off down the hall to join Riker.

By the time Charlaine picked himself up and ran down the hall to catch him, Myra was protected by the sharp, pointy wall that was Riker. "Back off, Fathoms—I mean Shattered." She grinned. "How's life protecting the High Commander's spouse?"

"Relaxing," Charlaine snapped. "Myra—"

"Is done here," Riker cut in. "Back off, Charlaine, or I'll put you back on the floor, and we both know you won't get up so easy the second time."

Charlaine grunted but didn't argue or test her. Penance Gate in general was not a group to piss off, but three people especially were to be avoided at all costs: Captain Chass, First Lieutenant Aria and Second Lieutenant Riker. She was Aria's protégé and would someday be her second in command when Aria became Captain. Charlaine could probably beat her in

a fight if it came to that, but he preferred not to find out just then. "Fine. Myra, we're not done."

Myra did not reply—did not even look at him.

Charlaine watched them go, then made his own way out of the palace and to the stables. Mounted up, he made swiftly for the fairgrounds west of the palace and north of the city, a sprawling, chaotic mess of celebration to commemorate the day the Harken Empire officially came into existence, uniting nine warring kingdoms. The festival also drew from myriad holidays of the various kingdoms and religions, a mishmash as colorful and diverse as the citizens it represented.

He kept eyes and ears strained as he traveled, looking for anything even remotely out of place, reaching for a sound that didn't belong.

But all he saw was joy and excitement, the occasionally harried merchant or vendor, or a child overwhelmed by all the people and noise. Lovers. Families. The wonderful scents made his stomach growl: all manner of kebab, from mutton roasted on spits to beef cooked directly on the grill and fish simmering away in pans. Samosas savory and sweet. Charlaine tried to block it all out. There'd be time for tea and samosas later.

A cacophony of cheering drowned out the rest of the chaos momentarily, a roar of celebration coming from the stadium, which meant Sarrica and Allen had arrived to officially start the festival. Charlaine's already racing heart sped up even further as he steadily made his way through the mess to the stadium, eyes watching constantly for anything that might stand out, though if the assassins were even half as good as he'd been told, his efforts were futile.

Reaching the stadium, he handed off his horse to one of the countless attendants, took his ticket to retrieve the horse later and flashed his medallion to get through the gate for special guests.

Charlaine swept his gaze over the seats once he entered, ignoring the fighting taking place in the center of the stadium. Despite his fears that Myra would try to get creative and hide—which rarely worked with assassins of the caliber they were facing—Myra was in the section reserved for important but non-noble guests. All the way at the back, the wall right behind him, Riker between him and the aisle. The seats immediately around

them were empty, despite the fact that the stadium was packed. Riker must have charmed them all into moving.

Charlaine looked to the imperial box, which was at the northern point of the stadium, well above everything else and jutting out slightly to give the best possible view of the stadium ring. Sarrica, Lesto, Rene and Shemal occupied seats at the back of the box, conversing quietly and drinking. Allen, Tara, Kamir, and Larren were right up against the edge, watching the fighting below avidly and speaking animatedly with each other. Just behind them stood Jac and Chass, and all around the perimeter and at the entrance were Fathoms Deep and Penance Gate soldiers. Along the edge, and mixed in the crowd, were Fathoms Deep and Three-headed Dragons, and probably imperial soldiers out of uniform.

Even at a distance, Charlaine could see something sad in Chass's normally closed off face as he watched his brothers, but whatever was upsetting Chass wasn't his problem, even if he was damned curious. The only emotions Chass ever wore openly were anger and dark amusement.

He turned his attention to the ring itself, where fifty-six people had split into pairs, artfully dueling, equal parts martial skill and theatrical talent, occasionally breaking up into a chaotic mass before arranging into new pairs again and starting anew.

The back of his neck itched, but Charlaine couldn't say why past the obvious, and that bothered the piss out of him. He'd almost rather be working; at least then he'd have something to do and would be somewhere more effective than on the fringes of the stadium.

Rolling his shoulders to ease some of the tension, he finally pushed onward, threading through the standing-only crowd along the edges of the seating area and climbing the steps to the first set of raised seats. All the while he kept searching the crowd—for someone too tense, too casual, too alert but not really watching the show. There was so much movement, though, that oddities were hard to spot. If he were an assassin trying to climb all the way to the imperial box, how would he go about it? Either be inside to begin with, which was highly unlikely, or scale it from the front or back. But those positions were blocked as well. From the air? Soltorin was known for their strange gliders, a secret they shared with no one. Many had tried to recreate them, but so far no one had succeeded.

He glanced at Myra, who scowled when he noticed Charlaine. Then he looked back at the performance—and saw something that drained the color from his face. He surged to his feet, eyes snapping to Charlaine. "The duelists!"

Charlaine whipped around and ran toward the ring, right as people started screaming and panicking. A moment ago the stadium had been filled with joy; now it was filled with screams of terror and pain as people shoved and pushed and trampled each other. He fought his way through the crowds and swung over the low wall that separated the ring from the spectators.

But he was too late. Many of the performers lay dead, and a few of the remaining were fighting off the guards that had surged forward the moment they'd noticed a problem. Blood soaked the sawdust, the iron tang of it sharp in his nose. Charlaine drew his sword and buckler as two of the assassins came at him, but taking on those two allowed another two to slip past.

By the time he'd dealt with his attackers and turned, the other two had vanished up the wall and into the imperial box. And it seemed like more than two were already there.

Given how few of the performers were dead and how many seemed to be missing, Charlaine's blood ran cold at the idea of how many assassins there might be.

Shouts and curses came from behind him and Charlaine turned just in time to deal with another pair of assassins.

They all froze at the sound of a gut-wrenching, agonizing scream. That was High Consort Allen.

Charlaine finished off his assailants and ran for the imperial box—just in time to see Myra throw somebody out of it. The body, broken and bled out, fell at his feet. Charlaine looked up and froze in place at the cold expression on Myra's face. If he saw Charlaine, there was no way to tell before he vanished again.

Running up the stairs—and over three dead Penance Gate guards who looked like they'd gone down hard—Charlaine barreled up to the imperial box.

And found a bloodbath. The sight and smell nearly made him gag, despite his years of experience. The space was meant to hold a maximum of

thirty people. Sarrica, Allen, their guests and guards had comprised twentytwo. There were at least thirty-five people crammed into the place, not counting the additional guards who had arrived right behind Charlaine. Or all the dead bodies.

So many dead bodies. All of them highly experienced soldiers. The best of Fathoms Deep and Penance Gate had been assigned, and nearly all of them lay dead. None of them had died easily or pleasantly.

Allen was bent sobbing over a body, and for a moment Charlaine thought it was Sarrica.

Not that the reality was better: Larren lay in a pool of blood, and what looked like damage from at least two blades responsible for killing him. One through his gut, the other across his throat. Given the blades lying around them...

Well, it would probably be for the best if Allen wasn't present when the body was moved because the head might have to be moved separately if it was as severed as Charlaine feared.

Lesto heaved to his feet then pulled Sarrica up. He yanked a dagger from his shoulder and snarled, "Get them out of here!"

Jader was already moving. He kicked and shoved away the bodies of the men who'd cornered him, bellowing orders to the few soldiers still standing.

Chass looked the worst of them, his spiked armor more red than gray, blood pouring down the left side of his head and more where something had thrust between the cuisse and fan-plate in his armor. Despite the injured leg, he mustered to his feet, scooped up a screaming, protesting Allen, and ran from the box—Charlaine barely dodging out of his way in time. He looked over the edge to see as more Penance Gate guards closed in around them, a spiked, blood-red wall with swords, war hammers, and axes ready to spread pain.

How had a small group of assassins caused so much damage to some of the best soldiers in the empire? Lesto's personal force, for Pantheon's sake, and Penance Gate, who'd fought off armies three times their numbers.

What was left of Fathoms Deep closed in around Sarrica, and the remaining Penance Gate led away everyone else, leaving only Jader, Charlaine, Myra—

"Where's Jac?" Myra cracked out, holding one bleeding arm, more blood dripping from his forehead. "She was here. She saved Allen. Then when I turned back she was gone."

Jader glared thunderously. "I want to know why I was told to expect roughly nine assassins and instead I wound up facing *at least thirty*. That's not a band of assassins, that's a mercenary force!"

Charlaine wanted to throw up. Had there really been so many? But he'd killed four himself, seen two more get by him...and he couldn't count the number of dead bodies up here and the still more that had been thrown over the side. That wasn't how assassins operated. No wonder there'd been a bloodbath. They'd been prepared for a completely different kind of fight. Pantheon. If they hadn't known about it...

"I've never heard of them doing such a thing," Myra said, shaking his head, wiping at the blood and sweat on his face but only smearing it. "I told you everything I know—"

"And now the Crown Prince of Gaulden, the High Consort's eldest brother, is dead," Jader snapped.

Anger filled Myra's face. "Arrest me if you want! Execute me! I don't care! I did the best I could! Where is Jac!"

Jader swore and kicked aside the arm that had flopped across his boot when a body shifted. "I don't know. I thought she was with Allen." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Somebody get me more Fathoms Deep."

Charlaine turned to do so but caught movement and looked down. "Already on their way, Commander."

Acknowledging the words with a grunt, Jader knelt beside Larren's body. From the grim set of his mouth, he shared Charlaine's assessment. "Help me." Charlaine moved forward and knelt on Larren's other side, removing his sash and working with Jader to secure his head so moving him wouldn't finish the job the killer had started.

As the Fathoms Deep soldiers arrived, Jader said, "Half of you are to escort me to the palace. Nobody comes close. Kill anyone who even remotely seems a threat. I want the rest to gather up these bodies. Take ours to the pavilion, the assassins to the dungeons for further examination."

They chorused an acknowledgement. Jader glanced at Myra, then snapped to Charlaine, "Get him back to the palace. He's to remain in his rooms until I say otherwise."

"Yes, Commander."

"And figure out where in the Realms Jac has gone!" Jader snarled before heading off with Larren cradled in his arms, wrapped in his cloak, several of the Fathoms Deep soldiers closing in around him.

Charlaine looked out over the empty stadium, the bodies still lying in the ring—most of the performers and nearly all of the soldiers. More bodies were in the stands, guards and would-be heroes who'd tried to stop fleeing assassins or otherwise gotten caught in the chaos. His eyes stung, but he pushed the tears back with years of practice.

If the goal had been to damage the stability and morale of the Harken Empire, whoever had commissioned the attack had gotten their money's worth.

Looking away, Charlaine finally approached Myra and gently took his uninjured arm. "Are you all right?"

Myra let out a bitter, angry laugh that turned into a sob. "I did everything I could. I tried to help. What did I do wrong? Should I have said nothing?"

"No," Charlaine said, pulling him close and threading one hand through Myra's messy, blood-soaked hair. "Without you, this tragedy would be far greater. Jader's angry, but I promise he's almost entirely angry with *himself*. Never mind that the first thing people are going to do is declare him an unfit High Commander, and that's one more thing the High Throne doesn't need right now. Nobody could have perfectly braced for an unknown attack involving *thirty* high-end assassins." He hugged Myra tightly. "I saw you—you did everything you possibly could. Come on, let's get you back to the palace. It's not safe to remain here."

"We have to find Jac. It's strange she's gone missing. That's not like her."

"She's probably back at the palace, and you missed her in the chaos. I can't tell you the number of times something similar has happened to me—both the one looking for someone and the one being sought."

Myra did not look convinced but nodded and finally let Charlaine help him across the bloody, body-strewn space and down the steps. It took some time to make it to the corral where the horses were kept, but once there it was easy enough to fetch his own horse.

The palace was earily quiet when they reached it: the pavilion desolate, the halls empty save for nervous servants and tense guards.

At his side, Myra pressed closer, trembling, tears falling despite obvious efforts to hold them back and wipe them angrily away. "Will you go look for Jac?"

"Of course," Charlaine said. "Once I know you're settled and well—as well as can be." He shook his head at Myra's attempted protests, and the rest of the journey to Myra's suite was done in silence.

But as they started down the hallway toward his door, Myra gave a cry and bolted for it. Charlaine saw the reason as he gave chase. They came to an unsteady halt in front of the door.

A note had been pinned to it with a black-handled dagger, the nasty, curved kind common to the Triumvirate and similar to the knives favored by Islanders, since the original purpose of both was for cutting fish and opening shellfish and similar chores.

Myra yanked the dagger from the door and broke the seal on the note.

Charlaine looked over his shoulder, but the note was written in what he vaguely recognized as Soltorish. Like most mercs, he knew a smattering of words in several languages—just enough to ask for food, a bed, where to piss, and where to hire a fuck for the night. Like many officers, he also knew how to ask what the bribe was to get his useless, drunk enlisted out of jail.

So he knew what Soltorish looked like, but the letter was far beyond knowing how to ask for a beer and a whore. "What does it say?"

"That if I want Jac to live, I'm to meet them at the Sharktooth by sundown. If I don't come, Jac will die and they'll come for me anyway."

Charlaine frowned. "Why not simply come for you, then? Why go to all this trouble? This gives us a chance to trap them."

"I think they'll come for me *eventually*. Judging from the bodies in the imperial box, most of their forces are dead." Myra's lip curled. "No doubt they expected that. I can't imagine why else they would go with a force that is more than three times larger than normal. We failed to save Prince L-L

—" Myra broke off crying, crumbling the note in his hand. "We failed to save Prince Larren. I'm not going to lose Jac too."

"You can't—"

"What?" Myra snarled, the words rattling through the empty hallway. "You can't seriously expect me to leave her? Let her die? This is *my* fault. I can't bring back Prince Larren, but I can save Jac! If they want me, they can have me." He shoved Charlaine away, unlocked his door, and barreled through it.

Charlaine swore and chased after him, but all he got for his efforts was the bedroom door slammed in his face and locked. He pounded on it. "Myra! Open this fucking door!" He yanked at the handle to test it, but it was unfortunately sturdy enough that breaking it wasn't likely. Not without tools he didn't currently have. "Myra, I will break down this door and then break your fucking—"

He jumped and turned around at the sound of someone clearing their throat and stared at a haggard, blood-smeared Riker. "What?"

"Their Majesties demand Myra's presence immediately."

"Then you fucking get him out of there," Charlaine said.

Riker hefted the bloody hammer she still held and stepped toward the door—only for it to swing open.

Charlaine sucked in a sharp breath through his nostrils, eyes locked on the stranger before him.

Myra's hair was gone, shorn close the way a soldier would wear it. He was dressed entirely in black, the clothes fitted, the jacket short, and he had boots that came to his knees, clearly made to hide slim throwing knives. There were fingerless gloves on his hands, and Charlaine counted at least five daggers, not including the knives in his boots. He held a long, dark coat that probably hid things Charlaine didn't want to know about.

He swallowed. "Myra..."

"I'll come see Their Majesties," Myra said to Riker, completely ignoring Charlaine. He shrugged into the coat and buttoned it.

Riker snorted. "Don't let the High Commander catch you with all those pointy things. He's already spitting mad."

"I deserve whatever anger I receive. Let's get this over with."

"Damn it, Myra—"

They left, still ignoring him, and oh was Charlaine going to have a lot of words, at very high levels, with Myra about that later. For the moment, however, he shunted his anger and worry aside and chased after them, keeping pace all the way to the office.

Thankfully, they let him in as well, and he slipped in his quiet, easy to miss way to a corner of the room—though that skill did not spare him raised brows from Jader.

Myra crossed over to where Allen sat on the sofa struggling not to resume crying and dropped to one knee, bowing his head low. "Your Majesty, apologies are insufficient, but I am sorry that my attempts to help were such an abysmal failure. I swear to you I held nothing back and did all that I could. I apologize that it was not enough."

"It's not—it's not—" Allen stopped, drew a shaky breath, and tried again, covering Sarrica's hand where it rested on his shoulder. Behind him, Sarrica shifted restlessly, but obediently remained silent as Allen finally said, "It's not your fault. You do not owe us apologies. Everyone involved did the best they could. Lesto, Jader and Chass all advised against going to the opening ceremonies, but we elected to go anyway. *I* elected to go anyway. If I had listened and foregone the festival as I was told, my brother would still be alive. The blame lies with me."

"With us," Sarrica said gruffly. "I agreed with you that we should attend anyway."

"Your brother made the decision as well," Lesto said. "We're all culpable. As head of your bodyguards, it was my right to lock you in your rooms. I didn't. We're all to blame for this tragedy."

Allen just cried harder.

"The ones most to blame are those who did the killing," Sarrica said roughly. "We are going to find at least one of the bastards to shake information from before removing their head. Myra, stand up already. What happened to your hair? Why are you dressed that way?"

Sarrica looked almost as haggard as he had on the day Nyle died, and also in pain, probably because his arm was in a sling but he hadn't taken any medicine. Lesto and Jader looked as though they were ready to execute themselves or help each other do it. Chass looked like a man who had never

cried in his life, and never would, but very much wished he knew how. Not something Charlaine had expected to see from him.

All of them needed to be properly tended by healers, but Charlaine didn't waste time telling them so. Eventually, when they were willing to listen, Lesto or Jader would see it was done.

In reply, Myra stood and held out the note, and as Allen took it, he explained what it said.

"Jac!" Allen said, tears renewing. "Sarrica—"

Sarrica made a rough, pained noise and moved around to sit on the couch, pulling Allen into his lap heedless of his damaged arm, and held him tightly. He stared at Myra, meeting his gaze, looking old and tired and hardedged. "What do we need to do?"

"Let me go," Myra said. "All they want is me. If they sense anyone else is involved, they will kill her. They don't give a damn about Jac. But they know she's important to Allen and that I'll come for her. So let me go. I'll take one person with me, provided they stay back and well out of sight, to ensure Jac gets home safely in case she's wounded or otherwise incapacitated. If you try to send in more than that, I promise you she won't survive the night. They've accomplished enough of their mission; the rest of this is personal, so it won't matter to them what kind of blood they shed or chaos they cause, as long as they can get what they want and get out."

"We're not just trading one of you for the other," Sarrica snapped. "That's not a solution."

"I'm not trading—"

"Don't insult me," Sarrica said, voice so harsh and cold that even Charlaine froze and stared. "I know the look of a person who has no intention of coming home."

Myra swallowed at the words and nearly started to cry. "That doesn't mean I don't *want* to come h-home," he said shakily.

"Your life isn't any less valuable than Jac's. If you're too intent on your suicide mission to help us form a real plan, then you're dismissed. Sergeant Riker, take him back to his room, and it's your job if he gets out."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Riker stepped forward, hauled Myra close, and held fast.

Charlaine peeled out of his corner and went after them.

"What do you think you're doing, Lieutenant?" Jader demanded.

Stopping, Charlaine faced him head-on and said, "He's my *friend*. He's behaving stupidly because he's in pain and feels guilty and afraid and wants to *do* something, just like everyone else here. Now he's being sent to his room like a child. I'm not going to let him sit there and all the pain fester."

"Fine. Keep me apprised." Jader jerked his head, and Charlaine gave a hasty salute before all but running out of the room.

He caught up to Riker and Myra halfway back to Myra's room—and stopped short as he registered they weren't moving but seemed to be waiting for him. Slowing his steps, approaching warily, Charlaine asked, "What's going on?"

"The end of a promising career, that's what," Riker said, striking the wall with the side of her fist. If she cared about the blood she left behind, she made no show of it. Normally, Charlaine might have teased her about being an uncouth barbarian, but right then the sight of blood smeared across the ornate green and gold wallpaper just made him sick and sad. "Get going, both of you. I'll delay their finding out for as long as I possibly can."

Charlaine frowned. "Why are you helping us?"

She sneered. "I don't care about you. I'm helping the Captain."

"The Captain?" Charlaine blinked slowly. "What does Chass have to do with this?"

Riker huffed. "Are you that stupid? If you don't go after those men to get Jac back then Chass will—he'll do whatever he has to, no matter the cost, for the High Consort. The last thing any of us needs right now is Chass striking out on his own. Certainly Their Majesties or Penance Gate don't need that." Sorrow overtook her face for a brief, blink-and-you-miss-it moment, and more quietly she added. "Least of all Chass."

Myra made a derisive noise. "Captain Chass hates Allen. He used to beat \_\_\_"

"You know nothing about it," Riker hissed, grabbing him by the throat of his jacket and yanking him in close. "Nothing at all. Captain Chass loves the High Consort and would die to protect him. After everything Chass has done for Aria and the others, I will do whatever it takes to protect him, even if that means throwing away my career and going back to my mother's damned dairy farm. Now go, because they'll probably feel bad in a little while and recall Myra, at which point time's run out."

Charlaine had at least a hundred questions about that little rant, but he stowed them for later—probably much later.

"We owe you," Myra said, and Charlaine clapped her arm before they bolted off.

Though Charlaine would have preferred to go to his room to get better armor and more weapons, it wasn't worth the risk or time. Commandeering horses from the public palace stables, they rode off as fast they could for Harkenesten City.

"I don't suppose you know where this pub we're supposed to meet at is located?" Myra looked frustrated and miserable that he had to ask, but Charlaine didn't comment. One of the most difficult parts of being the imperial Head Secretary was that it made him a liability. So much like Sarrica and Allen and many others who knew too much, Myra seldom left the palace and when he did, it was with a well-armed escort. So though he'd lived in Harkenesten for twenty years, there were entire parts of it he wasn't familiar with.

"I do, actually," Charlaine said. "The Sharktooth is one of those dubious holes that are scattered all over the dockyards. One pin will buy you a bowl of soup that tastes like it was made with week-old shit and a cup of beer that's probably just the bartender's piss. We'll have to burn our clothes when we're done." And probably shave everything, but one problem at a time.

Myra grimaced but said nothing, only signaled for Charlaine to lead the way.

It took them a good hour to fight through the chaos of the sprawling, overcrowded city, especially since the whole place was frantic over what had happened at the festival. From what snatches he caught, reality had already blown into wild rumors.

As they reached the street the pub was on, it was almost a relief to shunt all his other thoughts aside. He dismounted and led their horses to an alleyway. Nobody would be stupid enough to steal horses bearing palace brands, but he didn't want to draw more attention than they likely already had. "It's that building there, you see it?"

"Hard to miss the shark skeleton and the additional head full of teeth over the door," Myra said, sounding amused before he remembered there was nothing funny about the situation.

Charlaine *ached*, but words of comfort would just be ignored right then. "Once you're inside, I'll slip around the back."

"They'll have people watching and—"

"And I've been doing this longer than you," Charlaine snapped. "You might be a former Soltorin assassin, but you've been a secretary the past twenty years, while I've been a mercenary all this time—one with a specialty for sneaking around. I know you're upset, but would you *please* remember who it is you're working with?"

"I'm sorry." Myra closed his eyes, looking for a moment as though he was going to cry again. Before Charlaine could apologize, though, he opened his eyes and said, "How did you know I was..."

Charlaine huffed. "An assassin? I'm not stupid, Myra. The pieces weren't hard to put together. Did you think I'd be repulsed or something?"

"I lied. You've no idea how many lies I've told—and lived. The terrible things I did before I ran away. You hate lies."

Taking a chance, Charlaine reached out and ran a hand over Myra's poor, shorn hair. "I'm a little hurt, maybe, but that's my problem, not yours. I'm sorry you felt you couldn't trust me, but again, that's on me. Of course you hid it. You clearly hate Soltorin and your past. You'd hardly be the first person to come to Harken hoping to start a new life. We'll talk about this more later. Let's go rescue your lady, hmm? If she hasn't taken care of them all herself and is looking for more people to maim and kill."

Myra's mouth twitched, but he only nodded. "Off I go. Be careful."

"You be careful, you reckless fool." Charlaine yanked him close, kissed him hard, then shoved him away. "If something goes wrong, get out of there—and don't do anything stupid, I mean it. You promised Jac you'd go for tea, and it's rude to break a promise."

Myra stared at him a moment, looking sad and haunted for a moment before his face hardened. Then he turned away and headed for the Sharktooth. Trying to ignore the bad feeling gnawing at his gut, Charlaine waited until he vanished, counted out two minutes, then slipped down the alley to come around the building from behind, silently sending up a prayer that all three of them would be going home soon.

## CHAPTER SIX

Jac was going to *fucking*. *Kill*. The bastards the very second she managed to get her limbs free. They'd nicked her neck, broken her nose, thrown out her Pantheon-damned spurs—and those things weren't cheap. Worst of all, one of the fish-guts-for-brains bastards had gotten sloppy and sliced her breast and the blood was drying and everything *itched* and she could do not a single fucking thing about it.

Somebody was going to die, and they were going to die slowly and painfully.

And if she kept being pissed off about her bloody boob, she wouldn't drown in anger and remorse over failing Allen so horrifically. She'd meant to get them *both* out of the way, but the arrow that had narrowly missed her throat had delayed her enough she'd saved Allen but watched helplessly as Larren died.

Then she'd gotten herself fucking *kidnapped*, and oh, was somebody going to pay for that humiliation. She was going to remove their nether regions, make them into kebabs, and force the bastards to eat them.

Why, though, that was what bothered her. She was a bodyguard, for Pantheon's sake. Surely the assassins knew that the general practice was to kill the bodyguard and take the person being protected. Not that she was complaining. She'd rather be kidnapped than dead. Still, it was baffling. What did they hope to accomplish by taking her? Getting to Allen, since they'd failed in their first strike?

Because Allen would do it—this was the man who'd joined the Dragons on a dangerous mission in a reckless attempt to prove himself, after all—but no way would the others let him.

Although Sarrica would definitely do something himself, after making sure Allen was locked in a closet that had been nailed shut and had fifty people guarding it.

She looked up at the sound of the door creaking open—and swore softly, heart dropping into her stomach, as Myra stepped into the lice-ridden dump of a pub she'd been dragged to.

Then he stepped further into the light, and her heart practically seized. That...that wasn't Myra. Not any Myra she knew. The man before her looked more like somebody who belonged in Frigid Heart or Jagged Edge, not commanding the imperial office.

One of the men who'd taken her—the long, lanky, almost skeletal one who seemed to be in charge—stepped forward, blocking Jac from view, arms resting far too casually at his sides. She couldn't see his knives, but they were there.

Infuriatingly, they spoke in Soltorish. Jac focused on Myra's voice, tried to gauge what was happening and was going to happen by his tone, but both he and Skeleton were quiet and level. They may as well have been discussing the fucking weather for all she could discern.

She gasped as one of them grabbed the back of her tunic, hauled her to her feet and dragged her forward. The woman dumped her on the floor and spat several nasty-sounding words at Myra.

He ignored her, all his attention on Jac. "Are you all right?"

"I'll be better when I can kick all their asses," Jac said. "What's going on? Why do you look like that?"

Myra didn't reply, only turned his attention back to Skeleton and started speaking Soltorish again.

Skeleton said something rough and sibilant, making Jac shudder. Myra replied sharp and cold. Skeleton laughed, the sound low and mean and smug. He gestured lazily to the woman who'd been hauling Jac around. The woman stepped forward, pulling a knife—and toppled with a wet gasp, a knife sticking out of the back of her throat.

For a moment, everything went still and silent.

Then everything exploded into chaos. Myra swept forward, moving in a way that was impressive in its skill but shocking in that he knew how to do that.

Then her vision was blocked, and Jac jerked back with a snarl—and stopped as she registered Charlaine. "Get me loose, damn it!" The words weren't terribly impressive with a broken nose, but hopefully they were clear enough.

Charlaine gave her a look and obeyed.

Jac had just stood, flexing the soreness from her wrists, when Skeleton whistled and more figures poured in from outside.

"Damn it," Charlaine snarled, and then he was surrounded.

Jac yanked the knife from the throat of the woman Charlaine had killed, threw it at the man coming straight for her, then took the dead woman's sword and threw herself into the fray.

But they were simply no match for the sheer numbers. How many fucking Soltorins—but no, she could hear multiple languages. These were just cheap guttersnipes. But that was all it took sometimes. Even the best soldier in the world was no match when severely outnumbered.

Jac killed four more of them and was nearly to the door when the numbers overcame her. Three large men pinned her to the ground, and on her periphery she could just see five more holding Charlaine down.

Around Myra was a wreath of bodies, his face almost completely covered with blood, still more on his throat, and his clothes visibly damp in patches. Jac shivered, aching for the anguished stranger who had replaced the sweet man she'd asked to tea. He said something to Skeleton, who strode across the room and slammed him into the wall, one hand wrapped around Myra's throat. Myra dropped his knives but didn't struggle, only glared hatefully. Skeleton said something, and Myra snarled back, but Skeleton's reply made him slump slightly.

"Don't!" Jac snarled, because *that* was a demeanor she knew. "We can fight our way out of this, damn it. Don't—"

"I had twenty years," Myra said, looking at her. "That's more than I ever thought I'd get." He looked at Charlaine a long moment, then back at Jac. "Tell Sarrica and Allen I'm sorry. Take care of them. Take care of each other."

"Myra!" Charlaine bellowed as Jac cursed with every single filthy word she knew.

Jac struggled to get free, all the while hurling every nasty word she could come up with. It was pointless, given each of the men holding her down was at least twice her weight, but she tried until she was exhausted.

Tears slipped free and hit the grimy wooden floor she was pinned against. How much longer until their throats were slit? Damn it, why hadn't

Myra been willing to fight?

A figure appeared in the doorway and snapped out a handful of sharp words in terrible, guttural informal Harken.

The bastards holding her down laughed in an ugly, ominous way, and hefted her up. One of them cupped a hand over her groin and said something in a language she couldn't place. Jac spat in his face, which caused the others to laugh—and loosen their holds. Jac jerked her legs free, slammed a knee into Asshole's rancid dick, then drove her elbows back enough to further put the others off balance.

She pulled a sword from one of them and had Grabby Hands dead before he could pull his own sword. She rounded on the other two, parrying a sloppy swing and then sliding in close, driving the pommel of the sword into one's nose, sending him reeling to the floor in pain and blood.

That left only the third man, who looked as though he was reconsidering his choices. Jac thrust, one hand on the hilt, the other against the pommel, sinking the sword deep into the man's gut in the split between his cheap, plated leather armor.

Yanking a dagger from the dying man's belt, she threw it at one of Charlaine's captors, who realized too late that she'd come out the winner in one against three.

Two of them tried to hold onto Charlaine while the other three came to take care of her, but by the time she had one killed, Charlaine was free, and they dispatched the remaining few with ease.

Jac dropped the sword she'd been holding; it was heavier than a sword should be, too big for her to use easily anyway, and she was already exhausted. If there was another fight in her future...well, it probably didn't matter. She was spent.

She wiped blood and sweat from her face with one sleeve and looked at Charlaine. "All right there, old man?"

"Shut up," Charlaine said. "I'm fine. You, little girl?"

Jac rolled her shoulders and neck. "Be better when I get all this dried blood off my tits."

Charlaine gave her a look and started to speak, but before he could, the air filled with the sound of the whistle used by the city guards. A moment

later they were filling the already overfull pub. "Halt in the name of the High King!"

Jac rolled her eyes as she lifted her arms in a show of peace.

"We work for the High King," Charlaine groused even as he dropped his sword. "We're here on official business." He grimaced. "Business that went poorly. Let us show you our medallions." At the nod from the Lieutenant in charge of the brace of guards, Charlaine and Jac reached beneath their tunics and pulled out their medallions.

The Lieutenant sheathed his sword and approached, studying each one in excruciating, tedious detail before finally relenting. "You want to tell me what in the Realms—"

"That's no longer your concern," said a deep, rough voice.

Jac snapped to attention, as did Charlaine, as Captain Chass removed his spiked helmet and prowled into the room like a wolf that had scented easy prey. The city guards had already backed well away from him and the two who flanked him: Second Lieutenant Riker and First Lieutenant Aria.

Oh, Pantheon, what else had gone wrong that Sarrica had ordered out *Penance Gate*. They didn't normally deal with matters like this. They were one of the largest mercenary forces in Harken. They dealt with far bigger and bloodier affairs. This debacle was more likely to be handed off to Fathoms Deep, or one of the other midrange-sized groups that dealt primarily with homeland matters.

"Get out," Chass said, and Jac had never seen the city guards obey an order so quickly. When they were gone, the door banging shut on its half-rotted hinges behind them, Chass handed his helmet off to Riker and stepped idly over bodies. "So it looks like Myra and Charlaine were successful in retrieving you, Sergeant, but failed miserably at keeping him safe as well. This is what comes of sending you soft types to do hard work."

"Shut your fucking—" Charlaine snapped his mouth shut as Chass stared at him. "We were ready to go down fighting. Myra gave himself up and refused to fight any further."

Jac's mouth twisted sourly. "He acted like a prisoner already sentenced to execution."

Chass laughed, rough-edged and coldly amused. "Of course he did—that's what he *is.* Do you fools know anything about Soltorin? The Triumvirate?"

"Not really," Charlaine said. "I've crossed paths with Odon once, when we were forced to take shelter there. Most of the locals were nice enough, and the ones that didn't like us simply chose to avoid us. I know what anyone knows: they used to be three countries, then Benta colonized them and they became one. Technically the united whole is called Soldonir, but everyone just calls them the Triumvirate. They managed to overthrow Benta a few decades ago, but most of the changes Benta installed remain in place. There's a lot of internal strife between those who think the new ways are better and those who want to return to the old ways. They hate us partly because of their ties to Benta, and partly because we deserve it, given the less pleasant parts of Harken's 'the world is ours for the taking' past."

"I know school children with more knowledge than that," Chass said.

Jac winced inwardly because she hadn't even known that much. School for people like her amounted to whatever the person being made to teach the orphans that week felt like telling them. Usually it was easily memorized facts and basics like counting. Nobody bothered to teach them things like reading or world history. Mostly they were encouraged to find jobs as quickly as possible, so they could move out and make space for more orphans.

Before Charlaine could voice the scathing reply written on his expressive face, Chass continued, "The three parts are each a crucial mechanism in running the whole; that's partly how it came to be called the Triumvirate. It was a deliberate change on the part of Benta, to force the three to rely on each other for the survival of the whole, making it that much more difficult to rebel. If one part fails, the whole will collapse." Chass sounded shockingly like a patient teacher, suddenly, rather than the ruthless bastard Jac knew. "They've not truly been three separate countries for a long time, whatever they let the rest of the world think.

"Odon is where the governing forces reside, a court of seven, two for each country and one to represent the whole. They command all the ruling bodies on the islands—the chiefs, the governors, and so forth—as well as the tax offices, the courts, and the rest of the infrastructure. Odon also provides the bulk of the artisans and laymen, all of whom must go there to

be certified and licensed to practice their craft or skill at all. The only international port is there as well; anyone leaving or entering the country must go there before going anywhere else.

"Jithinir is the backbone, where the vast majority of food and goods come from, and they control the Heart Lake. They're also in charge of the ships, though they dock primarily in Odon. Soltorin is the fighting arm, providing both the military and mercenaries that the rest of the world sees, and the assassins that only a scant few of us know about. The assassin clans are few in number but powerful. They're little better than cults. If you leave, you're never heard from again. If you try to rebel, you are dragged home and put before a village tribunal. I've never known so-called traitors to be found anything but guilty; the tribunals are formalities, not fair trials. Traitors of Myra's...caliber, shall we say, generally die one of two ways: they are stoned to death, or they are tied to a stake in an open field and left there until dead."

"I'm not letting that happen!" Jac snarled, increasingly tempted to punch his stupid face. She'd give him a broken nose to match hers. "I don't fucking care who tries to stop me, I'm not letting—"

"Shut up, you ridiculous child," Chass snapped.

Jac bristled but shut up.

"Why are you here, Chass?"

"Because I don't have much choice," Chass said. "I cannot go myself, and if I leave the matter to the rest of them they will be too little, too late. So you pair of fools will have to suffice. If you want to rescue Myra, you are going to have to go to Soltorin and fetch him. We're scouring the docks and rattling the smugglers, but Soltorin probably used their damnable gliders to cut over land."

"If they're that far ahead of us, he'll be dead long before we can catch up," Charlaine said.

Chass gave him a contemptuous look. "If that were true, do you think I would be here helping a couple of bodyguards to do work they are barely fit for—"

Jac lunged at Chass, snarling several colorful words when Charlaine yanked her back and held her tightly. Chass looked genuinely amused for a minute. Well, he would.

"Chass, please, it's been a long fucking day and you're not helping." Charlaine flinched and added, "I'm sorry, that was out of line."

Chass ignored him, only saying, "They might be able to travel faster than you, little *flittas*, but they will not simply be able to go straight home once they reach Soltorin. They answer to bureaucracy the same as the rest of us. That will slow them down enough for you to catch up, assuming of course you're competent enough to do so and the weather doesn't work against you."

Jac glared. "Why the Realms do you care? I know what you did—"

"What I did to Allen?" Chass cut in. Jac snapped her mouth shut. "I'm not discussing that matter with you. I will see my brother happy, even if that means sending the two of you to save Myra when I should be going myself. Passage has been arranged for you. Riker will give you the details. Equipment is waiting outside. Try not to get yourselves killed. I'm damned tired of cleaning up the messes of incompetent fools. If you do something to further distress my brother, I will go into the Penance Realms and drag you out into the light so I can kill you again myself." He bared his teeth in something that probably counted as a smile amongst monsters. "Get out of my sight. Don't let me see you again unless it's to tell me of your success." He turned away from them. "Aria, get people in here to start cleaning up these corpses. Pay off the owner and shut this refuse pile down. If it accidentally burns, all the better."

"Yes, Captain." Aria spun neatly on her heel and strode off, barking orders before she was even out the door, her long, heavy, beaded dreadlocks snapping in time with her sharp movements.

Jac stared at Chass a moment longer, angry and confused, but when Charlaine tugged at her wrist she finally went.

Outside, it felt like she could breathe again.

And she was also abruptly reminded that Allen wasn't the only one who had lost a brother. However much a bastard Chass might be, he was still probably feeling the same grief. Pulling free of Charlaine's grip, she bolted back inside.

Chass turned around, vivid blue eyes striking her like lightning. "What now?"

"I'm sorry," Jac said. "I'm sorry about Prince Larren."

For a moment Chass looked like he'd been slapped, and Jac got a whisper of the pain he must be hiding. Then he was only the stony, sharpedged Captain of Penance Gate again. "I told you to get out of my sight."

"Yes, Captain."

Back outside, another realization belated struck her. "Oh, Pantheon."

"What?" Charlaine asked, scowling up at the rain that had started to fall, sharp and chilly and briny.

"Crown Prince Larren is dead. That means Captain Chass..."

Charlaine froze, his eyes shooting to hers, wide with comprehension and horror. "Chass is next in line. Holy Pantheon, he's now the Crown Prince of Gaulden."

Jac shook her head. "Thank the gods that's not our problem."

Three Penance Gate mercenaries approached them, one leading horses, the other bearing bags and satchels of supplies. Once they'd taken them, she also handed over purses of coin. "Don't fail."

"Stop acting like you're the only ones who can get anything done, Penance Menace," Jac snapped. "I'll knock your fucking lights out if you don't quit with the smarmy behavior."

The woman who'd handed them the supplies and money just smirked. "Pleasure in pain, little wyrm. Now go away and get on with it so we can finish our duties and go home."

Jac didn't punch her, but only because time was of the essence. Stomping off, Charlaine close on her heels, she waited until they were clear of Penance Gate before finally looking at the piece of paper they'd handed her with the information for the ship. Unfortunately, even having better light would not have helped. Handwriting was still completely beyond her capabilities, unless it was something as neat and easy to read as Allen's.

Hunching with embarrassment and shame, she held the slip of paper out. "I can't read it."

"That bad? Why am I surprised those fools—"

"No," Jac said, the tension in her shoulders worsening. "The problem is me. I wasn't taught as a child, and the military doesn't care. Thanks to Allen, I've learned a lot, but..."

"Oh." Charlaine smiled. "Can't have a better teacher than the Golden Tongue. I probably wouldn't have learned either, except I grew up in the theatre."

"You were a stage boy?" Jac asked. The mind boggled. Quiet, unobtrusive Charlaine prancing about on stage. "I need to hear about that later."

Charlaine snorted. "We've been booked passage on a merchant vessel, *The Falling Star.* Leaves at dawn. I know the location it's docked, and there's actually a good pub there. We can grab a decent meal before we head out, maybe take some food with us before we're forced to make do with ship food."

"I know the *Falling Star*, or at least of it. Rene's used it before for some of our more discreet missions, though whenever I was along we used a different ship. The captain of the *Falling Star* and he are old friends. Do you think Captain Chass knew that and arranged passage on that ship on purpose?"

"The only thing I know about Captain Chass is that trying to predict him guarantees failure and a sore head. Let's go." Charlaine rode off, and Jac kneed her horse to hasten after him.

They traveled in silence, for which she was grateful. Every stitch of her body felt battered and bruised, especially her face, but nothing hurt more than the twisting, knotting ache in her chest. Myra was gone, and no matter how hard they tried, they were probably on a fool's quest.

That, however, had never stopped her before. The most dangerous thing she'd ever done was abandon the High Consort Presumptive and ride loudly through enemy territory to deliver vital information to the High King. If that bit of madness had worked, why couldn't a reckless, foolish rescue attempt?

"You should probably know," Charlaine said once they'd reached the pub, ordered food, and taken seats, "that Myra and I—and Riker—defied direct orders from the High King to come get you. He wanted to save you a different way. Myra said it wouldn't work, and Riker and I believed him. If I hadn't before, I certainly do now. We're still acting in defiance of the High Throne. If you go home now, you'll be fine. I can go after Myra on my own; he obviously would understand, that Pantheon-damned fool."

"I'm not going to sit here on my ass after he gave up so much for me. I'm a bodyguard; it's my job to die if it comes to that, and it most definitely came to that." Jac drank down her beer and signaled for another. "Not that I want to die, but I wouldn't have resented anyone for leaving me fit only for a pyre." She groaned as the food was set in front of them: chowder heavy with lentils and vegetables, fragrant with tamarind, cumin, and other spices. Fresh, warm bread that steamed as she broke it in half. There was also more of the remarkably good beer of Harken style, made from millet. Thanking the man who'd brought it, Jac gave up talking in favor of filling her mouth with as much food as possible.

She didn't slow until the second round and a third beer. Across from her, Charlaine was looking to make it round three and already on his fourth beer. "I don't suppose you speak Soltorish?"

"Ten words, only half of them polite," Charlaine replied. "We'll sort out that problem when we get there." He finished eating and shoved his empty dishes away, scrubbing his hands over his face. "I feel there is more we need to talk about, but honestly, I'm too sore and exhausted to think of it right now. I'm going to speak with the ship, get our belongings stowed. There's a decent inn about three buildings down. It's simply called Hanna's. Get us a room, order a bath, and just an extra bucket of hot water for me."

"I can come help—"

Charlaine shook his head. "No, it's fine. I need to walk off all this anger, and it's best I do that alone. I'll see you in an hour or so."

Jac reached out and lightly touched the back of his hand, and Charlaine smiled wanly before pushing away from the table and walking off, steps calm but somehow angry all the same.

Stifling a sigh, Jac finished her own food and then headed for the inn.

Hanna's proved to be run by a nice person named Cali. Though Jac didn't flash her medallion stating she worked for the High King, the torn and bloody Dragon tunic seemed enough to excite the woman and guarantee a good room and plenty of hot water. There was even hot tea to ward off the chill of night on the waterfront.

Someone had also mustered up the healing supplies she'd asked for. Clean and bandaged, with a face that was sore but no longer unbearable, Jac rifled through the pack she'd kept with her for something to sleep in. She wasn't thrilled to think about some Penance Menace cretin going through her belongings, but she was ecstatic to have clean clothes—especially since the ones she'd been wearing were fit only for the fire. At least she seemed to have escaped that foul pub without a vermin infestation.

Pouring a cup of tea, she settled on the far side of the large bed and groaned to finally be off her feet and no longer moving.

She'd just returned from the piss room and poured herself more tea when the door opened and Charlaine strode in, looking tired and haggard and as fed up with the world as Jac felt. Her stomach gave a funny, wholly unwelcome flip as he offered her another of those wan smiles. "You look ready to sleep for a month."

"That would be marvelous," Charlaine said around a yawn. "Can I have a cup of that?"

Jac poured him one. "Plenty of water left. Might not be boiling hot anymore, but the fire has kept it warm enough."

Charlaine gulped down the tea, then started removing all the bits and pieces that came with being a soldier, finally tossing his clothes, as ruined as hers, in the fire to be certain any lice, fleas and other vermin were definitely gone.

He slipped into the tub, which looked tiny with him in it, and set to scrubbing. Jac put her eyes very firmly on the table, not at all amused she now knew exactly how nice a backside Charlaine had. But hey, she'd just won the pot on one of the longest running bets amongst the soldiers and mercenaries. She almost smiled, thinking of how outraged Charlaine would be to learn that people loved to speculate on whether or not his ass looked as good out of clothes as it did in them.

Pantheon, it must be exhaustion, or a need for distraction, because she wasn't normally so easily moved by the sight of a naked person. She'd certainly never noticed Charlaine before, minus that ass, save to note that if Myra was interested in Charlaine, he would never be interested in her. No one could compete with Charlaine if he chose to engage. Not with an ass like that. The kind of ass that made her want to get her favorite toy from her locked chest, buckle it on and have a grand time.

Jac set her tea down and scrubbed a hand through her hair. Definitely trying to distract herself. If she thought too hard about Myra, all that faced

them, all that they would endure and lose when—if—they returned home...

She was so close to crying or screaming or laughing in panic, she'd probably ogle old man Timo's backside just for the distraction. Ugh. Nevermind. She wasn't quite that desperate yet.

Pointedly keeping her eyes on the floor as Charlaine stood to rinse off, Jac crossed the small space to the bed and once more took the side closest to the wall. She preferred to sleep where she couldn't be trapped, but she also didn't feel like arguing and Charlaine would probably argue.

Several minutes later, the bed shifted and creaked as Charlaine climbed in and settled. It didn't take more than a few minutes more for his body heat to turn the bed from tolerable to wonderfully warm. Jac buried her face in her pillow and tried to sleep, but exhausted as she was, she was still too tightly strung to manage it.

"Did you know he used to be an assassin?" Charlaine asked quietly.

Jac rolled over and stared up at the ceiling. "I had my suspicions, but he seemed to not want to talk about it. There wasn't really any other way for him to know some of the things he did, though. Too many details only someone who does that sort of thing could know. I think he forgets we see details like that. That being said, I didn't guess the full extent of his past. Even when I thought that prisoner we took looked like him, I only thought that maybe he was just one of the few who decided to settle here, like maybe he was from a Triumvirate merchant family or something."

"I always assumed it was something like that. He never talked about his past much, but so many of us don't, I didn't linger on it." Charlaine sighed and shifted restlessly. "The minute he's safe, I'm going to kill him."

"Not if I get to him first," Jac muttered. "Why did he give himself up so easily?"

"To be fair, we both got our asses soundly trounced. He probably thought he didn't have any choice, although he *already* thought that, so I guess getting our asses kicked just solidified it." Charlaine sighed again. "I'm too old for this. I'm supposed to be a bodyguard now, not doing all this theatrical, hero-running-off nonsense."

"Whatever, theatre boy." Jac elbowed him lightly in the side. "Blame Myra. Make him pay for it, lots and lots, once we get him back home."

Charlaine laughed. "Oh, I fully intend to. For costing me my job, my retirement fund, my *sanity...* and I believe he has abandoned the tea he promised you."

Jac's levity faded. Thinking about tea, and the questions she still couldn't work up the nerve to ask about Charlaine and Myra, was the last thing she wanted. "As long as we bring Myra home, I'll probably forgive him. Eventually," Jac said. Was it stupid to be so dead set on rescuing a man she didn't actually know all that well? The occasional conversation while they were both working wasn't much to go on, and they'd never spoken outside of the offices until recently—and even then, it had been because of work, even if Myra had kissed her.

"We will." Something about Charlaine's tone compelled her to look at him, and Jac's breath lodged in her throat like a too-big piece of meat as she met his gaze. His filmy white eye had always reminded her of the kindly baker woman who'd given her buns filled with sweet paste made from dried fruit, cinnamon, and honey. Her eye had been exactly the same, the good one a beautiful jewel green. Charlaine's good eye was a warm brown with gold specs. Myra's were a cool gray, vivid against his dark hair. They were beautiful contrasts of each other and thinking that made Jac miss Myra more than eyer.

"I wish I felt as confident as you."

"This from the woman who tore through Cartha with half the mountain on her heels? I've known soldiers with three times your experience who couldn't have made that run. Never mind the breathtaking stupidity of you Dragons going off with an untried royal silver tongue. This should be easy for you."

Jac laughed. "We have barely sufficient supplies, the High Throne is going to *kill us*, and we're hunting assassins who have kicked our asses at least two times now, possibly three. I'm a little hazy on whether the pub counts as one fight or two."

"Counts as two, but we won the second round."

"Did we?"

Charlaine sighed. "I suppose not, at that. Let's get some sleep. Dawn is only a few hours away."

"Don't remind me," Jac muttered, both eager to be on their way to save Myra but also in desperate need of sleep.

As it often did when she was finally able to hold still, sleep won out, overriding even the anxious tumult of her mind as it tried to come up with every possible scenario and all their conceivable solutions.

She jerked awake, disoriented and fumbling in the dark.

There was a sleepy grunt and an arm fell heavy across her lower back.

Jac tried to get her brain to function, but exhaustion was thick and heavy, and the warm arm was familiar and reassuring for reasons she couldn't parse. Giving up, the bad dream that had woken her already forgotten, Jac drifted back to sleep and this time didn't wake.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Myra hurt.

Inside. Outside. He couldn't breathe or move without something hurting. His stomach had given up any hope of food hours ago. His wrists ached from being bound, though thankfully the ropes had been tied properly so as not to cause him permanent damage.

On the other hand, that care had only been taken because they wanted to make certain he'd be in relatively good health so it would take longer for him to die. Unless something had changed in the past twenty years that hadn't changed in the past few centuries, they would stake him in an open field and wait.

He'd never witnessed the death of a traitor, but one of his earliest memories was of them bringing the corpse back to the village. How old had he been? Six? Seven? He and every other child had examined it with the sort of gleeful, morbid curiosity only children could manage. Well, his friends had been gleeful and morbid. Myra would have preferred to go back to playing sharks and fish, but he hadn't wanted to look like a weak crybaby.

Would children look over his corpse the same way?

He closed his eyes again and tried to think of happier things, even if that brought a whole different sort of pain.

Kissing Jac. That was a sweet memory. Kissing Charlaine. How had he gone from a man with no lovers to being caught between two people? And how selfish and greedy did it make him that he very much liked the idea of that: being between them, the three of them. It wasn't something he'd ever thought about before—he hardly thought about lovers at all—but now the idea was there, he could not dislodge it.

If he weren't so exhausted and hurting and afraid, he might have laughed at the ridiculousness of it all. Secretary one day, caught between two possible lovers and being dragged back to his homeland to die the next. He should have remembered how quickly life could turn, instead of letting twenty years make him complacent. He'd managed to keep his skills up, but he'd forgotten to do the same with his guard.

He looked up at the sound of footsteps, anger and loathing coiling through him.

The man knelt, grabbed the back of his tattered jacket, and yanked him back. Myra had cut his hair so it wouldn't be a risk when he fought, or a burden when he traveled, but he also hadn't wanted anyone yanking or pulling it, as his father and brother had been fond of doing. There was also the fact that Iron Moon, and many other clans, kept their hair long as a point of pride—or rather, dangerous arrogance, just like the tattoos Iron Moon assassins bore. "Ryan. Are we finally going to chat?" he asked in Soltorish.

Ryan bared his teeth and let go of his jacket, but only so he could shift enough to slap Myra across the face. "I wish I could say it's good to see you, Eliza, but I really wish you'd stayed dead."

"That makes two of us." Myra spat blood on the floor. "That's not my name any longer."

"I'm not calling you by some dogshit Harken name," Ryan said.

"It's my name. Whether or not it's Harken is irrelevant."

"Traitors don't deserve respect, nor am I letting you hide from what you've done by giving you a name you bought with our father's blood." Ryan backhanded him that time, and Myra spat out more blood. "All these years we thought you were dead, then we send a recon team to lay the groundwork, and what do they report back to me? That someone with my face is Primary Toady to the Emperor."

Myra said nothing.

"You killed Father. I'm right about that, aren't I? There's no other way you could have gotten away with it."

"I'm not telling you anything."

Ryan struck him again, hard enough Myra toppled over, then kicked him in the stomach and strode off.

Myra curled up in a ball, closed his eyes against the stinging tears, and tried to focus on only his breathing.

The name Ryan had used curdled his stomach. He wasn't Eliza anymore. That name belonged to somebody who'd died twenty years ago. Eliza

Karlota, daughter of Karl Voker, brother to Ryan Karlot and Matthew Karlot.

Pantheon, he just wanted to go home. Or at least for this to all be over with. There was still a long journey ahead of him, though. They'd used gliders to cover a great deal of distance once the sun had gone, and once everyone had rested an hour or so, they would resume.

Gliders had been created, through a lot of trial and tragedy, to expedite crossing the Heart Lake. They weren't much more than kites large enough to carry a single person—with a few that could handle two people, though they didn't glide as far. But they made all the difference when time was of the essence and crossing the lake by boat wasn't fast enough.

The Heart Lake was enormous, a stretch of water larger than the three countries surrounding it. All their religions revolved around it, and the incredible depths to which it reached, while still being fresh water. Growing up, Myra had believed it divine work like the rest of the clan. A few years in Harken, with access to books they'd never allow within the clan, he had learned it was less divine and more science—but that only made it more impressive. If there was anything at all he missed about home, it was the Heart Lake.

Being that massive, though, meant crossing it was time consuming. Several days with good wind, and impossible in foul weather—which could come out of seemingly nowhere, especially during typhoon season. More than a few ships had sunk because the crew hadn't properly respected the power of a simple thunderstorm.

To overcome that limitation, the gliders had been developed, made from bamboo and special fabric, the secret of which was known only to the master crafters who made them. Different clans had different styles—some triangular in design, others more birdlike. All of them were collapsible for easy transport when not in use. They could only go for a few leagues before failing, but that was balanced by the platforms that had been scattered about the lake, each large enough and tall enough for landing and taking off. They reduced a trip of days to hours.

At the rate they were traveling now, it wouldn't take them more than a few days to reach the western coast, and from there the voyage to Soltorin would be relatively brief. Sailing from Harkenesten would take at least a month. Even if anyone had intended to come after him, which they shouldn't, they'd be far too late. Myra wouldn't be dragged directly home. They'd have to dock at Odon and there'd be further delays while Ryan and the others met with their client and whoever in Odon had brokered the deal. That still wouldn't be enough of a delay.

Footstep drew his attention again, softer than Ryan's imperious tread. The woman who knelt in front of him was just as hard and cold, however.

What was a woman doing here? Assassins were always men. She had entirely too much chest. Men like Myra were always expected to have their breasts removed, to prove they were sincere in 'giving up womanhood to live as a man and bring honor to Iron Moon by way of an assassin's blade'. What in the Pantheon had changed so much that a woman would be wearing the garb and gear of an Iron Moon assassin?

Myra swallowed his questions for the time being; he'd only get ignored or slapped or told to shut up.

The woman set a plate of food down, bound his left hand and arm to the wall, then freed his right arm. "Eat."

Myra almost thanked her, simply from habit, but cut the words off at the last moment. He picked up a piece of bread and dipped it in the uninspiring looking stew—but food was food, and he was going to need his strength. His chances of escaping were practically non-existent, but if a chance did present itself, he wasn't going to lose it because he was too weak to act.

Silence stretched on, heavy and suffocating, the woman watching him like she thought he might attack her with day-old bread and overcooked lentils.

"Why did you do it?" she finally asked, voice still cold, with that edge in her voice that said she was just waiting for a chance to tell him why she thought he was wrong.

Myra stifled a sigh. "Do what?"

"Murder Karl and Joseph. Betray Iron Moon."

"Does it matter? Would motive change your mind, alter the severity of the crime in your mind? Would you argue for leniency on my behalf?"

Her lips curled. "No. You're a traitor. You've brought your punishment on yourself." She flicked the long, heavy braid of her hair over her shoulder. A pang twisted through Myra's chest to be reminded of his own shorn hair. Cutting it had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done. He'd liked his long hair, even if it was also a clan tradition to wear it long. He'd argued with himself a hundred times about cutting it. But he wasn't going to do something just to be unlike the clans. So he'd kept it. Until now, when practicality mattered more than pride. Though it hadn't hurt they'd see his shorn hair and taken it as him rubbing his traitorous behavior in their faces.

Myra sighed. "If that is your opinion, what difference do my reasons make? I guarantee they won't ask about my motives at the tribunal. They'll list off my crimes, tell me why I'm a terrible person and deserve what's coming to me, and then stake me in the field. If the clan is much the same as it's always been, they'll place bets on what will kill me first: sun, cold or animals. They'll place bets on how long it takes before I start pissing and shitting myself. On when I turn delirious." He sneered. "What's the fun of inflicting a slow, agonizing death on a traitor if you can't make a little money from it, right?"

Something like shame flickered across her face before it was overtaken by contempt again. "Do you deserve a quick death for what you did? Do you deserve mercy and respect?"

"I deserved to decide my own life," Myra snapped. "I deserved a chance to live my life the way I wanted. When I tried to say that, my father told me no by way of a beating. I don't want to do this, he said. It hurts me more than it hurts you. It's for your own good. Let go of these foolish notions. You're clan. You should be proud to be clan. The only concession he ever gave me was to treat me like the man I am instead of the woman everyone else wanted me to be, and I think he allowed that only so he could brag that he would have three sons to follow in his bloody footsteps, and three daughters to provide the next generation. He always liked his numbers to line up nicely. Maybe he didn't deserve to die, but neither did High King Sarrica. I chose the man who treated me like a person over the man who treated me like a well-trained dog. For twenty years, I've lived the life I chose instead of the life forced upon me, and I refuse to be sorry that I'd rather be a secretary than a killer."

"You're the worst sort of killer," she said with a sneer and slapped him hard. "At least we have enough self-respect to make people pay us. You murdered two people for nothing but your own selfish gain. What honor is there in that?"

"What honor is there in thinking any person's life has a price that can be measured in coins? Go get fucked by a squid."

She lifted her hand, and Myra braced for the hit—and felt only air as she abruptly stood, grabbed his empty bowl, and stormed off.

Myra sighed again.

Only a few minutes later, Ryan returned and retied both his hands behind his back before hauling him to his feet—which were also bound. "Hope you don't need to piss."

"No," Myra said anyway.

Ryan dragged him out of the small backroom of the inn they'd been staying in, right at the edge of the small town they'd stopped at. From there, it was a long walk into the hills, and Ryan finally had to throw Myra over his shoulder because there was no way Myra could climb the steep hill at the end of their journey.

At the top were their gliders, already set up by the woman who'd fed and pestered him. Three of them were meant for single occupancy. Two were meant for riding double, though only Ryan's would have two occupants.

Myra went without protest as he was strapped into the harness of Ryan's glider. At least Ryan showed just enough consideration to wrap his face and eyes with the protective coverings necessary to avoid bugs and other possibly damaging things in the sky—and Myra had made certain to wear warm but lightweight clothing before leaving the palace.

He tensed as they took off, a difficult and not always successful endeavor on the duel gliders—but Ryan had always excelled at gliding. He'd apprenticed to the glider makers for years, working with them whenever he was not busy with assassin training. The Soltorin gliders were a highly coveted secret, and one they viciously refused to share. The crafters were highly selective of their apprentices, and the penalty for sharing secrets was death—of whoever shared and anyone they could have possibly spoken to. They were fragile, dangerous, not really meant for more than quickly crossing the lake to deliver messages and the like. The dual ones, even harder to control and incapable of going as far, were generally used only for the transport of people in need of a healer, and prisoners.

That they'd brought them along for this mission only emphasized how determined they'd been to retrieve him.

It was all so fucking stupid. Twenty years. Yes, he'd murdered two people, but all these years later Myra still didn't think those deaths had hurt the world. Not the way murdering Sarrica would have hurt more people than he could count. Myra's father had been a cold-hearted bastard, and Joseph...he'd only been a trainee, but with a kill count already higher than some full assassins. People like that always went too far eventually. There'd already been whispers about it. His death should have been a relief to the clan.

Wasn't it better to leave the matter in the past?

But if he were in their position, if someone had killed Sarrica, Allen, Charlaine, or Jac—would Myra have still held a grudge twenty years after the fact?

Given how much he still despised the clans, he just might have.

Pantheon, he was *tired*. After two decades, he had stupidly believed he was safe. That he could really, truly relax.

At least Charlaine and Jac were safe. Sarrica was alive. Allen was alive. Myra had failed miserably with Prince Larren, but he was selfish enough to be glad everyone else had lived. That probably made him an awful person, but he had not once regretted killing his own father, so he was already awful. What difference did more proof make?

Tired of thinking about himself and his own predicament, Myra shifted to happier thoughts, even if they hurt in a different way: the softness of Jac's lips, that lovely hitched breath. He'd wanted so badly to kiss her properly, had hoped to do so when they went for tea.

Then of course he'd proven himself a cad by kissing Charlaine senseless in the hallway, exactly the way he'd always wanted to—the way he'd hoped to do with Jac. And oh, wasn't that still the loveliest picture, and wasn't he just proving he really was a selfish bastard by wishing he didn't have to choose.

Both deserved better than him. Pantheon, they should consider each other. Was that selfish too? Liking the idea of the two people he had come to care most about growing closer?

Hopefully Sarrica wouldn't punish them. Charlaine had only helped him because Myra was going to act with or without him. Jac hadn't done anything wrong, only gotten caught in the middle. Myra still didn't know if

they'd figured out she was important to him personally, or taken her solely because she was important to the High Consort.

Sleep should have been impossible, but exhaustion tended to win out against all else—even flight, even being tied up, even fear of all that was to come. Myra didn't sleep well as they glided through the air, but he did sleep.

He was jarred awake by the landing, rough enough that Ryan nearly sent them toppling into some nearby scraggly bushes.

Ryan and another one of the men pulled Myra down and dragged him into a nearby scrub of forest. Given how long they'd been traveling, they must be in Tricemore by now. They'd be on the coast in another day, and from there...a couple of weeks, with good wind and weather, to reach Odon. Another few weeks to travel to Iron Moon territory...

They dropped him on the ground. Myra did his best to stretch his sore, stiff limbs while they set up camp. When it was ready, they dumped him on a too-small bedroll with a threadbare blanket. Ryan tied another piece of rope around his ankles, then secured it to a bell-trap. If Myra removed the rope or moved too much, the bells would ring—loudly—and wake the camp.

Sighing, Myra got as comfortable as he could and fell asleep, once more thinking of Charlaine and Jac and all the things he wished he could be doing with them, from relaxing in the gazebo during a rare shared moment of peace, to spending hours in bed doing every last thing they could think of to each other. Jac was so quiet on duty, but when her guard was down, or she was off duty, that serious demeanor vanished like mist burned away by sunlight. He'd also seen hints that she'd probably be quite the bossy minx in bed, though that could also be his imagination getting away from him. He doubted it though. Nobody got as far as she had, at so young an age, without being as fierce as a typhoon and twice as strong as the rocks even a typhoon couldn't break.

He smiled faintly into the pillow he'd managed to make of his headwrap. They were all three so used to being in charge, in their own way, in their day to day duties. How would they balance out when all of that was stripped away? Not secretary and bodyguards, simply three people...

Not that they would be three. Even if Myra lived, that would never happen.

Ah, well, at least they had each other, and their comrades, and Allen. Sarrica would be stubborn, but Allen would make him soften and not punish Charlaine—or at least not punish as severely. And Jader would do as Sarrica asked.

Or so Myra hoped. His best and oldest friend didn't deserve to suffer because he'd been loyal enough to help.

At least they were alive. If he'd done nothing else right in this whole miserable fucking day, he'd kept Sarrica and Allen alive, and he'd saved Jac and Charlaine.

With that, he finally dropped off to sleep.

\*~\*~\*

It was someone kicking him, and the searing burn of sunlight, that woke him. Myra stared blearily, sore and aching and still tired, up at the woman. She knelt and set aside his breakfast, then helped him sit up and tied one of his arms to his legs, leaving one hand free to eat and the rest of him too knotted together to have any chance of getting himself free.

Breakfast was more old bread and a watery quick porridge he'd always despised. It tasted like wet sand and dirty water—but it was also energizing, light, and easy to prepare, even without a fire. He gulped it down as quickly as he could, gnawed his way through the bread, and handed back the empty bowl.

"Stay with him and pack up while we find a suitable place for launching," Ryan said.

The woman huffed but obeyed, briskly retying his arms and resetting the bell trap before striding off to clean the dishes and pack up most of the camp.

Myra lay back down on the bedroll and stared up at the sky through the trees, listening to birdsong and rustling leaves. He turned his head at the sound of footsteps drawing close and sat up as the woman sat near him again. "So why is a woman dressed as an assassin?"

"That's not any of your business, traitor."

"What do you want, then? I doubt I'm so beautiful you came to stare at me until they return."

She laughed, but though she tried to make it derisive, she couldn't hide all of her genuine mirth.

"What do you want?" The woman looked away. Whatever she was after, she was still fighting asking for it. Myra stifled a sigh. "What's your name?"

She opened her mouth, clearly intending to tell him that wasn't any of his business either, then snapped it shut. After another moment, she said, "Kimberly Bartona." She hesitated another moment, scowling at the trees on the far side of camp. "I was a last-minute replacement. I have passed all my tests and was granted permission to become an assassin with my family's blessing. But there wasn't time to finish everything before we were sent out."

To say that was odd was to call the ocean a lake. Myra had never heard of an assassin being so desperately needed that they were willing to add one to the team before they'd finished their rites—especially while they were 'still a woman'. Myra had been eager to complete his training and rituals, because in Soltorin it was the closest he'd ever come to being treated like the man he was. But he'd known other assassins, from families without sons, who had been devastated, even distraught, to give up being women, though they'd always hidden behind honor and pride. And sometimes fear. Those who chose to become assassins had their breasts removed—which was a loss to some, a bonus to others—could not marry or be mothers, but they were also given neither home nor inheritance as were the men. They were forever caught between the two extremes, often denied the privileges of both.

If they were willing to sully a kill team by adding a woman, then numbers must be low. Iron Moon was in trouble. That explained why they were still angry with him twenty years later. *Any* wrong that could be made right would bolster the clan. They must have been ecstatic to learn he was still alive and a traitor. Myra's mouth flattened. "So did a plague devastate numbers? Did too many 'leave' the clan to live a different life?"

"Why do you say it like that?" Kimberly asked, the words snapping out.

Ah. That was it. Sadness washed through Myra. "Did you have a brother or sister who went before the clan leaders and said they wanted to leave?"

She looked at him, then looked away, throat working. "Yes. A brother."

"Your family threw a quiet dinner party, he said farewell to friends, you escorted him to the edge of the territory and wished him well. He promised to write, was excited and happy, and your parents were nothing but loving and supportive."

"Yes." The word was barely audible, her face drawn.

Myra sighed. "Yet you've never received a single letter, and when you ask your parents where you can send one to him, they're evasive."

"Yes."

"He's dead. You're with the clan or against them," Myra said as gently as he could. "That's why I left the way I did—with all the blood and violence they wanted me to use *for* the clan. Your brother was killed the first night he made camp. His body was burned."

"You're a fucking liar," she hissed, surging to his feet. For a moment it looked like she'd attack him, kick and hit, expunge all the rage—and pain—choking her by way of beating him as close to death as she could get away with. At the last she pulled herself back. "A traitor's words are worthless," she finally spat.

Myra said nothing, only went back to staring up at the sky through the trees.

Kimberly returned to her own bedroll on the opposite side of camp, putting her side to him so she could watch but also have a modicum of privacy. From the pouch at her back, she pulled a small book—the kind all assassins kept, ostensibly to store coded information that was too complicated to easily remember. Many also used them to hold mementos, tokens, other personal effects. The life of an assassin often meant a life of travel, as it could take anywhere from weeks to years to carry out a job.

The clans hadn't always been assassins. Even now, not all of them were. They'd started as advisors, scouts, occasional spies. They'd been valued for their expertise in world matters, as the whole clan spent large sums of money to educate and train a precious few. Somewhere along the way, as times became hard and Benta made things even harder, it was the rare, darker elements of the clans that had taken precedence, until the rest of what they'd done had been lost. No doubt there had been some sort of honor and moral code in it to begin with. Maybe once the clans would have

refused to kill someone like Sarrica, who did far more good than bad. But 'once' and 'maybe' didn't mean anything to Myra.

Money had been the primary reason for the change. Few people wanted wisdom or reasonable solutions to their problems. Plenty of people were willing to pay to make a problem go away. And Soltorin, Odon and Jithinir had badly needed money: for the fight against Benta, then holding out under Benta rule and finally throwing Benta out. Soltorin and their shadowy clans had best been positioned to make that money, even if it came at great cost. But in the aftermath...

Instead of trying to rebuild themselves into what they wanted to be after breaking free of Benta's hold, they had chosen to continue festering. They continued with practices enforced by Benta, with Bentan customs, even food and music and such brought over from the mainland. Even Bentan naming conventions remained. They let the world call them the Triumvirate, instead of by their individual names or at least Soldonir. The Triumvirate council, instead of saying 'no, enough' had chosen to broker a deal to murder the best High King and Consort Harken had probably ever had.

The attempt on Sarrica and Allen's lives had probably taken years of work, from drafting the initial plan, finetuning it, embedding killers in the dancing troupe and more.

Myra had endured countless plays and novels and other fanciful tales of assassins—brooding heroes, wily heroes, ruthless, tormented killers who only wanted to live an honest life.

But as with most things that fiction loved, the reality was duller and grimmer. Most of an assassin's work, at least the sorts of jobs given to the clan, entailed waiting, watching, waiting, watching. The kill itself took only a moment, but figuring out how to reach the target could take ages. A storm builds for days and is over in minutes, as the clans said.

Myra would have bet anything Kimberly kept a drawing of her brother in there, or some token he'd given her before he left to start a new life free of the clans. Laughter bubbled up in Myra, but not good laughter. The kind of laughter that turned into sobbing because if he didn't laugh or cry, he'd start screaming, and that had somehow always seemed far worse.

When all the chaos surrounding his heroic saving of the life of the imperial crown prince had died down, he'd laughed like that. Laughed and cried and puked up everything he'd tried to drink to calm himself down.

The silence stretched on, weighted with everything she didn't want to believe and everything Myra didn't want to think about.

So he tried once again to turn his thoughts to happier things—happier times. What was everyone back home doing? Poor Piru. He wasn't quite ready to take on the full weight of being head secretary. He'd almost been there. Myra had planned to loan him out to the Duke of Chassis when his lead secretary went on maternity leave to give him a taste of running a large, busy office without having to run one quite as overwhelming as the imperial office.

But if anyone could adapt and master quickly, it was Piru. Myra had trained him diligently. Piru would flourish.

Did Sarrica miss him? Was he worried? It was impossible to be friends with his boss, but Myra had liked to think they were some professional approximation of that. Myra had gone to Harken with every intention of faking his own death and starting a new life on a completely different continent, but his plan had fallen away once he'd come to know, as well as any cadet could, the commanding, drawing presence of the imperial crown prince. He'd never met anyone like Sarrica, had not met anyone like him since. Whatever rulers followed, there would never be another Sarrica.

Pantheon, please let Sarrica be taking care of Charlaine and Jac. He would never—

"Did you mean it?"

Myra turned his head, his carefully gathered happy thoughts scattering like a sack of spilled beans. "About your brother being dead? Yes."

Her face clouded. "You have to be lying."

"I killed my father. I killed another assassin simply for standing in my path to freedom. I gave myself up to save my friends. I've denied nothing. Why would I lie? The way they murder their own for wanting to leave is one of many reasons I hate the clans."

"How do you know that's what happens?"

Myra sighed and sat up, resettling his feet carefully so he wouldn't jar the bells overmuch. "I snuck out one night. I was young—ten, eleven. There was a little pond where I liked to watch the glowflies, and sometimes a fawn and its mother would come to drink. One night while I was out there, I heard voices, and followed them through the woods. I arrived just in time to see them kill a woman who'd left the village that very day. Not long after they killed her, the woman she was running away with from another village showed up. They killed her as well. Burned the bodies right there. I've never gotten that smell out of my nose. I wanted to run, but I didn't dare draw attention to myself. When I was eventually able to leave, I cried all the way home. There was no one I could talk to, that much I knew. So I kept my silence. I started watching more. Seeing more. It didn't take long before I knew two things: that I wanted to leave and doing so would come at great cost. But the clans do excel at teaching patience and sacrifice."

Kimberly made a rough noise and did not reply, only surged to her feet and vanished into the woods.

It was a perfect chance to run away. Even if she heard the bells, she wouldn't be able to return immediately, and once he was in the forest, getting away would be relatively easy. He might not be as good as he'd once been, but he hadn't let his skills entirely languish either. First, from fear and habit, then from habit and needing a good way to expend the frustrations of the day.

But he was also exhausted and had neither weapons nor provisions, and the forests in this area were not exactly filled with friendly woodland creatures. He might escape, but the elements would get him long before his kidnappers. No, as much as he wanted to try, for the present he was better off where he was.

Several minutes later, Kimberly returned—and seemed relieved that he was still there. She pulled out snacks for both of them but didn't say anything, only dropped the food at his feet before retreating again.

Myra let her be. She was a potential ally, but wouldn't be if he pressed too hard, too fast. For the time being, it seemed most prudent to let her keep making all the first moves. Sadly, his best chance at escaping would be once they were in Soltorin, unless he got lucky when they reached their waiting ship—but more than likely it'd be a smuggler ship, small and fast and light, shifting contraband between Soltorin and Delfaste.

He was just starting to drift off again, because sleeping was infinitely better than the unending, weighted silence, when the others finally returned.

Ryan spared him a look, then snapped his gaze to Kimberly. "We've found a place. Let's finish packing up camp and head out. We'll make camp there, replenish supplies and head out at dusk. If we push hard, we can be at the meeting point by morning."

"Good," said one of the other men in the group. "This has already taken far too long, especially given—"

"That's enough," Ryan snapped.

"Especially given you failed your mission?" Myra asked, ignoring the look of fury Ryan shot him.

"Pack up and move out." Ryan strode over to Myra and bound him for travel. "Did he say anything?" he asked, looking briefly over his shoulder.

Kimberly slowly shook her head. "No, sir. Nothing at all. Just slept and cloud-gazed the whole time. I find it hard to believe *this* is the man who killed your estimable father."

Ryan laughed, bitter and mean. "Eliza—"

"Myra—"

"Eliza here was once quite the assassin, there's no point in denying that. He looks like a soft, pathetic Harken now, but back in the day...back in the day I was proud to call him first sister and then brother. A pity his strong skin hid a weak core."

"Weak is blindly doing as you're told without ever questioning what you do—especially when what you do is murder."

Ryan sneered and hauled him to his feet, throwing Myra over his shoulder as he said only, "Let's go."

Myra closed his eyes in an effort to stave off the nausea that would come from being carried around so for too long.

Feeling a prickle along the back of his neck, however, he dragged his eyes open to find Kimberly watching him pensively. He met her gaze a moment, then let his eyes fall shut again.

Was he building an alliance? Too soon to tell. If all he did was put another fracture in Iron Moon, he would count that a victory. It might be his

last victory, but it wouldn't be a bad one to die on.

Closing his eyes again, Myra tried to bring up happy thoughts again as they trudged drearily on.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

"So what's your type doing on a ship without all the rest of them around?"

It took Charlaine a moment to sort the question out. The matter wasn't helped by the sailor's thick Gearthish accent tangling around informal Harken. But he'd sorted out far more difficult accent-language combinations, and Pantheon knew how many times he'd been the difficulty. "I'm not acting as a merc. This is a personal matter." He threw a card down on the pile in the middle of the barrel serving as their table and drew one from the central stack.

"What's your girl got to do with it?" asked the second of the three sailors he was playing with. This one had a tooth with a cheap sapphire in it, an affectation of sailors and pirates who harkened from Treya Mencee, and his dark skin meant he was likely from one of their colonies.

Charlaine's mouth quirked at the thought of Jac's reaction to be called anyone's girl. "She's not my girl; she's a friend. We're looking for another friend, who is also her lover." Or would be, damn it. Charlaine would see them happy together, if that was what they wanted, especially after this nightmare.

"Good luck finding them in Soldonir," said the first one who'd spoken, throwing down a card of his own and taking another from the face down pile. "If Soldonir wants you, it gets you." He shook his head and sighed, motioning for the next man to take his turn.

"What do you mean?" Charlaine asked. "I know they're somewhat xenophobic."

The third sailor snorted as she threw down two cards and took one more. "What sort of fancy palace word is that? If you mean they hate everybody not them, yeah. About the only ones they hate more are those of their own who leave. We had a mate, retired few months ago, came from Jithinir. Was terrified every time we made port. Wouldn't leave the ship. Said it was his life if he was recognized. Had all kinds of wild stories about people he'd

known who didn't escape or were found later. Some of those stories will shrivel up your dick, no mistake."

Putting that image out of his head, Charlaine looked over his cards, shook his head, and motioned for the next sailor to go.

Thank the Pantheon he was only playing Four Corners with sailors for whatever cheap coins they all had on them. He barely had to pay attention to the game, or their rambling, to keep up. Most of his attention was on Myra. On everything Myra had never told him.

Everything Myra had suffered, and was suffering, in silence. How miserable had his life been in Soltorin? It was hard to picture the man he'd known as a well-trained assassin. Myra was a force to be reckoned with, but a killer? Maybe only when it was time for the census.

Someone indicated it was his turn, and Charlaine shook his head again. They all eyed him, trying to gauge if he had four corners or was bluffing. "So your friend from Jithinir was able to retire?"

"Aye," said the woman sailor. "Lives in Gearth now, raising sheep or some nonsense." She threw her cards down. "I surrender." She took a swig of the bottle at her side, which looked to be spiced rum rather than her ration of beer. "Tanaka is his name. We still see him sometimes, when we make port there. Think we've bought some of his dumb sheep." She snickered.

"Tanaka? That's not a Triumvirate name."

"You mean it's not a colonial name," said the first man, cold contempt in his voice. "No, Tanaka threw out his Bentan-style name the moment he joined up. Got all his Harken papers with Tanaka on it. Never even told us what his old name was. We never cared."

"I see. Thank you for explaining." Charlaine smiled briefly. "I'm glad he made it out and got to retire. Hopefully I'll be able to say the same for my friend someday." He would do whatever was necessary to ensure it, in fact.

He threw down his cards as the other two did and laughed as they all groaned to see he had four corners. Charlaine gathered up the few coins he'd won, thanked them for the game, and headed down into the belly of the ship, to the level where hammocks were strung for sleeping. Jac was tucked into one, still vaguely green but looking better than she had in days, some

life to her eyes as she patiently listened to the sailor trying desperately to impress her with his overblown adventures.

He slapped the man's shoulder and gave it a congenial shake. "Aren't you supposed to be on shift soon, Hima?"

"I suppose," Hima said. "I'm almost finished with my story, though."

Charlaine dragged him away, and when they were at a suitable distance from Jac said, "She isn't going to return your interest, my friend, so best give it up."

"How do you know?" Hima's face fell.

"One, she's a Three-Headed Dragon, or haven't you noticed the tattoo low on her neck? Two, she's already taken—by someone in the imperial palace, no less."

Hima sighed. "A man can dream. Thanks, though."

Charlaine clapped him on the back. "Go try the cook. She's always admiring your chest and arms."

Casting him a look of disbelief, Hima shuffled off, leaving them alone save for a handful of snoring sailors. Returning to Jac, Charlaine smiled in greeting. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now you got him to shut up and go away. He's sweet, but Pantheon does he talk and talk and talk." She groaned and slumped further in her hammock. "Finished cheating at cards?"

"I never cheat at cards." At Jac's look, the corner of Charlaine's mouth ticked up. "Not with people who make far less than I."

Jac giggled. "So how did you finally make that guy go away? I've been trying to figure out a polite way to get rid of him for the past hour."

"I told him he was wasting his time flirting: that you were taken and also a merc."

Broadly speaking, sailors and soldiers were a bad combination logistically. There were plays, songs, and jokes about how often that particular pairing did not a good relationship make. Something 'working out like a sailor marrying a soldier' meant it was doomed to failure.

Jac's brows furrowed. "He was flirting?"

"It wasn't obvious?"

"Not to me, but in my defense, all sailors like to brag about their exploits. If that's his idea of flirting, he's terrible at it."

Charlaine gave her head a playful shove. "Sure. I'm starting to see why it took you so long to ask our secretary to tea, Dragon."

Jac shoved him back, though her efforts were weak, and climbed out of the hammock. "Speaking of tea, I would like to try food again. I'm really tired of sitting here wallowing like some noble undone by the weight of terrible gossip."

Snickering, Charlaine paused to grab the satchel he'd left with her, then led the way through the ship to the mess, where the cook was happy to feed them. The food was nothing exciting, but for ship food it wasn't bad. Once they were finished, he opened his satchel and drew out the map and a few other items inside.

"What's all this?" Jac said, still sipping slowly at a bowl of thin gruel made from lentils topped with salted fish.

"Captain Chass included a map of Soltorin for us, as well as a letter we're to give to a Lady Mark upon our arrival. How we're supposed to find her, he didn't bother to say, but I'm sure we'll sort that out upon arrival."

"I'm a bit dismayed how much of this we're figuring out as we come to it."

Charlaine snorted. "Every mission I ever undertook was 'figure it out when we get there.' Hard to plan when you rarely even know the whole of the problem. As to the map..." He rolled it out and used their empty dishes to hold the corners. "Here is where we'll make port. This is where Myra's clan is located." He picked up the little journal, bound in black leather, that had been with the other things. "According to Chass's notes, upon arrival they first have to report to their superior, which will also be the person who brokered the deal with the client and commissioned Iron Moon—likely someone part of the Triumvirate's ruling council, or someone not far removed from it. Who that is, Chass doesn't know, though I agree with him the client is likely to be Benta or Treya Mencee, though there are a couple of other places not outside the realm of possibility."

Jac broke up her ration of hardbread and soaked it in the gruel, interspersing bites of it with the hunk of cheese she'd been given. "Yeah, but nobody hates us quite like those two right now. Allen has been worried

they'd start colluding at some point, if they haven't already, though spies haven't come back with anything firm."

"Wouldn't surprise me. Either way, the intermediary will most likely arrange a meeting somewhere in the city. Our trip will take another twenty to twenty-five days, if the weather cooperates. From the coast of Dethmane, it takes about ten to twelve days to reach the nearest port of Odon, and since they're probably taking a smuggling vessel, it could very well take them a day or two longer."

"Odon? They're not simply going straight to Soltorin?"

Charlaine gave a sharp shake of his head. "No, that much I actually know. There are only two public ports in all of the Triumvirate, both in Odon, and the nearest and most frequently used of the two is Odokka, right here." He tapped a spot on the map. "They may be using smugglers to travel between the two places, but they'll have to go to Odokka all the same. I sincerely doubt the meeting with their client will take place immediately. Such things always take a couple of days to arrange. So that is fourteen days. Say thirteen to be safe. They will also need time to gather supplies, since the location of the clan means crossing the lake won't save them any time. Even using their fliers, they'd still have to go through the mountains, so it's easier to loop around Soltorin, I think. That's another few weeks of travel."

"So our best bet is to get to the clan first, which means heading out almost immediately after we reach port. Skirt along the coast until we reach about here." She tapped a point of the map. "Then hike the rest of the way. Sounds marvelous. I hope this other clan doesn't mind us going through their territory."

"I'm sure Lady Mark will tell us what we need to know. Chass must have known, or at least suspected, some of these obstacles." Charlaine sighed. "This would be much easier if we were doing it under sanction."

Jac snickered. "Yes, things do tend to go smoother and faster when lubricated with Harken imperial crowns."

Charlaine gave her an unimpressed look for the play on words as he rolled up the map, returned it to its protective case, and put everything back in his satchel. "The hardest part of all this is that we don't have a silver tongue along. Hopefully that is a problem this Lady Mark can fix."

Jac frowned. "I still don't understand why Captain Chass is being so helpful. I mean, he's not actually the mortal incarnation of a Penance Beast the way everyone likes to say, but he's not usually like this, either."

"I think he meant it when he said he was doing this for Allen. I cannot begin to understand the relationship between those two, and I am happier far from it. All that aside, I find it easier to do as told and not ask too many questions when the orders are coming from a man whose military motto is *darkness is dull, pleasure in pain.*"

"Ugh, true enough." Jac wrinkled her nose, the gesture far more adorable and endearing than Charlaine liked noticing. Even recovering from illness and far too pale, Jac was pretty.

Nor would Charlaine be forgetting any time soon just how good it had felt to fight at her side. She knew what she was about, the kind of soldier he could trust implicitly to have his back. Not to mention how much there was to admire in a person who was ready to go toe to toe with *Chass*, and that after snarling and sniping and beating the shit out of a slew of assassins and thugs.

She'd also felt good in bed, when he'd woken briefly and realized he'd shifted to cling a bit. He'd almost moved away but had feared waking her. So he'd held as still as possible and focused on going back to sleep. Not on the way her skin smelled like jasmine, or how small she seemed when all that armor and fight-anyone temper was stripped away.

It made him think about all the other ways she'd be fun, and those were thoughts he definitely shouldn't be having. Hadn't he just told those sailors that Myra was her lover? He felt like the lowest sort of scoundrel, especially with the memory of Myra's kisses still haunting him. How could he go from pining after Myra, to kissing Myra ardently, to lusting after Jac? Pantheon, how did he get himself into these situations?

Not that any of that mattered until they rescued Myra. But there wasn't much to do on the ship save play cards, sleep, eat, and think too much. The captain would probably be more than happy to give him work to do, but the crew didn't seem to need extra hands.

"You look frustrated," Jac said.

Charlaine shrugged one shoulder. "There are just more variables than I like, and nothing much we can do about them. I try to minimize those when

I go on a mission, and it frustrates me I cannot do that here. We are at the mercy of the ocean and time—and luck. Far too much of this rescue is going to rely on pure luck, and she is a capricious goddess."

"Luck has gotten us this far. I think she'll look after us a little longer. Hopefully. If not, I've out-stubborned worse." She frowned. "I think."

"You worked under Rene for how many years? Then Lesto, now Jader. I believe it."

Jac rolled her eyes and shoveled more food into her mouth. When she'd swallowed, she said, "Now that trivial matters have been discussed, we can begin with the important questions."

Charlaine's brows went up. "I'm afraid."

Snickering, Jac replied, "So tell me about Charlaine the stage boy."

"Not a chance," Charlaine said. "What's there to tell? I did all the stuff stage boys usually do."

Jac made derisive noises. "Please. I bet my left tit you got into plenty of mischief."

Neither looking at nor commenting on either one of Jac's tits, Charlaine replied, "As I said, all the stuff stage boys usually do."

At that, Jac laughed. "Well, tell me, tell me."

"Mostly I helped out around backstage, running errands, bringing the actors food and drink. I had to gather up all the flowers and trinkets thrown on stage after the show and deliver them to the right places. Though I always stole one or two blossoms from the larger bouquets to give to my mother."

"Was she an actress?"

"Bit parts only, but she loved it. Never really wanted all the work and trouble that came with being popular. She had suitors enough."

Jac pushed away her empty plate and drank more of her beer, made from rice and cut with water and lime juice, a staple on all Harken ships. "What about your father?"

Charlaine's mouth tightened.

"You don't have to say. I didn't mean to pry."

He shook his head. "It's not that. My father was a noble. When my mother died, he threw me at the army. When *he* died, my half-sister gave me some money if I agreed to leave well enough alone. Which I did, gladly." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Lord Wyiamar was my father."

Jac blinked at him. "The late Marquis of Sedar. The man who owns all those coffee fields? *That* Lord Wyiamar?" She whistled. "You should have fought for the title. I'm assuming you stood a chance, and that's why the sister paid you off."

Charlaine rolled his eye. "Yes. I didn't want it. Even now the thought gives me chills."

"Still, that's a lot of money and power. You could have probably bought Myra's freedom."

"Please." Charlaine snorted. "If I'd become some stupid Marquis, I'd never have met you or Myra. I'll stick with the decision I made, thanks."

That got him a positively stunning smile. Charlaine swiped her beer to keep his stupid mouth shut.

"Hey!"

Charlaine grinned as she stole it back. "So fair is fair: you know a bit about me and my scandalous upbringing. What was yours?"

"Psh. Scandalous. I was an orphan. Young one. I don't really remember anything before the orphanage. My story is the same as all the others: evil house mother, lousy food, borderline abuse. The lucky ones got apprenticed to good trade and craft shops. The unlucky—mostly anyone with a drop of Islander blood—got pressganged, and the rest of us fled to the army. So here I am."

"Here you are," Charlaine echoed dryly. "How does an orphan with as reckless an attitude as yours make it all the way to the Three-headed Dragons? Wait, never mind, I just answered my own question."

Jac threw the rind of her cheese at him. "Be quiet. I'll have you know it was my skill with a bow that got me an invite."

"Being a good marksman doesn't pass their entry test."

"It passes part of it, and I practiced the others so hard that most days I puked when I was finished. I only made it by a few points. I didn't have it as

rough as some applicants."

Charlaine snorted again. "It would be difficult to be more miserable than Jagged Edge and their damnable endurance tests." They had good reason for it—all mercenary groups had good reasons for their entry tests. They weren't posturing or for bragging rights, as so many civilians and foreigners believed, though both happened anyway. Jagged Edge was a whole separate lesson on difficult. If Penance Gate was known for taking any fight, Jagged Edge would take any environment.

"How did you wind up in Fathoms Deep?"

"Terrag. When he was invited, he suggested me. Fathoms Deep investigated me and agreed—provided I passed the test of course."

"And you probably won't tell me what it is," Jac grumbled.

Charlaine smiled faintly. "Not allowed, sorry."

"Did you have to take Shattered Winds' tests?"

"No. Captain tel Mendi and his lieutenants agreed it wasn't necessary, given my record."

"Lucky."

"Very. I'm too old for entry tests."

Jac rolled her eyes. "Yes, so very old."

Charlaine smiled. "On that note, I'm going to grab a nap." He rose and slung the satchel over his shoulder. "Try to stay out of trouble."

She did that nose-wrinkle thing again. Was there a way to ask her to stop that wouldn't force him to admit the sorts of thoughts it provoked?

Clearly this whole situation with Myra was messing with his head. He'd known Jac, at least in passing, for years without ever thinking of her that way. What had changed?

Then again, the same could be said for Myra. But Charlaine always had been a slow burn sort; he'd never really been much for sex with people he didn't know well. The few exceptions were situations he'd either been desperate to escape loneliness or drunk enough to ignore himself.

"You're looking frustrated again," Jac said, frowning at him. "Are you certain you're all right?"

"I'm fine. Too many thoughts clamoring for attention, and nothing I can do about any of them." Charlaine shrugged, lifted a hand in parting, and trudged off. He settled in the hammock Jac had used earlier, making a pillow of the satchel and pulling up a thin but warm wool blanket to ward off the damp chill.

Despite his roiling thoughts, he eventually fell asleep.

\*~\*~\*

He woke with a gasp, hard and aching, the details of his dream vanished but the memory of them making him perfectly fucking miserable. Charlaine gritted his teeth and thought of decidedly unpleasant things, like Myra being dead; being dishonorably discharged; getting Jac dishonorably discharged. Though, come to that, he had every faith Allen would have plenty to say about the matter, and mercy of the gods to those foolish enough to challenge the High Consort when he was riled.

A smile flickered briefly across his mouth as Charlaine thought of the few incidents he'd seen since becoming Kamir's bodyguard.

His levity faded at thoughts of Kamir, who had somehow slipped so easily from duty to friend. He was probably worried sick about Charlaine—and Jader would be on the warpath. Realms, the more he thought about going home, the more he realized he probably didn't have a home to go to anymore. Nothing waiting for him now but a dishonorable discharge and some belongings to pack. He was fortunate that so much had changed under Sarrica's rule—under his father or grandmother, Charlaine's behavior would have resulted in execution.

Well, he'd certainly taken care of the problem of his hard dick.

Very carefully not thinking about all the solutions to the problem he would have preferred, Charlaine rolled out of the hammock and went to see what time it was and if there was food to be had.

As he climbed up through the ship, however, what he heard was music, singing and a whole lot of booze-laced laughter.

Reaching the main deck, he stepped outside and immediately saw a circle of barrels and other improvised seats, a trio of women playing instruments and two figures in the middle of the circle dancing what he thought was an Outland jig.

As he drew closer, he saw one of them was Jac, stripped to breeches and undershirt, not even wearing shoes, skin gleaming with sweat, short hair soaked, laughing as she danced with a sailor Charlaine recognized but whose name he hadn't yet learned. Both women moved gracefully, beautifully, clearly familiar with the dance.

Realms. He'd seen Jac move before but never like that. No wonder she was so effortlessly graceful.

The watching sailors cheered them on, lifting cups and bottles, some singing along, others making playful, lewd suggestions.

Charlaine joined the circle, approaching a seat with no occupant because he presumed the sailor passed out on the deck had been using it until recently. He made sure the man was all right, dragged him somewhere quieter and then claimed the empty seat. All around him people spoke in myriad languages—mostly informal Harken, but he also caught snatches of Outlander, Tricemorien, Gearthish and of course Islander.

Jac and the woman she was dancing with broke apart to dance side by side, hips swinging, legs moving faster than Charlaine would ever manage. He wasn't clumsy, but he wasn't a dancer either. Jac, however... He hadn't known she could dance. She moved with the skill of someone born to it, though from what he knew, she hadn't grown up in a troupe. The laces of her shirt were loose enough to catch a hint of her breasts now and again, and Charlaine was far from the only person aware of that.

The woman beside her had discarded her shirt at some point, and her flat chest was equally admired. Whenever she turned, Charlaine caught sight of the beautiful, colorful Delfastien wood-block style tattoos on her back, a style imported from Kin del Kar forever ago.

Like most sailors, she wore a leather cord around her neck strung with beads that indicated she was a woman, since some cultures were weirdly old-fashioned and rigid when it came to things like gender and didn't default to a neutral when they weren't sure what an individual preferred.

Charlaine shook his head in amusement as the ribald comments continued, Jac and the other woman retorting with looks and brief words as the dance permitted.

Thankfully, this was a Harken ship, and looking and admiring was likely all anyone would do—well, and make lewd suggestions nobody took

seriously. Sarrica had seen to it a lot of death penalties the empire had clung to were done away with once and for all, but he'd left those pertaining to sexual assault unchanged.

He tore his gaze away from Jac and sought distraction, but over and over again his eyes were drawn helplessly back. As the jig concluded, she kissed the woman on the cheek, before another sailor came up and a new dance started. The song this time was a bawdy one, the dance itself much more sprawling and playful than the intense, tricky jig.

Charlaine watched helplessly as they turned and twisted, moving together in perfect harmony, occasionally dancing twined and twisted together, stirring the crowd to deafening heights. Why was Jac a soldier when she could move like that? Every move of her hips had the effortlessness of a wave lapping at shore, every kick sure and strong. She dipped like a bird in flight and spun like leaves in the wind. He wanted to rain praises all over her—vocally and then carnally.

By the time the dance ended, Jac's shirt was plastered to her skin with sweat. She begged off another dance and accepted the bottle of rum someone offered, taking a long swig that drew attention to the unreasonably long line of her throat.

Someone called out to her and she turned to reply—and stopped as she saw Charlaine. Hastily replying to the man who'd called out, Jac crossed the circle to Charlaine, flushed and mussed and smiling bright enough to burn. The shadowy remnants of Charlaine's dream teased at him, and all his efforts to bank leftover desire began to crumble.

Damn it, he didn't need this. Myra was off somewhere, scared and alone and possibly hurt. Even pretending for a few seconds that all was well, he was not going to hurt Jac by pushing himself on Myra, and he wasn't going to hurt Myra by succumbing to inappropriate lust for Jac. What was wrong with him? Was he so fickle, to love Myra and yet suddenly be so drawn to Jac? Because even if his focus right now was mostly on how much he'd like to make her come apart in his arms, there was much, much more to Jac than how ridiculously sexy she was. No, she was infinitely more dangerous than that.

Pantheon damn him. The man he loved—the man they *both* cared about —was going off to die, and Charlaine wasn't bastard enough to be distracted by the woman Myra wanted.

Except apparently he was, and he had no idea what to do about it.

Why couldn't his dick have just stayed disinterested in everyone? He'd been perfectly happy before sex and romance had woken up and decided they needed attending.

Charlaine curled his fingers against his thighs to remind himself he shouldn't—couldn't—touch. "You look like you're having fun."

"Lots. Do you want to go for a spin with me?" She offered the rum and he took it, ignoring all the warning bells clamoring in his head.

It wasn't the cheap, too-sweet clear rum imported with great enthusiasm in Harkenesten, but dark, rich and spicy Kin del Kar rum, more potent than even the expensive brandy and whiskey that kept the High Court functioning.

The taste of cinnamon, ginger, orange and cloves lingered on his tongue and burned all the way down his throat. He wanted to taste the rum from Jac's mouth.

Instead, he handed the bottle back and enjoyed the view as she took another swig, watching a bead of sweat vanish into the valley between her breasts. Those dream remnants flickered through his mind again, shadowy images of bodies pressed together, eager hands and hungry mouths.

It was almost a relief when Jac was dragged away again. She hastily pushed the bottle back into his hands before returning to the center of the circle. A short, slender man with Islander looks—and earrings, no mistaking those—motioned and said something. Jac laughed, chin jutting out, and those that had heard their conversation cheered and taunted, the ribald suggestions from before returning twice as bad.

Charlaine figured out why, as Jac stripped off her shirt and threw it at him before rejoining the Islander and falling into a dance that had Charlaine feverishly gulping at the rum and hoping the shirt in his lap hid the worst of his transgressions.

He'd thought Jac entrancing before, but clearly she'd just been warming up. Now she was *enthralling*, moving fluidly through the steps of a complicated dance that Charlaine recognized as Islander. He saw them around the military yard and barracks sometimes, and around the palace swimming pool the Islanders had more or less claimed. He also knew them from his theatre days, when bits of them had been incorporated into certain

plays. Islander dances were *hard*; he remembered the complaints of the actors.

It was unusual for anyone not an Islander to know them, but Jac danced like she had Islander blood. Charlaine watched every movement like a man obsessed, rum and lust heating his blood to boiling.

He wished, with a sharp, sudden ache, that Myra was there to enjoy the sight with him. Did Myra dance? Funny that he didn't know—funny and sad. How much did he work that he didn't know whether or not his best friend could dance?

Pantheon, he hoped Myra was managing. They'd find him and take him home, and he bet Jac would dance for Myra until she fell over if he asked—and Charlaine would definitely tell him to ask.

By the time the torture session was over, the rum had left him pleasantly warm and a bit floaty—but nowhere near drunk enough to be unaffected by the sight of Jac half-naked, sweaty and bathed in flickering lantern light.

She stumbled as she drew close, catching herself with one hand on his knee, the other on his opposite thigh. "Sorry."

"S'alright," Charlaine said, the words coming out strangled. He thrust her shirt at her and gulped more rum. Once her entirely too delightful chest was covered again, he handed off the rum and tried to think about things like Myra's hurt face and being homeless, but even contemplating his own death by deadly assassins in a sweltering forest could not counter all the images of Jac now permanently engraved in his stupid, traitorous, worthless mind. "You done dancing for the night, Dragon?"

Jac laughed, swaying a bit and once more all but falling on top of him. Hopefully she was too drunk to notice how hard he was, because that was not a conversation Charlaine intended to have *ever*. "Maybe."

"Definitely," Charlaine said, and finished the last of the rum before leaving the bottle on the barrel. "Come on." He pulled one of her arms around his shoulders and slid one of his around her waist, bidding goodnight to the sailors before leading her away.

They stumbled down a narrow hall once inside the ship, Jac giggling the whole way, doing nothing to make the trip easier, warm and soft pressed up against his side, though he could feel the flex of firm muscle beneath his fingers.

Pantheon, if his dick got any harder he was going to break something. "Remind me to kill you later," he muttered.

Jac giggled. "Why do you want to kill me?"

"I don't, sorry," Charlaine said. "How much did you drink?"

"I have no idea. A lot."

Charlaine grinned briefly as they continued stumbling and shuffling along. "Finally got over the seasickness and now you're going to be dealing with a hangover. Some dashing hero."

"Oh, you be quiet," Jac replied, the words coming out slurred and faintly sing-song. "At least I'm not sitting around brooding and scowling. We'll get your beloved back, never fear."

Charlaine froze, heart thudding hard. "My what? Myra isn't my beloved."

Jac huffed, the sound way sadder than such a tiny noise had any right to be. "I saw you in the garden. I can tell. Don't know why he said yes. No tea for me."

"He said yes because he wanted you, as he damn well should," Charlaine said, heart breaking. He got them moving again, going as quickly as he could push her, down to where the hammocks were located.

They'd nearly reached the hammock they'd been allotted when Jac stumbled again, sending them both nearly crashing to the floor. Charlaine averted disaster at the last moment, but only wound up slamming into a wall, setting his head to throbbing—and leaving him with an armful of Jac, her soft breasts pressed against his chest, one of his hands accidentally falling to places it had no business gripping. He moved it hastily, while also trying to both right his balance and push her away.

Jac looked up abruptly, head slamming into his nose and leaving it throbbing. "Sorry!" she said, and drunkenly leaned up to kiss it.

*That* led to disaster, though Charlaine could never entirely say how.

But he could say how soft her lips were, how hot her mouth was, and how excellent a kisser she was, even drunk out of her mind.

Charlaine tore away, scooped Jac up, and dumped her in the hammock. He pulled the blanket over her, made certain his satchel was safely tucked away, then went in search of something, anything, that would work off his frustration.

\*~\*~\*

By morning, he was feeling moderately better, and laughed loudly as a hungover, completely wretched and miserable Jac stumbled over to him. "How are you feeling, Dragon?"

"Fuck you," Jac said around a groan as she sat next to him and sipped at a bottle of festival tonic. "What the hell was I thinking last night? I'm not normally this damned stupid on a mission."

Charlaine grinned around a bite of porridge. "It's not like we have anything else to do for the better part of a month. And you do dance extremely well. I didn't know you could dance."

Jac's skin turned a few hues darker as she tried to stare a hole through the table. "Um. I learned a lot of it as a child. Dancing is a big thing in Outland. The rest I picked up traveling and trying to blend in. I mostly learned it from sailors, traveling performance troupes, sometimes from villagers when we happened to be around for a holiday or something."

"Where did you learn the Islander dance?"

"Sailors there, too. The Dragons were stuck aboard a becalmed ship, and the Islanders were short one person for one of their holiday dances. I offered to fill in if they could teach me the moves. I think they only agreed at first because they thought I was a stupid Mainlander who couldn't possibly manage—but I did, and so they taught me more and more. Shemal and some of his friends have taught me a few new ones. I don't think I dance *extremely well*, but it's always fun. Maybe with less rum next time." She whimpered and drank more of the tonic.

Charlaine's grin widened. "I'm guessing it's tradition to do it bare-chested?"

That got him the most adorable squeaking sound he'd ever heard and a look on her face he wished he could capture. He buried his face in his folded arms to muffle his laughter—laughing harder when she smacked his shoulder over and over.

Finally sitting up, he gasped out, "Your face."

"So are you just messing with me?" Jac asked.

"No, you really did take your shirt off. You danced beautifully."

"It is tradition, and yes, I do it that way with Shemal. Not normally with strangers, though."

Charlaine shrugged. "This is a Harken ship, so it's not like anyone would be bothered. If I recall correctly, there was a great deal of approval."

Jac groaned and let her head thump on the table.

"Should I stop you next time?" Charlaine asked. "You didn't seem that drunk."

"No, it's fine. It's not the first time I've done that. Islanders don't really wear much clothing, after all, so all their dances are done at least half-naked. I remember doing it last night, sort of. I was just really hoping I was wrong. I'm seriously embarrassed I'm acting this way when I should be working. Some professional mercenary I must seem." Her face clouded. "Especially when Myra is somewhere suffering, and that's assuming he really is still alive."

"From everything we've been told, he'll live until they return him to Iron Moon. Myra wouldn't want you sitting here brooding and being miserable on principle. That will just sap your strength and leave you useless when you need it most. So dance, Dragon."

She grunted an acknowledgement, finished off the tonic, and tucked the empty bottle away. "I think I'll go spend the rest of the trip hiding amongst the cargo. Did I do anything else? My memories go a little foggy after that last dance. I remember the dancing and you returning my shirt, but not much else."

Charlaine stared at her, but if she was lying, she was too damned good at it, and he hadn't noticed that quality before now. Though he really should have, given the Dragons specialized in covert work, not to mention the discretion required of an imperial bodyguard. "No. You were pretty much done at that point, so I took you to bed—" He covered his face as Jac spit out the sip of tea she'd just taken. "*Put* you to bed."

Jac smirked as he looked up. "How much rum did *you* have?"

"Too much, clearly," Charlaine drawled. And not nearly enough. He finished his porridge and tea, then gathered up his dishes. "I hate to abandon a comrade while they're suffering, but I helped mend sails and

clean last night and am exhausted. Try to stay out of trouble while I'm sleeping."

"I'm too hungover to do more than lie around feeling sorry for myself."

Charlaine dumped his dirty dishes in a bucket, then returned to gather up the book he'd been reading, obtained from a sailor, and gripped Jac's shoulder. "I'll see you in a few hours."

She smiled and covered his hand briefly with hers and went back to her tea and porridge as he headed off.

Hopefully when he woke up later, the memory of that kiss would have finally faded, and Pantheon willing, there'd be no more dancing.

## CHAPTER NINE

Jac never wanted to set foot on another ship ever again. Between the sea sickness, the hangover, making a perfect fool of herself dancing and that fucking *kiss* her drunk self never should have let happen, she'd rather swim back to Harken than be trapped on a vessel with Charlaine ever again.

She rubbed her temples, willing away yet another headache, this one brought on by the shift from sea to land. Mercy of the Pantheon, she hated ocean travel. No matter how many times she did it, she was always sea sick and came away cranky and with a pounding headache.

But focusing on her headache was better than thinking about that night. By now the memory should have dulled, but it could have happened yesterday, instead of weeks ago, she recalled it so clearly. Dancing like a brazen fool, spurred on by the audience, driven wild when she'd realized Charlaine had joined the crowd at some point. She hadn't realized just how strong an attraction to him she'd been pretending not to have until she'd seen him watching her like he wanted to bend her over the barrel he was sitting on and fuck her into it. Or maybe he wouldn't mind if she spread that ridiculously perfect ass of his and fucked him.

Ugh. Not helping. She fished out one of the headache powders she'd fobbed off the captain, dumped it in her mouth, and chased it with the watery ale she'd managed to order. After her ridiculous, drunken display, the sailors had been more than happy to call her friend and teach her all they could—including a smattering of Soltorish. Most of it not fit for polite company, but they seemed convinced of the kind of company she might seek once back on shore, and she'd given up arguing with them.

She finished her ale and ordered another. At least they were finally ashore. Now they could focus on rescuing Myra. Pantheon, let him still be alive. What if they'd come all this way only to be too late? What in the names of the gods was she going to do if he was already dead?

There was no point in worrying herself to death about something that may not have happened, though. Better to focus on problems she actually had.

Like Charlaine's smiles. The way he laughed when his guard was down. The way it felt to be pressed up against him, wrapped in his arms and kissed senseless. If Myra had that, why had he agreed to spend time with her? If he didn't have that, what kind of fool was he not to try for it all these years?

Merciful divine, she hoped they got into a fight soon. All this sitting and waiting was driving her to madness. If a good distraction didn't come along soon, she was going to do something drastic or stupid.

Hopefully Charlaine would return soon. How long did it take the man to piss? Had he fallen in or something?

She was just about to go look for him when a sudden shift in the demeanor of the cheap pub they were in drew her attention. Nothing good ever came from a place that went from cheerful to alarmed in the blink of an eye. Several people got up to crowd around the windows, buzzing with nervous chatter. She caught snatches of words in various languages, mostly *soldier* and *looking* and, most ominously, *dragon*.

Setting down her cup, Jac wedged into a small space and stared out the grimy glass. "What's wrong?"

Thankfully, as she'd hoped, somebody replied in Harken, though it was poor and thickly accented. "Guards to be look for Harken double soldier, a dragon of three heads and broken storm."

Even with the dubious grammar and verbiage, that wasn't hard to figure out. "Thank you." She shoved her way out of the crowd, dropped a coin on the bar and gathered their belongings, and headed for the back—nearly plowing into Charlaine. "There you are. What took you so long?"

"Do you really want to know?" Charlaine asked.

"No. We have to go. There are Triumvirate soldiers looking for us." She relayed what the man at the window had said.

Charlaine swore. "Either the Triumvirate wants us dead, or someone back home has ordered them to find us before we cause further trouble. Either way, not good for us."

"It could simply be that Allen is worried about us."

"I have every faith he is, but that doesn't mean the High Throne isn't concerned our actions will start an international incident. What we're doing isn't all that different from some of Treya Mencee and Benta's behavior.

Myra is guilty of at least two murders, I'm sure there are false identity charges that could be levied, especially since he's been lying to the High Throne all this time, and that's only the stuff we know about. Soltorin has every right to want to punish him, even if their methods are illegal since he is also a Harken citizen now. And look what happened to those Treya Mencee delegates a few years ago—shipped off and Pantheon alone knows if they're even still alive given how brutal Treya Mencee can be. We're lucky Harken isn't nearly so strict. Whatever the case, if the people who took Myra know we're here, that's even worse for us. Either we're going to get dragged home, or we're going to get killed."

Jac made a face. "Less talking, more going out the back." She shoved Charlaine's packs at him then wedged past him and headed out.

They slunk through the narrow alleyway that ran between two rows of buildings, nearly gagging on the smells of refuse and garbage, and came out on a relatively quiet street that smelled like roses by comparison.

"This way." Charlaine touched her back lightly, urging her to turn as he headed up the slightly inclined street.

"So do we still need to look for that woman, or are we going to try to do this on our own as originally planned?"

Charlaine didn't immediately reply, too busy negotiating the street as it grew busier and steeper. When they reached the end of it, the street opened up to a half-circle of imposing looking buildings, the middle of the street and all the houses decorated with flowering bushes in a variety of colors. Finally, he said, "Lady Mark lives here."

"When did you figure that out?"

"When we were disembarking. I thought to ask the ship captain where the best place to find her might be. He knew the name because she's the youngest daughter of the Harken ambassador here."

Jac covered her face with one hand. "Are you kidding me? How did we not know that?"

"I sure as Realms don't keep up with all the names and doings of the High Court abroad," Charlaine said. "I can't even keep up with the people I see every day protecting Kamir. She lives here, at number twelve. Come on."

She followed him in silence, fighting a stupid, childish urge to reach out to take his hand. Despite all the years now she'd been working for Allen, all the luxury that should feel commonplace, she still felt largely like a poor, scrappy soldier tromping about where she didn't belong.

Charlaine clearly didn't have that problem. He strode up to the beautiful blue and green house without hesitation and knocked on the front door. A servant answered the door and looked at them like somebody had left a pile of horseshit on the step. She couldn't exactly the blame the man; they had just come from a ship and a month of travel. "We're here to see Lady Mark."

"She's not—"

"She's at home for us," Charlaine cut in, and held out the sealed letter Chass had given them. "From His Royal Highness Crown Prince Chass Telmis of Gaulden, Honored Kingdom of the Harken Empire."

Clearly annoyed to have been so soundly outdone, the man took the letter and closed the door in their faces.

Several minutes later, he opened it again, looking even more peeved as he said, "Her Ladyship will see you."

"Thank you," Charlaine said with a pleasant smile that elicited slightly narrowed eyes.

Jac smothered an inappropriate giggle as the man led them down the hall and through a set of double doors to a beautiful sitting room. The back of it featured another set of double doors that opened on a man-made pool similar to the one in Harken palace that the Islanders used for swimming.

The rest of the room was given over to chairs and sofas, an enormous harp and stool in one corner, expensive paintings on the walls, and plants and flowers everywhere.

A woman approached them wearing a Harkenesten style draping gown—one single piece of cloth artfully arranged and draped, with only a colorful, cropped top beneath. It was arranged in Gaulden style, though, wrapped around the bottom half to resemble loose trousers before sweeping up to drape over her chest and shoulders. Her long hair was loose and unadorned, a beautiful Gaulden-style collar necklace around her throat. "Sergeant, Lieutenant, it's an honor to have you in my home. His Highness has mentioned you many times in his letters; it's a pleasure to have faces to

put to names. Would you like refreshment? Wine? Tea? My cook makes a wonderful hibiscus tea."

"Tea would be wonderful," Charlaine said. "Thank you."

Jac wanted to go back to the part where Chass had apparently mentioned them 'many times.' But she hadn't come this far by opening her mouth when she shouldn't. Instead, she set her bags by the door and took the seat Lady Mark indicated. "Thank you for seeing us."

Lady Mark waved a hand dismissively. "Not at all. I'm always happy to help a friend." Her mouth quirked, amber eyes gleaming. "Chass knows better than most my penchants for mischief and doing what I feel is right, even if my family and I do not always agree on what that means. Chass and I schooled together when we were young, then drifted apart as we got older and went different ways. Do you know Aria? She is my stepsister. They met in Penance Gate, and through her Chass and I crossed paths again."

"Oh," Jac said, still stuck on the idea of Chass having friends—and friends who weren't as creepy and hostile as him. "You're nothing at all like Aria."

Bursting into giggles, Lady Mark bowed her head to smother them in her hands.

Jac covered her own face, ignoring the way Charlaine was grinning at her misery.

"No, though Aria and I have been sisters since we were small children, we are as different as night and day. We're still close, however." She smiled brightly. "We're also close to Chass. He was there for Aria when she needed it most in a way other people were not, and then he was there again for me years later. But that is not why you have come here. I've read Chass's letter, obviously, so I know a bit about what's going on, but tell me in full and then we will see what we can do."

Jac motioned to Charlaine, who told Mark everything, from learning of Myra's long deception to the tragic attack, right up to the point they boarded the ship.

"You should also know," he finished, "that we think there are Triumvirate soldiers looking for us, though we don't know exactly why. We can only assume it's because we're disobeying orders and likely going to make the whole mess with the Triumvirate worse. Or it's possible they learned we're after Myra and are trying to stop us."

"I think it might be slightly more complicated than that, based on what you've told me, combined with the information from my own sources. News of Prince Larren's death was delivered to us only a few days ago. Since then, the ambassadors for Treya Mencee and Benta have been jumpy—when they're seen at all. I have not yet learned which country is guilty and which is merely afraid of being blamed, but my sources have eliminated the other possible suspects. Treya Mencee, of course, has been at odds with Harken since the mess involving the Duke of Fathoms Deep a few years ago. Not to mention that Harken's hardline stance against them is making life more difficult for them the world over.

"Treya Mencee does not like living in a world where they are, at best, second place to the Harken Empire. If King Desmond can hold his throne and quash the rebels once and for all, Benta may knock Treya Mencee to third place in world powers. But the Bentan rebels are slowly coming together to form one solid group, and they could have pooled the funds for the assassination."

She pursed her lips, then continued, "The Soldonir council brokered a deal to assassinate the High Throne, and it has failed. That's bad enough. But Iron Moon also acted on their own with regards to Myra, causing even greater problems, putting Soldonir in a great deal of trouble if the council cannot find a way to convince everyone that Iron Moon acted independently." Her expression turned grim. "A great deal more can go wrong right now, and none of the outcomes are good for Soldonir. They haven't been free of Benta for that long, and this could drag them into a war they have no hope of winning and right back into being a colony. So those soldiers could very well be looking for you to stop this before it gets worse."

"I'm not willing to take that chance," Charlaine said.

Jac nodded. "I'm not either."

"And in the time it would take for me to officially sort the matter out, your friend could die," Mark replied. "Rest, eat. I will go change and pack. The sooner we leave, the better. It won't be long before my father contacts me to see if my sources can find you, and at that point it will be infinitely more difficult to help you. I'll be back shortly."

Before they could say a word, she was gone. Jac sighed and helped herself to the food a servant had just brought in because the poor excuse for fish she'd had in the tavern had done nothing to ease her appetite. She settled at a small table and removed the lid on a bowl, revealing fragrant noodles in some sort of fish broth and piled with meat, egg, and unfamiliar vegetables. She picked up the chopsticks and dug in, and promptly moaned. "This is the best thing I've eaten since we left Harken."

"Enjoy it," Charlaine said. "It may very well be the last good meal we get."

Jac ravenously ate several more bites before bothering to reply. "Nobody is killing me until I get one good Harken meal. Lamb samosas and a proper cup of Outlander-style tea. Harkenesten beef kebabs—"

"Too spicy," Charlaine cut in.

Giving him an unimpressed look, Jac continued, "With rice, yogurt and cucumbers. For dessert, I just want a pile of mangos."

"Have you ever had mangos the Kinnish way?" Charlaine asked.

Jac shook her head.

"They serve it with sticky rice sweetened with coconut milk."

"Oh, Pantheon, that sounds delicious. How come I've never had that? Everything else finds its way to Harken, I swear."

"I'm sure it will eventually, if it's not already made at some tiny cart on a small, overlooked street in Harkenesten. Most of our mango exports go to Kin del Kar, especially since we shifted most of our sugar contracts to them. We might send even more, depending on how the current negotiations for their spiced rum proceed."

"How do you know so much about trade? I'm around Allen all day and I can't keep up with it all."

Charlaine returned her unimpressed look. "How do you not? Trade is how all countries survive, especially an empire like Harken. I attend the public meetings about it whenever I can to keep apprised. It's come in handy more than once."

Jac flinched. "A lot of those meetings require you be able to read. There's not much point in listening to the briefs if you can't read the details."

Charlaine closed his eyes briefly, then opened them, his eyes dark with remorse. "I'm sorry, I didn't think. I should not have said that," Charlaine replied. "Those meeting are meant to be accessible to everyone. We should mention to Allen that they're not. Someone should have pointed the problem out a long time ago."

Gods, no. Jac would rather get into it with Cartha again than whine to Allen about something so stupid. "I think we have bigger problems right now."

Charlaine eyed her with entirely too much knowing, but thankfully said nothing, only drank an entire cup of chilled hibiscus tea in several large gulps and promptly refilled it. He drank most of that as well before finally turning to the food. He licked his lips, and the memory of their kiss came flooding back. It had only lasted a moment, but that was long enough to engrave how hot his mouth had been, how good it had felt to be pressed against the long, hard-muscled length of him, how nice it was to be kissed like an equal, instead of like something fragile or some thrilling prize who might spill interesting gossip.

One stupid kiss should not be so seared into her mind. She'd kissed plenty of people over the years, from 'respectable' types she probably should have had the sense to settle down with, to whores she could barely talk to because of language barriers. None of those kisses had stuck with her, not even the first person she'd slept with.

But though nearly a month had passed now, Myra's soft kiss in the hallway was a constant torment and encouragement. That kiss she and Charlaine were pretending hadn't happened haunted her every waking and sleeping moments.

Thinking of both provoked ideas that weren't helping anything.

Jac finished her first helping and went for more, moaning all over again at the taste of real food after twenty days of what passed for food on the ship. Pantheon, what she wouldn't give for a long stretch of days where she did nothing but sleep and eat.

And fuck Myra and Charlaine blind.

Damn it. Bad thoughts.

"What has you looking so annoyed?" Charlaine asked. "Do you think involving Mark is a bad idea, after all?"

"No, sorry, my thoughts wandered." Jac drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Now that we're here, it's starting to hit me just how much we're up against—and all we really stand to lose. I'm not giving Myra up without a fight, even if *he* didn't want to fight."

"He was protecting us," Charlaine said softly.

Jac jerked one shoulder. "I know." It didn't make her any less annoyed. Any one of them could hold their own in a fight. Together? Myra hadn't needed to give up. "We don't need to be protected. We need him. The minute we retrieve him, I'm going to clobber that fact into him."

Charlaine laughed, in that open, unguarded way that Jac loved and hated in equal measure. "I would offer to help, but I think you'll have the matter well in hand. Best he learns early not to cross you—if he hasn't learned that already." He winked and went back to his food.

Before Jac could get her thoughts working again, the door opened and Mark strode briskly in, dressed now in breeches, high boots and a shirt and jacket, all of it in various shades of brown and green. She was beautiful, almost distractingly so in clingy clothes. Jac was half in love with Myra and wholly confused about Charlaine, but Pantheon, a woman could look.

"Shall we go?" Mark asked, thanking a servant who slipped in to hand over a handsome scimitar and matching daggers that Mark deftly strapped and buckled into place. "I assume your plan is to beat them to Iron Moon and await their arrival."

"Yes," Jac said, finishing off a last bite of bread stuffed with red bean paste and wiping away crumbs as she stood. "Thank you for the food."

Mark waved a hand. "Thank you for allowing me to repay a debt to an old friend. Come, I have horses waiting. We are going to head out of the city to a particular place in the country where some... associates, shall we say? of mine will be more than happy to take us most of the way into Soltorin. From that point, we'll catch another boat that will take us as close as we can get without drawing undue suspicion. And I will be there to do all the talking." She winked, then clapped her hands, turned and strode off.

Jac hastened after her, Charlaine right behind—and both drew up short as Mark came rushing back in.

"They're here, and worse, my damnable father is with them. Come on." She ran past them and through the doors at the back of the room.

Swearing softly, sharing a look with Charlaine and loosening her sword in its sheath, Jac bolted after her. Charlaine caught up a moment later carrying their belongings, and Jac shot him a grateful look.

Outside, Mark beckoned them to the far end of the pool and then down a set of stairs carved into a cliffside Jac hadn't even noticed until suddenly they were climbing down a damned cliff.

"So we're all officially in trouble now," Mark said with a laugh. "My father will have my head for this."

"You don't have to risk yourself for us, my lady," Charlaine said. "Surely you can simply tell us what to do, and we can be on our way without dragging you into this mess with us."

Mark scoffed. "Chass asked for my help, and I have never known him to ask anyone for help. I owe him, anyway. I do not like that lives are in danger, but I am always eager for adventure. Come on. The servants will keep my father and the soldiers busy and hide any evidence you were about. We'll have to go into the city now, but once there we can obtain horses and then resume as planned."

Jac had never known any plan to proceed so easily, but she was all for being proved wrong. Shouldering her pack and satchel as Charlaine handed them to her, she followed Mark across the sand, keeping close to the cliff wall.

Eventually, they reached another staircase—but disappointingly passed it. Thankfully, they came to a third after another half hour or so of walking, and that one Mark led them up. Jac's legs were not enjoying all the sand and stairs after weeks of little effort on the ship, but she buried her complaints and kept trudging.

Dusk was falling by the time they were once again in the city. It wasn't the harbor where they'd been before, or the streets they'd taken to Mark's house, but a rundown, derelict part of the city. Jac would have thought at some point they'd return to the harbor, but instead Mark led them through a maze of streets and alleyways, occasionally hissing for them to hide as guards passed by on patrol.

Eventually they stopped in a tiny courtyard wedged between two buildings that looked on the verge of collapsing.

"Why all this meandering?" Charlaine asked.

"Because I haven't seen this many guards in the street since they were looking for the woman who killed Ambassador Tuva's mistress a few years ago. I think the Triumvirate went a bit too far this time with letting their assassins out to play, and they are going to clean up the mess one way or another."

Charlaine's mouth flattened.

Jac had to agree, as much as she hated to. They must be in even more trouble than suspected. "I don't suppose there is any chance they're trying to find us to relay good news? That maybe they've somehow worked out a deal to get Myra back?"

Mark and Charlaine laughed, neither one sounding anything but resigned.

"That's what I figured, but one can hope," Jac said with a sigh. "So they're trying to stop us, like you mentioned earlier?"

"Yes, because if you die as well as Myra, then Harken will shift from diplomacy to war, and they will win—easily," Mark replied. "An outcome Soldonir is desperate to avoid."

Charlaine sighed. "To think a month ago I was worried about how to fill all my newfound free time. I am not enjoying being back to this sort of work at all. But I still don't think handing ourselves over is the right way to go. If I had some guarantee they'd rescue Myra, I would consider it. But..." He looked at Mark.

In reply, she grimaced and said, "The council has probably already marked him a loss, to be honest. The Seven are the liaison between clients and assassins to keep apprised of and some control over the clans. That control has always been tenuous at best, however, and since getting rid of Benta, matters have only gotten worse. If they had any real authority over the clans, Myra never would have been kidnapped to begin with. Venturing into Soltorin to deal with them directly is tantamount to suicide. So far as the council is concerned, Myra is already as good as dead. They're simply trying to save you so they have *something* to appease Harken. This is all supposition of course, but I am good at my job, and I've lived here a long time—and have been dealing with Soldonir even longer."

Anger curled through Jac. "I'm not going to save my own skin by throwing Myra on the pyre, and I'm not letting anyone else do it either!"

She struck the ground with one fist. "Do Sarrica and Allen realize that's what the Triumvirate is doing? They can't—they'd never permit it."

Charlaine surged forward and grabbed her shoulders, said something Jac didn't catch, and pulled her into an embrace. Jac held fast to his sides, trembling with anger. It wasn't fair. If Allen or Shemal or anyone else with a title or high standing had been kidnapped, this matter would have been handled completely differently. Sarrica would already be sending Lesto out or coming himself to wreak divine havoc until he got his people back.

But nobody had ever moved mountains to save a secretary and a couple of mercenaries.

"Jac, just breathe," Charlaine said softly, and damn it if his voice wasn't calming. "Their Majesties would never abandon us, you know they wouldn't. Allen loves you. Sarrica loves Myra. They're doing everything they possibly can, even if we can't see it right now."

"They had damn well better be," Jac said, more reassured and comforted by Charlaine than she liked. Damn it, why did the man have to be so fucking perfect and wonderful? The more time they spent together, the more laughable the idea of Myra choosing her became. The more she wondered what it might be like if nobody had to choose, and how foolish did that make her? She swallowed and pushed away from him. "Sorry."

"You don't need to be sorry," Charlaine replied, and looked at her with a frustration Jac absolutely understood, though she doubted they were frustrated for the same reason.

"I don't understand why they aren't trying to save Myra, why they're just leaving it to the Triumvirate."

Charlaine gripped her shoulder again, and Jac hated herself, absolutely fucking hated herself, because she wanted another hug, wanted a kiss, just for the comfort and strength those gestures could bring. It wasn't *fair*. Couldn't she go on a simple rescue mission without developing feelings for her own fucking rival? Wasn't it difficult enough cooperating to rescue Myra while avoiding that they both wanted him—and had kissed each other. Not to mention Myra had also kissed her.

Had he kissed Charlaine? And *of course* her immediate reaction was that she wished she could have seen that.

Was love always this difficult? Had Allen had such internal turmoil? Lesto, the bastard, had practically just shown up after being kidnapped with the love of his life in tow, because of course Lesto had. She wasn't even going to think about Jader and Kamir.

Ugh.

"We don't know that they're not trying to save Myra," Charlaine said. "We don't even really know why they've sent the guards for us—we're just making assumptions. They could be doing something to find Myra. Realms, maybe some of the guards are trying to find him rather than us. All we can do for now is carry on and do our best to win the day."

Jac nodded. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Charlaine tweaked her nose. "No apologies. Now come on, let's keep going. The sooner we're out of the city, the better."

"Just so," Mark said. "This way."

It took them until well after dark to finally get out of the city, and from there still more walking until they came to a large, sprawling complex that seemed to be a tavern, an inn, a private pier, a public stable, and something else Jac couldn't figure out.

Mark bid them wait outside before she slipped into what seemed to be the main building. A few minutes later a young man came out and approached them with a tray bearing bowls of what resembled the congee she'd grown up eating, though this kind was heaped with salted fish and pickled vegetables instead of stringy bits of barely edible meat. There were also cups of warm rice wine that helped cut the brisk night air.

Sitting on the low wall that surrounded the whole place, Jac happily dug in.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone enjoy food as much as you," Charlaine said, grinning around a piece of fish he shoved in his mouth. After swallowing, he added, "And I've been surrounded by soldiers my whole life."

Jac ignored her burning face. "Between growing up an orphan and being a mercenary, I appreciate food when I get it. After all the lousy food on that ship, I'm eating every scrap of good food that appears in front of me." That got her the laugh she'd been hoping for, even as it knotted her stomach and started up an ache in her chest.

Damn it, she'd been happier when she and Charlaine had been passing acquaintances and really only talked when work brought them together. Becoming friends with him was the worst thing ever. All it did was make her wish they could be lovers too. With Myra right there with them. What would they say if she suggested it?

Nothing good, probably. Growing up in Outland had made it very clear that the Islander way of love and romance wasn't acceptable in Harken, unless it was under the propriety of dames and sires.

"Do you think we'll get to him in time?" she asked. "Or are we really in need of someone to save us from ourselves?"

"I think it doesn't matter," Charlaine said, leaning in close, resting his forehead against the side of hers. "I think we're both the type to do whatever we can, damn the consequences. Why else would I be the shadowy third of Fathoms Deep and you the woman crazy enough to leave the High Consort presumptive practically alone in the middle of enemy territory?"

Jac grimaced. "It's not like a wanted to. I'm never going to live that down, am I?"

"Of course not. Heroes usually don't live down their deeds. Nor should they," Charlaine said as he sat up again. He finished the rest of his food and set the bowl aside, picking up his cup and sipping at what remained of his wine.

Jac shook her head and stuffed more food in her mouth. She'd never forget that awful moment when she'd been forced to abandon Allen. It hadn't been heroic at all. It had been desperate and reckless and nearly failed. Cartha had chased her nearly the whole way, and twice they'd caught her, beaten and tormented her. She'd escaped the first time by using the last of her firebombs.

The second time...the second time she didn't remember. Sensations of pain, terror, desperation. Screaming. Branches cutting her face. But the actual events were a blur. Her first clear memory after that was looking into Sarrica's face and telling him all that she could. Doing her duty had never been so difficult, and the Dragons had been involved in some nasty affairs. The glorious empire so many enjoyed being a part of came at a steep price

most never knew about. The price that day had been leaving Allen behind to be captured. Allen never spoken of that time, but they all knew he'd had nightmares for months after. Every once in a while, after particularly rough days, they came back. He'd always have the scars on his back, piled on top of those left by his brothers.

There hadn't really been any other choice but to leave him behind. She'd replayed that moment over and over again, but still only saw the solution she'd taken. That didn't make it easier to live with, even if no one else blamed her for Allen's suffering, outside of ignorant nobles who enjoyed talking about things they didn't understand. Even if she had plenty of scars of her own.

She'd be damned if she ever let him down again. Even if getting Myra back cost her everything.

Jac swallowed another bite of congee and the last of the pickled vegetables, none of which she recognized but were all delicious. It wasn't Mestan lobster chowder or Outlander-style roasted chicken, but it was good.

Mark returned before she could figure out how to obtain a second helping of everything and beckoned them to follow her. She led them up a set of stairs and into a large room containing four beds. "I've paid for the whole room, so we will not be bothered. No guards or rumors of guards have come this far, so we should be safe through the night and we'll leave at first light."

Jac didn't groan or whine, but it was a near thing. Instead she went over to the bucket in the corner and used the soap and rag set next to it to quickly wash up before she changed into fresh clothes that didn't smell like filthy sailors and hours of walking.

Leaving the others to do as they pleased, she flopped down on one of the beds and fell almost immediately asleep.

\*~\*~\*

She jerked awake to someone shaking her feet and reached for the sword she'd been too stupid to remember to put to hand—but her fingers touched it anyway, and she would have kissed Charlaine for that alone if she wasn't just awake enough to remember why that was a bad idea.

"What?" she asked, voice pitched low.

"Guards downstairs," Charlaine said, and withdrew to pull on his boots and weapons.

Jac rolled out of bed and did the same—and had just strapped on her sword belt when the door flew open and guards spilled into the room. *Damn it.* She reached into her special pouch and palmed two of the contents before spreading her arms to show she meant no harm.

"Stop in the name of the Seven!" the woman in the lead bellowed in Harken, as eight additional guards fanned out. "Lady Mark Valturr, Master Charlaine Astor, Mistress Jac Denali, we request that you come peacefully. If you refuse, you will be arrested and treated as prisoners rather than guests."

"Do you aim to stop us from completing our mission?" Charlaine asked.

"I am not fit to comment on that. My orders are to bring you to the Court of Seven," the woman said. "Will you come—"

Jac lobbed the smokebombs she'd been holding, one right after the other to opposite sides of the room. "Go!" she bellowed, and rushed forward into the smoke, holding her breath as she shoved and punched and kicked her way through the chaos until she at least reached the door—more by accident than intent, since it was far too easy to get confused even in a small space.

A guard came out of the mess next, and she knocked him out with a simple one-two. She put down the next as well, and almost punched a third before she registered it was Charlaine, smoky and with a bloody lip and black eye, but otherwise all right. "Mark?"

"Here," Mark hissed as she tumbled out. "My father isn't going to murder me after this, oh no, he's going to send me to my stepfather." Another guard came barreling out, and Mark got hold of him, slammed his head into the nearest wall, and blew loose strands of hair out of her face. "Let's get out of here."

Swearing at everything they were leaving behind, including her daggers and all of her clothes, Jac followed behind Mark and Charlaine, more smokebombs at the ready. She threw one on the stairs and at the base just to be safe. Out in the courtyard, Mark and Charlaine were mounting horses that clearly belonged to the guards they'd just attacked. Not certain whether to laugh or cry, Jac mounted another horse.

She and Mark took off, and a few minutes later Charlaine caught up, his grin just visible in the moonlight. "Sent the other horses off in the opposite direction. They may yet catch us, but it'll take them that much longer. Nice work with the smokebombs, Jac. Did you bring your firebombs along as well?"

"Does a Dragon go anywhere without smoke and fire?" Jac asked.

Charlaine laughed, and Mark chuckled. "Come," she said. "My friend with the boat is only a couple of hours from here, and once we're on the water they'll have a much harder time catching us. Smugglers' vessels can go places the royal and private vessels can't. Even most fishermen won't venture where we're going, especially as we draw closer to the more secluded parts of Soltorin."

Groaning at the idea of riding and then sailing, with no chance of rest in sight, Jac nevertheless heeled her horse to a faster pace and raced with her companions into the night.

## CHAPTER TEN

Myra stared out the grungy window a few paces from where he sat on a narrow bed. They were in a small inn just outside Odokka, with Ryan and everyone but Kim having gone back into the city. They'd left that morning, and it was approaching evening. The day had been long, tense, and miserable—exactly like every day before it.

He just wanted it all to be over. The worst part of going to his death was that it was taking forever. Not that he wanted to die, but this slow waiting, sitting around doing nothing, day after day of eat, sleep, wait, eat, sleep, wait, was damn near worse than death.

Never again would he complain about the tedium of rearranging the schedule for the five hundredth time, or sorting out what legal texts would need to be pulled for Allen to look over, or writing out contracts in multiple languages.

Since their arrival in Odon, he'd been moved around three times. The only good thing was that every inn they stayed in was of good quality, so he got decent food and a comfortable bed and didn't have to worry about lice and other vermin.

Minus the ones who'd kidnapped him, anyway.

Kimberly kept watching him, and she was always the one put in charge of babysitting him while the others were out, but since their conversation about her brother, she'd not said a word to him. Her doubts and worries were plain enough to anyone who knew to look, but Ryan and the others were so distracted by reporting the failed mission to their liaison that nobody paid Kimberly much attention. It was clear they didn't consider her a real part of the team; she was treated more like a servant than an assassin.

So far as making her an ally was proceeding, he was about to declare that a monumental failure. Whatever her reticence and doubts regarding the clans, she'd not yet worked herself free of their cultish thinking. Then again, it had taken him witnessing a murder of a clanswoman to realize just how terrible life would be if he remained. Leaving aside they never would have seen him as anything but 'a woman living as a man,' which was already

unbearable, all their talk of killing for the greater good, removing those who were hurting the world, was lies. Killing was killing, and good was often a matter of perspective.

Nearly every kingdom in Harken was happy to be a part of the empire. But ask most Tricemorien citizens and they'd be happy to regale the listener with tales of the Battle of Korron; the Massacre of the Nine; the Pyre of the Lost City. No one could be forced to join the empire, that was one of its oldest laws, though it hadn't come soon enough to prevent some of Harken's earliest crimes. Tricemore hadn't exactly joined with ringing enthusiasm, and every now and then it seemed like they might rebel and join Cartha.

Kin del Kar got along with Harken now, but they had plenty of stories of empire brutality of their own to tell. And the history between Cartha and Harken was carved in bone and soaked in blood. Harken's history with Benta and Treya Mencee was only moderately better. All of the empire condemned Treya Mencee for their slave colonies, but Mesta and Selemea had once purchased some of those slaves and might still if ceasing such practices hadn't been a requirement of joining the empire.

Treya Mencee should be rightfully condemned for slavery and many other horrific practices, but they'd done a lot of good too. Benta had its own complicated history, with just as many people who loved and hated them—Including Soldonir. Yet despite the animosity between the two countries, it was highly likely it was someone in Benta who'd paid for the hit on the High Throne.

When all the pretty words were stripped away, the clans were not so different than the mercenaries the rest of the world relied on so heavily, save that mercenaries could leave if they chose, and did a lot more than kill and spy.

If he had not witnessed that murder in the woods, would he be any better than Ryan, than Kimberly? Probably not.

He fervently hoped that, whether she helped him or not, Kimberly saw sense and found a way to escape.

He also rather hoped he survived, but he'd known his fate the moment he'd seen his nephew in the dungeon.

Myra tensed as the door opened and relaxed slightly when it proved to be Kimberly bearing a tray of food. She arranged him at the table and sat across from him, scowling at the bowl of rice, salted mackerel, and pickled radish, bamboo shoots, and lotus root as though they'd called her mother a two-pin whore.

"Something on your mind?" he asked.

"Be quiet."

Myra obeyed and managed to finish half his meal before she started giving him pensive, confused, frustrated looks. Though he itched to push, he left her alone. Some people needed to be persuaded, some needed to be seduced, some needed time.

Just as he wanted to scream, Kimberly said, "The clans are shrinking. It's not common knowledge. The clan leaders don't want people to realize."

Despite his thoughts of a moment ago, the words were a blow. Myra shoved the unwanted emotions away. The clans had made their own mess. It was always going to catch up with them. "That's what happens when you hoard people the same way you hoard secrets and treat your own like they're as expendable as the people we're contracted to kill," Myra said. "Every person dead is another family that will never be, and every once in a while you get someone like me. No matter how much of a spectacle they make of me, no matter how much they'll shame and humiliate me to terrorize everyone else into falling back in line, there will be another who decides my death is a step too far, and once you see one flaw, you begin to see them all."

Kimberly went back to glaring at her food, but after several more minutes said, "I don't have the resources or skills to save you. To be honest, I'm not sure I'm willing to throw my life away to save yours."

"I never expected you to," Myra said. He didn't need her to save him. He just needed her to give him an opportunity to save himself.

She looked up, met his gaze. "If you could have escaped without killing your father, would you have? And that other man you killed?"

Myra sighed. "That's the wrong question. I didn't kill my father to secure my freedom. I killed my father because I decided someone else's life was more valuable, and the only way to save that person was to kill my father. 'What if' is a waste of time because there's no world where that option ever existed. I had a choice between a world with Emperor Sarrica or a world without him, and I chose the one where he lived. If I had to do it all over

again, I'd make the same decision. The only difference between me and the rest of the clans was that I made the choice myself, instead of taking money and acting on someone else's choice."

Kimberly's mouth pinched, and she ate the rest of her meal in silence.

Biting back frustration, because most of it was simply the result of stirring bad memories, Myra finished his food and went without comment when she moved him back to the bed. He rolled over on his side and stared at the wall, losing himself in happy daydreams of being home again, of Jac, of Charlaine—and maybe a few of Jac *and* Charlaine.

The door slammed open so hard it hit the wall and bounced back—which just further angered the man it nearly hit. He slammed it closed once he was inside and stomped over to the bed opposite.

Myra slowly relaxed from the fighting position he'd jerked up into and sat on the bed facing the man.

"You're bleeding everywhere," Kimberly sniped.

"Shut up, bitch," the man snarled. "Can't you see I'm trying to fix the problem?"

"Quit stomping and floundering about! That'd—"

"Shut up or I'll make you shut up."

Kimberly huffed but fell silent, and the man went back to whatever he was doing.

His face was a mess, and Kimberly was right—the way he was moving around ignoring it instead of at least using something to staunch the blood wasn't helping. Finally, though, he dug out a battered pack of healing supplies and pressed a cloth to his face to sop up most of the blood. When he pulled it away to look at his wounds in a mirror, Myra finally got a good look at the damage: long gashes down his cheek and the top of his neck. Similar, in fact, to wounds and scars he'd seen on many mercenaries, including Captain Chass.

The damage was done by Bentan bear claws, a nasty weapon Bentan mercs favored because the long claws could be worn under special gloves, making them particularly useful in the frigid, snowy weather that plagued Benta most of the year.

Bastard was lucky he still had a face—that he hadn't lost an eye. That he was still *alive*. The only way that happened was if the claws merely grazed flesh, or were mostly blocked by good armor, instead of landing a full blow. When that happened...well, the body wasn't arranged for a public viewing before being put to pyre.

"Stitch this up," he snapped, looking at Kimberly.

"Fuck you," Kimberly said. "I'm not the group healer, and I'm sure as shit not helping somebody who's already snarled at me for trying to help and called me names. Stitch your own fucking wound—that's what you'd say to me if I asked you for help."

"I can't stitch my own fucking face, bitch."

Kimberly sprawled on her bed with a book she'd pulled out of her bag. "Calling me a bitch over and over again isn't helping you. Do it yourself or wait for one of the others to come back."

"I can do it," Myra said.

The man sneered. "Like I'm letting a traitorous whore like you anywhere near me."

Myra didn't roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. "The longer it goes untreated, the more likely it is to get infected, not to mention you've already lost quite a bit of blood. And you're right: you can't stitch it yourself. That job will take two hands. When are the others due back?"

Swearing loudly and colorfully, the man finally said, "Fine. Get over here and stitch up my face."

Kimberly rolled her eyes but got up to loosen Myra's tether. He approached the man's bed and deftly laid out the supplies, then fetched the jug of water and washing bowl from the table in the corner. It would be better if it was hot water, but the ass would have to make do.

Once Myra had cleaned and treated the wounds as best he could, he threaded a healer's needle and set to work stitching the man's face and neck up. It was slow, difficult work, and he had to stop several times to clean his hands when they got too slick, but eventually the deed was done. Washing his hands one last time, Myra slathered the wounds in healing ointment, bandaged them, and finally stepped back. "All done. Change those bandages twice a day and keep a close eye for infection, and you should be

fine in a few weeks. Where did you cross paths with a Bentan mercenary, of all people?"

"None of your fucking business. Get back on your bed where you belong." The man rose and stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

"I hope you weren't expecting Barry to thank you," Kimberly said as she rose to fix Myra's tether and clean up the mess.

Myra laughed briefly. "Definitely not. He just better be careful, because I'm not going to be amused if he tries to blame any infection on me."

"He blames everyone but himself for everything," Kimberly groused, then seemed to realize who she was talking to and snapped her mouth shut, saying nothing more as she slipped out of the room to get rid of the used supplies.

Waiting really was the worst part.

But it was a little too much coincidence to think the halfwit had just happened to irritate a Bentan mercenary. So it was Benta who had commissioned the kills—more likely, the Bentan rebels. There'd been various factions during and after the war, divided by end goals. Most of them were small and of little to no threat.

A few of the factions, however, were decidedly threatening, and some of the reports he'd decoded had indicated they were starting to join forces. Whatever their different goals, they all agreed on disliking King Desmond and his determination to forge an alliance with Harken—not least of all because of Bentan ties to Cartha that Desmond had severed but the rebels maintained.

Where had they gotten the money though? It would take Benta a lot longer than a few years to recover all the funds bled away by decades of war. Even Sarrica would flinch at the price on his own head, never mind combined with Allen.

Either the Bentan rebels had more money than anyone knew, or they'd allied with other parties to gain the funds. Which reeked of Treya Mencee, who had more gold than they could ever spend and would benefit immensely from a blow to Harken and having the Bentan rebels in their debt—especially if they were also willing to assist with a possible dethroning.

Myra's head hurt. His biggest problem was supposed to be the master schedule. He shouldn't be sitting here stewing over politics and counting down the days to his own demise.

If only he could convey what he knew to someone who could get word to Sarrica. If he was right, and this was the work of Bentan rebels with assistance from Treya Mencee...then Harken, and the Bentan Throne, had a great deal more trouble headed their way.

Of course, Sarrica and the others might already know that and more. Myra was best positioned to get proof, though. Something, anything, that would let Harken and King Desmond go for the rebels' throats—for Treya Mencee's throat, since they were by far the larger threat right now.

But what could he possibly do when it had taken this long for him to get even a hint of who had hired Iron Moon?

Ryan would have the important information that had needed to be written down, pertinent details that needed to be kept until everything could be copied into Iron Moon's permanent records—because nothing said security like blackmail material, even if it was equally dangerous to have records that they had in fact done the killing.

There was no chance, however, that he'd be able to get near Ryan's belongings. He had next to none to begin with and kept almost everything on him all the time—even when he slept. As good as Myra was, there was no way he could avoid shaking the bells while removing the tether locked around his ankle. If he could do that, he would still be in Harken.

Myra sighed and tabled ideas of getting word to Sarrica. What could he possibly know that Sarrica wouldn't figure out, given all the resources at his disposal?

Were any of those resources being sent after him?

Myra's chest ached, eyes stinging, as he reminded himself the answer was no. Nobody was coming for him. How could they? Thanks to the gliders, they were weeks ahead of any rescue, and he didn't think there was anyone in the Triumvirate territories that Sarrica could send out to retrieve him. Nobody was going to risk their life and livelihood to save a secretary, even the imperial Head Secretary.

The door opened, far too loudly and carelessly to be Kimberly. Myra turned and sat up, and stifled a sigh as Ryan strode into the room looking

equal parts furious and smug. "I'm going to kill that worthless sack of shit myself if he doesn't stop giving us the run around. What's left to say? We arranged the return of the money for the incomplete jobs, he doesn't want us trying again, and we have plenty of other matters to take care of right now." He cast Myra a look. "Like staking cowardly traitors in a field to suffer the slow, miserable death they deserve."

Myra ignored him.

"Speaking of deserved deaths," Ryan said slyly, sending a cold chill slicing down Myra's spine, "there are some interesting rumors going around the city. They say the Seven sent out the city guards to track down a couple of stray Harken birds." His smiled turned nasty. "Do the names 'Sergeant Denali' and 'Lieutenant Astor' mean anything to you, dear brother?"

"No," Myra replied, struggling not to throw up and cry and laugh all at once. Jac and Charlaine were in Soldonir? They'd come after him? What were the fools doing? They'd get themselves killed! They had no idea what they were doing, getting involved in Triumvirate politics and clan vendettas.

Ryan laughed meanly. "Liar. Did you think I wouldn't recognize their names? Denali is the pretty little slut we hired men to kill in the city. Sadly, they didn't listen to us and underestimated her. Astor is the one-eyed soldier who babysits the High Commander's bitch."

Oh, Myra would give anything to see him call Lord Kamir *the High Commander's bitch* in front of Jader.

Crossing the room, Ryan backhanded Myra hard enough he toppled to the bed. "Give it up. We all know those two are chums of yours, given how upset they were to see you dragged away. How sweet they've tried to come to your rescue. What a pity they'll be dead long before they get anywhere near you, and knowing the royal guard, the bodies won't ever be found. That will really upset your precious little birds won't it? I know how much they just love setting corpses on fire."

Myra had always liked that tradition, versus those of Soldonir: important figures were laid out in special decaying rooms until only the bones remained, at which point they were put in special boxes and placed 70p-=-in a crypt. Some wealthi families had similar practices. Everyone else, the bodies were laid out for nature to take back. That was why the ultimate

punishment for traitors and other high-level criminals was to put them out while still alive.

He licked blood from his lips. "Leave them alone. There's no reason to set the guards after them—"

Ryan's laughter drowned him out. "That's the best part! Your stupid emperor sent a request to the Seven that they were to be located and treated like guests. He also apparently sent a request that you be foundand treated the same, until he and the Seven could come to an agreement on what is to be done with you. Pathetic, but that comes as no surprise."

Myra almost did start crying then. Sarrica was trying to save him.

It was a futile effort, but it warmed him in a way nothing had for days. Iron Moon would slit his throat before they let anyone take him, but Sarrica was trying. He was leveraging his power and authority to save a *secretary*. A lying, deceiving, former assassin turned secretary who'd failed to save his brother-in-law.

"You're just as pathetic as them—no wonder you fit in so well," Ryan said.

"Why are you *such* a mean-hearted bastard?" Myra asked.

Ryan slapped him that time, then shoved him face down on the bed, pressing so hard Myra couldn't breathe. "I'm mean-hearted? I'm doing what I must to see that my clan, my *family*, survives. You're the bastard who killed our father. A friend. People who *trusted* you, who did their part believing you would do yours, only to be murdered by the hand they died thinking would *save* them. You don't get to judge me when you're the one so fucking selfish that you betrayed and abandoned everyone who loved you." He yanked Myra around and straddled him, pushing his arms into the bed and holding his wrists bruise-tight. "We *mourned* you. We thought that whole mission a fucking tragedy, a job we shouldn't have taken, that father's arrogance led us to disaster. Mother cried for you. She cried for *weeks*. We gave you *everything* and this whole *fucking time* you've been living a grand and glorious life of luxury in the goddamn Harken Empire. *I'm* meanhearted? Brother, you could give me lessons."

"It's not mean-hearted to want to choose my own life!" Myra snarled, slamming his head into Ryan's nose, which started bleeding. Ryan let him go and Myra immediately shoved him back, then grabbed hold and threw

him off the bed, not remotely sorry when that caused his head to crack against the frame of the neighboring bed.

Ryan bellowed as he clambered to his feet, nose and forehead bleeding—but he struggled only briefly as Kimberly and another man dragged him back. He wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

"You'll pay for that." Turning sharply on his heel, he stormed out of the room, the man who'd held him back giving chase.

Kimberly turned to Myra. "You've really done it now."

"What are they doing to do? Kill me twice?"

"There's a whole lot of suffering that can be done before they finally let you die."

"I don't care. I'm not going to keep putting up with his abuse. If he's going to treat me that way, I'm going to return it."

"I can certainly tell you two are related, solely from your reckless behavior and tempers. I would have thought a man known as the High Secretary would have a bit more control."

Myra laughed—and laughed and laughed, until his sides and face hurt, until his eyes burned from the tears, and he was gasping for breath. Kimberly stared at him like he'd lost his mind. "Control? You think I lack control? I have murdered more people for Iron Moon than I care to think about. I plotted an escape, murdered my own father and lived twenty years with everyone in Soltorin thinking I was dead. I've been kidnapped, beaten, abused, taunted, and more over the past three weeks, and only now do I snap and you think I lack control?"

There was a long, heavy silence, then Kimberly quietly said, "Fair enough. You might want to get it back, though, because you're not going to like what's coming next."

"What's coming next?"

"Do you remember Lord Ethan?"

Myra frowned briefly as he ran through his memories. "He was the Clan Overseer, their liaison between the Seven and all the clans. He died nine years ago." Myra's stomach cramped. "Why are you telling me this? What difference does that make to me?"

She gave him a pitying look. "I think you and Ryan do share arrogance. A smart man who wanted to start a new life would have picked a quiet farm in the middle of nowhere, not chosen to work as the Emperor's head secretary."

"It wasn't like that," Myra said, but she'd already vanished out the door, probably to go fetch supplies to clean up the blood and fresh linens for Myra's bed.

He rose and stripped off his bloody jacket, used it to wipe the blood from his face and hands. There was still plenty of tacky, drying blood left behind, but without the water he couldn't reach there wasn't much he could do.

So he sat on the floor and waited for the others to return, ignoring his pounding headache and the fear gnawing at his gut. The only reason the identity of the new Overseer would matter to him was if it was someone he knew. Someone from Iron Moon, and before he'd left there'd been a great deal of talk about who in their clan would most be suited to assume that role. Women weren't allowed to become assassins, but they'd always been permitted to take up other roles. Men ruled the clans, but women could do other things—include serve as Overseer.

Pantheon, please let him be wrong.

Kimberly came back a short time later, an inn servant behind her who quickly set all to rights. By the time she'd left, the others were back, and with a smile full of malice, Ryan hauled him to his feet, freed the tether, and slung Myra over his shoulder. "You should be honored, brother; a special guest has made time to come see you."

Myra was going to throw up.

They went downstairs into a private room usually rented for meetings, banquets, and the like, where Myra was put on his knees, his head yanked back—and his heart dropped into his stomach as his greatest fear proved to be true.

Lady Nessa, his mother, wearing a necklace that marked her as a member of the Court of Seven and the circlet of the Clan Overseer. Which meant she was likely the liaison who'd brokered the deal between the Bentan rebels and Iron Moon.

Myra's mother had always been shrewd and ambitious, far more than was usually tolerated in women. She had only grown more beautiful over

the years, her skin moonglow pale, a mark of her high status, her long hair bound in elaborate braids and twists, and held in place by jeweled combs. On her hands and fingers were the intricate tattoos worn by the women of Iron Moon, showing their family lineage—from birth to those birthed. Her robes were of dark reds and oranges, decorated with gold snakes and silver cranes, with a wide green sash embroidered with roiling gold and silver waves.

Her lips curled. "So it's true. I kept hoping everyone was wrong, that it would be a stranger brought before me who only strongly resembled the son I thought dead these past two decades." Standing just behind and on either side of her were four guards, each wearing the garb of a different clan, but the cowl and hoods marked them as working for her. "Eliza—"

"My name is Myra—"

"Your name is irrelevant," Nessa snapped. "You're a murderer and a traitor."

"We're all murderers!" Myra said, laughing coldly. "You act like I'm some monster and all of you the offspring of gods, but we're all killers. You think you're better than me simply because you haven't killed anyone you're related to? Murder is murder."

Nessa's mouth tightened so severely, white lines formed around them. Finally she drew a breath and said, "I wish I could watch you die. It's the least I deserve after all you took from me, all you put me through. We thought you killed alongside your father. We mourned you, missed you, wished we had been able to save you from your father's arrogance. All this time we were ashamed for sending you on a mission we should have known you weren't ready for, ashamed we sent you off to die—and all these years you played us for fools, lived a life built on betrayal and the blood of your own. If I could kill you right now, I would, but Iron Moon should not be deprived of that honor, so I will settle for seeing you suffer. And don't worry about your foolish friends; I'll take care of them too." She motioned her men forward with a sharp cutting gesture.

Myra felt the first blow, the second and third. He felt the next few a little less, and by the time he lost count of the hits and kicks and smacks, he'd stopped feeling anything.

At some point, he passed out, waking now and again, but in too much pain to take in his surroundings or understand what the voices around him were saying—he couldn't even be sure if the voices were real or the result of fevered imagining.

He was fairly certain he called for Jac and Charlaine, sobbing their names when he could draw enough breath to do so.

Eventually, he passed out again and stayed that way.

\*~\*~\*

The next time he woke, he stayed awake, and took in the unfamiliar room around him. Not the inn they'd been in before, but definitely an inn. To judge by the sunlight pouring in the two windows, it was the middle of the day—and they must be somewhere nice, to have such fine windows and more than one. The room had four beds, and two more had been made up on the floor close to the door.

Myra could smell food from the covered plates on the table, but all it did was make him want to throw up. Instead he closed his eyes again and focused on his breathing.

Every last bit of him hurt, but the pain was distant, like someone had given him drugs and they were only just started to wear off. He could feel the scratch of bandages, the itch and pull of healing cuts, and about three hundred bruises. His face felt swollen, and his lips were definitely split.

Tears stung his eyes at the thought his mother had ordered all this abuse. Stupid to be upset after all he'd done to them, but it hurt all the same that his mother had stood there and watched as he was beaten nearly to death. Pantheon, he must look a fright. Would it all heal? Would he ever look respectable again?

Myra gave a shaky laugh, then groaned at the way it pulled at various cuts and bruises on his chest. What did it matter how he looked? He was going to be dead soon. Whether he died a pretty corpse or an ugly one made no difference.

Thinking of corpses and his mother brought back her final words: that she'd take care of his friends too. Please let Jac and Charlaine be all right. Why couldn't those stubborn fools have stayed in Harken where they were safe—where they were *alive*. They should have stayed there and looked after each other like he'd asked. Clearly they were not as good for each

other as he'd thought. Why hadn't someone stopped them, made them see reason? They were bodyguards, for crying out loud. They had important duties, important people they were supposed to be protecting. They shouldn't be running around putting themselves at risk for a foolish coward like Myra.

Pantheon, he wished he could see them just one more time.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Charlaine woke slowly, groggy and sore and exhausted, chased by fanciful dreams and the crick in his back reminding him they were on a creaky boat and would be for some time yet. He stared up at the sky, still dark but with the soft haze of a slowly rising sun. The stars were still visible, fading diamonds in a velvet sky.

The soft sound of shifting clothes drew his attention, and he craned up just enough to see Jac sitting at the prow of the boat, staring out at the water looking as though she carried the weight of the world, spinning one of her knives with absentminded deftness.

He sat up slowly so she would hear him and not startle, then shifted closer. Near where he'd been lying, Mark and one of the smugglers were still fast asleep. Near the bow of the boat, the other two smugglers still commanded the craft, speaking occasionally in low tones to each other but otherwise content to travel in silence. "What has you frowning so much?"

Jac smoothly slid her dagger back into its sheath at her thigh next to its sister as she turned to face him, hands on either side of her for balance in the gently rocking boat. "All the usual, and it's been so quiet since we returned to the sea, I'm leery. Quiet is never a good thing on missions like this."

Charlaine didn't reply, because what was there to say? He agreed completely. The quietest moments came right before everything went wrong. You knew things were going well because the camp was chaos and the captain was complaining about his food being burned.

"Keep your thoughts on the goal, your attention on the present, and your worries in your bag," Charlaine said. "Lesto used to say that so often I got to the point I wanted to punch him every time I heard it. But it's good advice."

Jac snickered. "He said it once to us, and Rene was right behind him, mimicking every gesture. Lesto swung around and punched the shit out of him. Rene punched him right back, and then resumed speaking like nothing

had happened. I think their antics cheered everyone up more than Lesto's words."

"They're good at that, though they'd deny it." Charlaine's fingers twitched to reach out and reassure through touch, but that illicit kiss on the boat was never far from his mind, and the urge to kiss Jac properly grew stronger with every passing day. Not that it mattered. Regardless of that kiss, Jac was gone on Myra, and Charlaine would leave well enough alone no matter how much it was killing him.

"Have you thought about what you'll do once we're home again?" Jac asked.

Charlaine looked out over the sea, which was gaining color as the sun continued its slow rise. "I have no idea. I've been a soldier so long, and one who mostly worked from the shadows, it's hard to figure out how to live any other way. How sad is that?" He swallowed, feeling immediately stupid and pathetic for whining so unexpectedly. Jac was like Myra in that she was deceptively easy to talk to, all the more disconcerting when Charlaine was the one who usually did the listening.

Jac made an indistinct noise that could have been a curse or her choking on something. "Trust me, you'll get used to it. Look at Lord Lesto—actually, don't, he's a terrible example. Shemal shoved him into the swimming pool a couple of months ago when he tried to get involved in something. I thought Lesto was going to kill him, but it was the funniest thing I've ever seen."

"I heard about that," Charlaine said. "I would have given every pin to my name to have seen it."

"It was worth the money." Jac smiled. "If you need help finding ways to spend your free time, I can suggest some things." Charlaine almost bit his tongue. "Like napping. Eating. I know all the best places to eat in Harkenesten. You could get back into acting."

"I was never an actor, just helped around the stage and read parts when people were practicing. Even if I had been, I'm hardly fit now." Charlaine reached up to touch the edge of his bad eye. "I'd only be allowed to play the thugs that get killed off in the first act."

Jac's noise that time was definitely derisive. "That's stupid! It's not like any of those people are real. They're roles. You could do it. And I know

there's a dashing hero with one eye. I've seen that play. He's framed for murder but manages to escape on the way to prison and then comes back years later as a merchant."

"The Merchant of Jarla," Charlaine said. "No one with half a mind would ever cast me as Shera. I could be the bit part manservant, though."

"You're ridiculous."

"So are you if you think I could get cast as the lead in one of the most famous and highly-regarded plays of all time," Charlaine replied. "Just how much sense did Cartha knock out of you, woman?"

Jac grimaced. "I'd say quite a bit, though to be fair, it can be argued I didn't have much to begin with."

"Oh, now who's being ridiculous?"

"It's true." Jac laughed sourly. "I didn't have much in the way of skills before I joined the Dragons, and those skills would only be good at getting me into another mercenary band, which I have no desire to do. I'm not like the rest of you."

"What in the Pantheon are you talking about?" Charlaine would argue she was better than the rest of them, capable of breaking the face of a person three times her size just as a warm up, but still capable of smiling and laughing and being sweet. Even Sarrica wouldn't argue that Jac was a large part of the reason Allen had opened up more, learned to relax and smile and show emotion.

She gave him a disbelieving, somewhat angry look. "What do I mean? Don't give me that. Every child in the palace can read better than me. No matter how hard I try, I've started too late in life. I'll never be anything but passable at the most basic Harken—mostly informal, I stand no chance of mastering written formal Harken." She gave another unhappy laugh. "That's just the start. My options outside of the Dragons are scullery maid, prostitute, or muscle at a pub."

"What about the way you dance? Your experience with sailing? You're good with people—that alone is a skill that could set you up anywhere, and you're not even close to the only person who can't read. You can do much better than prostitute or door guard."

"Maybe."

Charlaine did reach out then, curling a hand around the back of her neck and dragging her in close to press his forehead to her temple. "Dragon, pretending for a moment that Allen would not move mountains to see you well situated if he could not find a way to keep you, neither Myra nor I would ever abandon you to such a miserable fate. We have come this far, the two of us, and I have every intention of *three* of us going home, and we'll still be three when we wind up on the streets with no idea of what comes next."

Surprise filled Jac's face, followed by longing and an unmistakable heat, then all of it was smothered by disbelief—but her mouth ticked up in a teasing, if hesitant, smile as she pulled back and said, "Three, is it, Lieutenant? Here I was resigned to the fact Myra would never pick me when he could have you."

Charlaine jerked, sputtered, thoughts going in too many vastly inappropriate directions at once.

Jac burst into giggles and buried her face in her arms, which she braced on her knees. It did little to smother the noise, amusement so great her whole body was shaking. If they weren't in the middle of the ocean, Charlaine would have shoved her over the side of the boat.

"You're terrible," he said gruffly, smothering his anger, because it was really only embarrassment. Of course she'd been joking about such an arrangement. "What nonsense are you talking about, Myra picking me? He was beside himself with excitement that you asked him to tea."

Slowly looking up, flushed with laughter, tears of amusement still on her face, Jac gasped out, "Your face! One would think you'd never heard of a threesome before. Sheltered life, Lieutenant? Do your captain and the former commander keep you too busy?"

"Oh, be quiet, I know perfectly well what a threesome is," Charlaine said. "I've had the same adventures as any young, stupid merc on leave in strange ports. I wasn't expecting you to suggest one with us and Myra."

Jac's amusement faded, uncertainty and longing falling over her face again. "No? I—maybe it's just me, then, but I'd rather—" She looked away. "Never mind. I'm just being stupid. I think I've been alone with my thoughts too long. I'm sorry if I caused any offense."

Charlaine's mouth was dry, and he couldn't seem to unstick the words trapped in his throat.

Seeming to curl even further into herself, Jac made to turn completely away.

That wouldn't do.

Charlaine reached out, grabbed her, and hauled her close, leaving her awkwardly sprawled between his legs, her hands on his thighs for balance.

"What do you think you're doing!" Jac hissed.

"Having a discussion," Charlaine said. "Though I'd prefer it be anywhere else in the world. Well, I prefer this to the prison cells of Harkenesten. Anyway, I think this conversation missed a step. Let's begin with the ship."

Jac looked torn between amusement and annoyance. "Let me go."

Charlaine obeyed, partly because he'd made his point, and partly because she needed to move before he embarrassed himself. Sometimes he really envied people who didn't have dicks to make fools of them at every stray thought and stiff breeze.

"I thought we were pretending I didn't make a complete ass of myself by kissing you," Jac said. "I was perfectly all right with that plan, for the record."

"You were drunk," Charlaine said. "I didn't want you to be more embarrassed than you already were, and my ego is fragile and already bruised. It's hard to compete with a younger, prettier person, especially one who dances and kisses like you do." He scrubbed at his face, feeling tired, even though he'd just woken up. This was not the conversation he'd anticipated when he'd prodded Jac.

A hand rested heavy on his thigh again, and Jac's voice filled his ear, low and warm and husky. "I'm not drunk now."

Charlaine's head jerked up, but before he could say a word, Jac gripped his hair and dragged him into a hard, deep kiss. Her mouth fit to his like a missing piece. Pantheon, he'd thought her lethal when she was too drunk to know what she was doing.

Jac with intent and awareness wasn't something he was certain he'd survive.

Tearing himself away, Charlaine asked, "Do you have some sort of *thing* for boats and ships?"

"Shut up, you stupid bastard," Jac said, and this time kissed him wet and filthy, her tongue taking his mouth like a prize to be claimed.

Charlaine groaned and enjoyed every second of it, hauling her to sit in his lap and feasting at her terrible, distracting mouth the way he'd been wanting to ever since that damned night on the ship.

Eventually, however, they pulled apart again. "You're a terrible person," Charlaine said.

Jac laughed. "You're the one who started this conversation."

"You're the one who suggested a threesome!"

"Seemed like a better solution than fighting you or walking away," Jac said. "A pity the person truly responsible for this mess is still being dragged off to his death."

"Oh, no, you and you alone are responsible for the *mess* you're sitting on."

Jac blinked, then burst into another fit of giggles, arms wrapped around him as she shook with it, which didn't help anything, at all, even a little bit.

Charlaine mollified and tortured himself by holding her close anyway and kissing her throat. That turned into another heady kiss full of heat and hunger, and oh, the delightful things they could do in bed together. All three of them. Because as delightful as this was, as much as he would love to spread out on a bed and let Jac have him any way she wanted, there was an important piece missing.

Pulling away, he shifted her back to the bench and tried to think unpleasant thoughts. Which wasn't difficult: there were plenty of them clamoring for attention, most of them involving death.

"Don't stop on my account," Mark said, making Jac jump and Charlaine give her a look. Rising, she took Jac's vacated seat across from them. "I had wondered if that's what the three of you were, but despite what everyone says about us nosey Harkens, I know it's rude to pry into others' relationships. We should be heading for shore soon, if I am judging the landscape correctly. We'll eat, make certain Triumvirate navy and soldiers aren't about, then start the last leg of the journey. We should reach our final

destination tonight, and from there it's just a long walk to Iron Moon territory. We'll hit forest eventually, though it's nothing like the forests back home. It's hot, sticky, full of vines and more snakes and spiders than I like thinking about too hard. Thankfully, two of our companions will be happy to guide us part of the way, and I've a contact waiting for us who will lead us the rest of the way."

"That's brave of them, given how dangerous the clans and the Seven can be."

"You would be surprised by how many people hate the Seven and the clans. There's been contention for years. But politics are my problem, not yours. The men helping us are...not quite rebels, that implies more organization and purpose than they possess. Defiants, maybe. They never mind doing anything that will upset the rule of the Seven, and they have even less love for the clans."

"We're grateful. I hope they do not pay the ultimate price for helping us."

Mark nodded, patted their knees, and moved to the stern of the boat to converse quietly with the men.

Several minutes later, as the sun bled orange and pink and red across the sky, they landed on the sand of a little rocky hollow. Charlaine climbed out and helped drag the boat further up so the tide wouldn't carry it away. They sat in a circle and Mark made a small fire to ward off the worst of the morning chill as they ate bread, dried fruit and pickled fish for breakfast.

They were nearly done, though Charlaine was still hungry, when one of the sailors brought out a bundle—some sort of large, thick kerchief, the ends knotted together. Opening it revealed a wonderful sweet and spicy smell. Grinning, the sailor handed the bundle off to Mark, who took two of the small steamed dumplings inside. "Spiced dumplings. They're filled with a spicy-sweet paste made from all sorts of things, popular for short trips because they're energizing and will keep for a day or two if packed correctly."

Charlaine happily took two himself and passed the bundle on to Jac. She took one and broke it open, sniffing curiously, a frown on her face. On the verge of devouring his own, Charlaine paused and watched her. The sailors did too, and one of the three was trying hard not to look nervous.

"One of the best ways to sedate someone is cemarine," Jac said, "but cemarine has a very particular smell and taste—not a bad one but distinct, which is a problem when drugging people who might be familiar with it. You can only get past that by combining it with stronger flavors and administering it within an hour or so. Because if you let it rest, for oh, say, several hours of sailing, the cemarine starts to overwhelm everything else."

Across from her, Mark had gone still. Her eyes snapped to the sailors as she threw her dumplings to the ground and stood.

They tried to bolt, but Charlaine and Jac rose in tandem, Jac's knives flying true and crippling them both, Charlaine just behind to bind their wrists and drag them back to the fire.

Mark stood over them, words snapping out as she yelled at them. Their replies were hesitant and quavering but did nothing to soothe her anger. She looked at the third sailor, standing nervously off to the side, looking ready to bolt himself. Her words lashed out, and he replied with only slightly more steadiness than the first two.

Swearing in Harken, Mark turned to Charlaine and Jac. "These two pieces of rotten fish have sold us out. They say because their families were threatened, but I have my doubts. Their orders were to bring you to this spot and keep you here. Get going."

"You're not coming with us?" Charlaine asked.

"I would love to," Mark replied, "but someone will need to hold the soldiers off, since there is no stopping them coming now."

Jac's mouth flattened, and her eyes took on a haunted look. "We're not leaving you behind!"

Mark glared at her. "I am not the one in danger. You are, and your friend is swiftly running out of time. Get going, and I will do my best to make certain the soldiers do not follow you. At the very least, I can slow them down and give you a chance to prepare. *Go.* Take my satchel. It has all you will need to carry on alone. I have a contact who will find you once you're in the forest."

Jac's reply was to disagree—loudly, vehemently, rudely. Charlaine grabbed the satchel Mark had indicated, then scooped up Jac, dropped her in the boat and shoved off before she could get to her feet. He climbed in

just as she was about to throw herself out and shoved her back down. "It's done. Do you know how to sail?"

"Yes," Jac snarled. "Not well, but if we stay within sight of the shore I can manage. But we can't leave her!"

Charlaine turned around to lift a hand in farewell.

Mark returned it, then rounded on the traitorous sailors and started yelling, her words swiftly lost as Charlaine and Jac sailed out of hearing.

Turning back to Jac, who'd settled in to steering the boat, Charlaine sat, dropped the satchel at his feet, and said, "She was right. If we wanted to have any hope of getting away, she had to stay behind."

"I don't like leaving people behind," Jac bit out, but beneath her anger was an undercurrent of fear. She curled in on herself. "What if something goes wrong? What if the soldiers don't listen to her? Damn it, I don't want her to die or come to harm!"

"I'm sorry. I know how much this troubles you and why," Charlaine said, "but Lady Mark isn't Allen. She can handle herself. Remember that she's the ambassador's daughter and a close friend of Captain Chass. Those two things go a long way toward keeping someone alive. They'll arrest her, I have no doubt, but they won't kill or harm her. But they would have killed us. Whatever Their Majesties intentions, I do not believe Soltorin, or at least Iron Moon, agrees with them."

"What possible good would come from killing us? That would only anger Sarrica and Allen more—and they're already out for blood with Larren's body barely put on a pyre."

"After a point, it stops mattering how many wrongs pile up. Iron Moon never should have made matters personal. If they wanted revenge on Myra, they should have done it separately, and definitely not without sanction. By mingling the job and the vendetta, they've made it clear the Triumvirate is guilty in the matter. Maybe they killed Prince Larren for money, but they still did it."

"Wouldn't it be to their favor, then, to help us rather than hinder us?"

"No," Charlaine said quietly. "You heard what Lady Mark said: there's a whole lot of internal unrest. If the Triumvirate helps us and therefore stands against Iron Moon... well, look how reckless and foolish they were about

Myra. Do you think Iron Moon will hesitate to cause a bloodbath if they think the Seven betrayed them? No, the Seven will suffer greatly for making an enemy of Harken, but they'll lose their control of the Triumvirate if they make an enemy of the clans. There won't be a Triumvirate, just a pile of bodies and three fragmented countries. That sort of damage would take decades to repair—and that's assuming someone doesn't swoop in and take them over again."

"Someone like Treya Mencee, you mean." Jac grimaced. "I don't even want to think about what would happen to the world if Treya Mencee gained control of the clans."

"Nobody does."

Jac frowned. "Wouldn't Allen and Sarrica have known all this?"

"All this and a thousand things more," Charlaine said, scrubbing at his face. "Things I could not even begin to comprehend and frankly don't want to. I'm a soldier, not a politician."

Jac smiled, soft and bittersweet. "Allen always makes it look so easy. Watching him, you would think politics nothing more than a simple game played to pass the time. I don't know how he does it."

"Training," Charlaine said. "I've seen you shoot and throw; you make it look easy as breathing. All the fresh-faced mercs in the practice yard try to throw like you, and they're lucky they don't kill someone. His Majesty is no different. He's been trained probably most of his life to do exactly what he's doing."

"Since he was little more than a babe, from what I know," Jac said. "That's why he's fluent in so many languages. Learning to throw a knife or shoot an arrow isn't anywhere near as hard, especially with crossbows."

Charlaine rolled his eye. "Uh-huh. The point is, Their Majesties must know things we don't, and that's why they felt asking the Triumvirate for help, or whatever it is they did, was the best recourse. We won't know until this mess is over, assuming we survive it and get an explanation." One corner of his mouth ticked up. "Which is unlikely, as no one tells soldiers anything."

"Says the man once third in command of Fathoms Deep. Don't even pretend you don't excel at hoarding information."

"Guilty as charged," Charlaine said with a laugh. "I—" He broke off and opened Mark's satchel, quickly finding the spyglass he'd noticed her using before. Pulling it from the case, he settled it at his eye. "I can just make out a boat. Small ship? I was never clear on when a boat becomes a ship. They're headed to shore, so I don't think they've spotted us, or at least haven't realized who we are."

"Hopefully it stays that way. Here, keep watch while I adjust the sails, see if we can't catch a bit more wind and get as far away as possible."

Charlaine took her spot. "You better hope I don't have to do anything because I'm definitely a soldier only, not a sailor. Most I've ever done on a ship is the kind of grunt work they leave to cabin boys and those being punished."

Jac laughed. "Don't jerk it and we'll be all right." She winked and went to adjust the sails.

Refusing to laugh at that, Charlaine focused on the tiller. When Jac reclaimed the tiller, he once more raised the spyglass. "It's out of sight."

"Good. I hope Lady Mark's all right."

"She will be. I can't imagine you make friends with Captain Chass without being made of strong stuff."

"I didn't even know he had friends. Especially once all the rumors of his abusing the High Consort started spreading." Jac's face clouded. "If he was anyone else, that bastard would have been thrown out of the military and sent home in disgrace."

Charlaine lifted one shoulder. "Agreed. But there may also be more to the story than even you know. Better to stay out of family affairs, and imperial affairs, as much as possible—especially when they're the same thing."

"A good point. How much further do we need to go? I'm keeping to the coast so we shouldn't get lost, but I don't know where we're meant to stop. Hopefully it won't take long, because it's going to be a whole lot more difficult in the dark."

Charlaine stowed the spyglass and rooted through the satchel, finding another round leather case at the bottom of it. He opened it and slid out the contents. Unrolling it, he said, "Well, I have a map and paper with our destination coordinates, so give me a few minutes and I'll be able to tell you. Looks like there are also notes on landmarks."

"That's one thing in our favor, then," Jac said, and blew out a breath that fluttered her bangs. "Now if only all the rest of it would fall into line. Even for me, 'find way to clan territory, rescue Myra from entire clan, escape' seems a bit daunting, and the Dragons aren't exactly known for their slow, careful, well-planned ventures."

Grinning, Charlaine said, "Just think how jealous all the other Dragons will be of this venture—and how mad that you didn't take them along."

"I'm certain they're trying," Jac said. "It would take Jader and Rene combined to make them stay put."

Charlaine gave a soft snort. "I can't believe you think you have nothing else to do if you get kicked out of Harkenesten. Sounds like every last Dragon would be happy to point you to their mother, brother or friend who needs help with something."

Jac looked down from the sails she'd been eyeing and gave Charlaine a slow, hot little grin that nearly made him forget, yet again, all the danger and death that surrounded them. "I'm fairly certain I've got a much better offer."

"Assuming we live and Myra is willing, but..." Charlaine let himself picture it—really picture it, sex, sweetness and all. "I think the second part will be easy." He grinned. "Not as easy as a drunk Dragon, mind you, but easy."

"Get over here within kicking distance and say that again," Jac replied, gesturing crudely.

Charlaine put the map away, closed the satchel, then obediently got closer—much, much closer, so instead of getting kicked he could kiss Jac soundly, sliding his fingers through her short hair, liking the way it clung to his rough fingers, soft and fine as silk.

"I wonder if we would have thought of this without the whole assassination, losing our jobs, probably going to get killed bits," Jac said as she pulled away. "Or if we would have done something equally as stupid but vastly more pathetic."

"I think I'm happier not knowing the answer," Charlaine replied, mostly because he *did* know the answer—he would have walked away from any chance of Myra as his lover, sulked and been hurt and jealous for a long time, but eventually settled back into their friendship, though it probably would have never been quite the same.

Or perhaps they would have landed upon 'threesome' at some point. Who knew? He didn't care. All he cared about was getting Jac and Myra home safe, whatever that required.

Jac kissed him again, quick, hard and biting. "Get back to work on that map so we don't fuck something up and make this already terrible situation worse."

"Yes, Captain." Charlaine snickered as she swatted him and returned to his seat, pulling out the map and coordinates and sorting out where they were going and exactly how long it would take to get there.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

They hit the beach in a crash of thunder and ran for cover in the trees as the storm pelted down, stinging rain and even hail, which Jac had only ever seen one other time, and that was forever ago.

She shivered as they pushed on a little further, looking for a spot sheltered enough they could get a fire going. Thankfully, it didn't take them long, though the few minutes felt like an eternity. Jac obeyed gladly when Charlaine motioned for her to sit, settling on the exposed root of an enormous tree, hugging herself and shivering as she watched Charlaine work.

The hardest part should have been gathering wood, but somehow within only minutes Charlaine had plenty to work with. Any other time, Jac would have admired the view, the deftness with which he worked, the casual expertise he displayed. But right then, even his ridiculously perfect ass could not distract her from the misery of being wet, cold, hungry and exhausted enough to sleep for a month.

She could have wept when the fire was sufficiently built, abandoning her tree root to shuffle closer, putting her hands close and moaning as they warmed. She edged a bit closer and sighed as the heat washed over her and slowly banished the cold.

"Getting out of those wet clothes would probably help too," Charlaine said.

Jac looked up with a grin, watching as Charlaine followed his own advice. "I hope you don't think you're being smooth, Lieutenant."

Charlaine laughed as he hung his wet tunic and shirt over some nearby branches. "I definitely would have thought so a couple of decades ago. But if I tried anything right now, I'd only embarrass myself." He pulled off the rest of his sodden clothes and swiftly pulled on a dry set from his pack. "Change. I'll make some tea to warm us up a bit more, then start on dinner."

"I miss real food."

"You had real food a few days ago," Charlaine replied.

Jac scoffed. "One meal, eaten in haste. Delicious, but food abroad is never the same as food at home. I want a bowl of Harkenesten curry with plenty of rice and fresh, warm bread." She yanked off her wet clothes and hung them near Charlaine's, pulling on dry clothes quickly and strapping her weapons back in place.

Charlaine wrinkled his nose. "I prefer Carthian curry."

"Shut your mouth, you vile blasphemer," Jac replied. "How dare you."

"I prefer mutton to fish, and for the heat level to be slightly below tongue-melting."

Jac tsked, but finally broke down laughing at Charlaine's look. "Oh, stop pouting."

"I'm not pouting."

"Uh-huh."

Charlaine heaved a long sigh and handed her a cup of tea—Harken-style tea, thankfully, fragrant and spicy, not the weak, flavorless stuff they seemed to drink everywhere else. The only thing she loved more was a good cup of strong coffee. Jac gulped it down as quickly as she possibly could and held the cup out the moment it was empty. Chuckling, Charlaine refilled it.

Drinking the second one more sedately as Charlaine started on dinner, Jac said, "So we're about a day's travel from Iron Moon territory?"

"Assuming we don't get lost or something, yes," Charlaine said. "The hard part will be not getting caught, and I have a feeling we're going to fail miserably. I've been in Soldonir before, but it was nothing like this. We kept to Odokka, and it was only for a brief time before we moved on to the main part of the mission. This is wholly new, and I wish we still had a guide."

"I hope Lady Mark is all right," Jac said, stomach curdling with worry all over again, every part of her scraped raw at having to yet again leave someone behind. Leaving people behind should never be the better option, even if it was choosing between different evils. "Lady Mark has no stake in this. It isn't right she's paying such a high price."

Charlaine shredded some herbs he pulled from a packet in Mark's satchel into the broth he'd already built from water and other things Jac had missed.

"She's an adult, and probably close to Allen's level in political machinations. She knew what she was getting into, and no one forced her."

"She was repaying a debt—"

"It was still her choice," Charlaine cut in, and gave her a gently reproving look. "Plenty of people without full knowledge of the situation muttered you never should have left Allen, that you are largely responsible for what happened to him. You both knew how important it was you reached His Majesty with Allen's information, and you both knew what would likely happen to him. But you'd make the same choice again, I have every faith, because it was the best decision to make. Don't assume other people aren't as smart, especially since we know absolutely nothing of Lady Mark's story."

Jac sighed. "You're right. I don't like it, but you're right."

Charlaine finished slicing up some vegetables and threw them in the pot.

"Where did all that food come from? Where did you learn to cook?" She stared at him intently. "What else can you cook?"

"I am just past forty, far too old to be eating bad camp food. I learned how to make halfway decent food a long time ago. I'm no cook, but I don't leave soldiers dead from the food long before they reach the battlefield." His mouth tipped up at one corner, a mischievous little smile that had probably gotten a younger Charlaine every last thing he wanted—and probably got the current Charlaine much the same. "Being able to cook also goes a long way toward making friends and gaining trust."

Jac was certainly willing to do whatever he asked or demanded. How refreshing—and exciting—to be able to think that without guilt or confusion, only a slow burn of anticipation.

It was slightly muddied by the likelihood of their demise, but she wasn't dwelling on that detail. Aggravating though Lesto could be, he'd always been right about controlling thoughts. If only doing that was as easy as knowing to do it. "That smells wonderful."

Charlaine shrugged one shoulder, but his mouth curved as he fussed with his soup or whatever it was. "It should be ready soon. Some soups and stews can take forever, but the campfire ones I've learned to make generally cook pretty quickly. Did you want more tea?" "Sure."

He poured more for them both, and as promised, by the time they were done the soup was ready, and for the first time all day, Jac was warm all the way through.

When they'd finished and cleaned up, the rain had stopped as well, so Jac pulled out the map and Mark's accompanying notes, frowning in despair over them. "She's, uh, remarkably thorough."

"Probably in case we lost our guides or failed to meet up with this socalled contact who will be finding us," Charlaine said. "She has interesting experience and knowledge for an ambassador's daughter."

Jac smiled briefly before focusing completely on the task. "So we need to travel northwest, keeping to..." Her shoulders hunched and tensed. "Her handwriting is pretty, but I'm having a hard time reading it."

Charlaine took the papers from her, then traced a spot on the map. "Keeping to the stream. If we see a rock wall with red markings, we've strayed too far east. We'll be at the very edge of Iron Moon territory when the stream turns into a large pond. That's when we'll really need to be on guard, though we should be at all times, since we'll always be in the territory of one clan or another—but unless we seem to present a danger to that particular clan, they shouldn't interfere. And even Iron Moon won't cause problems in the territories of other clans."

"They'll just traipse about the world committing murder," Jac muttered. "So this is the wall we should avoid, this is the stream, the river... and that's the village where Iron Moon lives?"

"Where exactly each clan's primary village is located isn't public record," Charlaine said, shifting the papers a bit closer to the fire to better read. "The point Mark indicated is her best approximation based on what information she could gather, but it shouldn't be too far off..." He set the papers aside with a long sigh. "Let's face it, we'll be lucky if we don't get caught at some point. Myra's party may not have come this far yet, but it's a safe bet Iron Moon has been informed we're here, and it's not hard to figure out our goal. How in the world we're going to fight off an entire clan of professional killers, I don't know, but I guess we'll sort that problem out once we're faced with it. For now, let's get some rest. Tomorrow is going to be a long, hot,

frustrating day of slogging through a muggy forest, or whatever they call this, with targets on our backs."

Jac grimaced and tucked the map away. She checked on her still-damp clothes, then set out her bedroll and stretched out. "I miss sleeping in a good bed even more than I miss good food."

"I miss a good bath," Charlaine said from the opposite side of the fire as he arranged his weapons, carefully stowed his boots so nothing could crawl in them during the night, and settled onto his own bed. "I miss good, strong coffee being available whenever I want it."

"Served by friendly cooks always happy to give you extra cream and a bit of a flirt?" Jac grinned when he shot her a look. "What? I'm not the only person in the palace who's noticed how good-looking you are, especially that ass. Every soldier and half the staff in the palace have been vying for your affections for years." She burst into giggles at the mortified look on his face and would bet his skin had darkened too. "You cannot be surprised people find you attractive."

"People find I'm best out of sight because usually I bring bad news or other trouble with me," Charlaine said. "I'm nowhere near as feared as Lord Lesto or Commander Jader, but people don't generally smile when they see me either, even now that I've taken what most see as a demotion. Do people really talk—"

"About your ass? Yes." Jac grinned as he buried his face in his hands. "I wouldn't have guessed you for the shy one."

He lifted his head and cast her a look. "I definitely knew you were the bratty one."

Jac's grin widened.

"And I'm not shy, simply private," Charlaine added. "I know both the military and the High Court think it's normal to discuss everyone's private life loudly and with plenty of opinions, but I prefer to keep as much of my life to myself as possible."

"Ha! You're Lord Kamir's bodyguard; you don't have a private life anymore." Jac started to comment he'd have even less of one once the court caught wind of their relationship—threesomes were seldom seen outside of dame and sire arrangements, which were most often temporary—then remembered they probably weren't going to be at court anymore. Whatever

Charlaine said about Allen defending her, there was only so much even the High Consort could do about such flagrant disobedience, especially when it was his personal bodyguard behaving so.

Even if Allen did protect her, she couldn't remain nice and cozy in Harkenesten while Charlaine and Myra were forced to leave.

Pantheon, she still couldn't believe she and Charlaine were considering such a thing. Outside of parts of Gearth and the Islands, and the rare dame or sire that remained with the couple they'd been hired to assist, the practice was uncommon. She had maybe three friends throughout the whole military who had multiple partners. She never thought she'd number among them. Jac had always considered herself lucky to hang onto anyone for longer than a week. Being a Dragon, and then Allen's bodyguard, did not leave much time for romance.

Then she'd become enamored of Myra, and the idea of looking at anyone else had slipped completely away.

Now here she was fervently hoping Myra would like their madcap idea as much as she and Charlaine did, because the more she thought of leaving any one of them out instead of being three, the more she hated it. Three sounded as right as it did crazy.

"Sleep well," she said around a yawn.

All she got in reply was a soft snore.

Smiling, Jac closed her eyes and let exhaustion finally have her.

\*~\*~\*

She woke to darkness and a prickling at her neck. Listened sharply, careful to keep her breathing unchanged—and sat up and spun around in one smooth move, coming to one knee and driving the knife that had still been strapped to her thigh deep into the gut of the man who'd been poised over her. Jac knocked him off his feet, pulled another knife and pressed it to his throat. "Who are you?"

The man said something in Soltorish and Jac swore softly.

His eyes shifted, and Jac threw herself out of the way just in time—then watched as the new assailant collapsed, a dagger in his back, Charlaine standing over him.

Jac finished off the man with her knife in his gut and rose just as four more figures slunk out of the dark. "Who are you?"

One of the men stepped forward and pushed away his hood and cowl. "You are the ones in our territory, little Harken bird. Tell me who you are."

"None of your concern. We're passing through. Our business is with Iron Moon."

The man looked amused. "So the rumors are true: Iron Moon went too far this time. You're the imperial warbirds trying to rescue your little friend. Is it true Lady Eliza murdered her own father and faked her own death and became secretary of that arrogant High King?"

"I have no idea who Lady Eliza is," Jac snapped.

"Myra," Charlaine said, voice colder than Jac had ever heard him, every bit the severe, contained Second Lieutenant of Fathoms Deep he'd once been. Hearing him like that, Jac could appreciate why he'd been so surprised anyone admired his ass. "His name is Myra, and if the way you're treating him is any indication of the way his family treated him, it's no wonder he killed his father. I always forget how backward in their thinking the Triumvirate is."

"Harken birds have no business telling us we're backward, not with your history," the man replied.

"Says a man who murders for money," Jac snapped. "Why are you here?"

"Because you're in our territory uninvited, and there's enough trouble in the wind, we did not need more. There is also the fact you killed two of my men."

Charlaine replied, "Don't try to sneak up on two well-trained Harken mercenaries."

"Or send better men," Jac added.

The man shrugged. "You have until dawn to get out of our territory, or I will hunt you down and kill you myself, and trust me, little warbirds, you won't see me until you're bleeding out and helpless." In the next moment, he and the three shadowy figures around him faded off.

Jac started packing because the words had not struck her as bragging, and even she wasn't so cocky and reckless she'd challenge a professional

assassin on his own turf.

Charlaine did the same nearby, yanking his dagger from the man he'd killed and cleaning it quickly before sliding it back into its sheath. "So much for a good night's rest."

"At least we're alive to complain about it," Jac said, stuffing her mostly dry clothes in her bag, attaching her bedroll to the bottom, and swinging it on her shoulder. She put out the remains of the fire and made certain they would stay out, took several swallows of water in an effort to get rid of the exhaustion that was crashing back over her now the excitement was over, and followed Charlaine out of the clearing.

Throughout their hike, she could feel eyes, leaving her shoulders so tense it spilled into her neck and up into her temples, resulting in a headache that wasn't helping anything.

But as the sky began to turn the barest shade of gray, the feeling of being watched faded off, and Jac couldn't decide if she wanted to laugh, cry, or collapse.

Charlaine made the decision for them by dropping down in front of a massive tree and sprawling like his limbs had turned into noodles. Jac did the same, though she sprawled across the ground with Charlaine's thigh for a pillow.

"May I safely assume we get to live a few more hours?" Jac asked through panting breaths, every part of her body hot and aching, and really, if she was going to be this sore and tired, it should be for fun reasons, damn it. "Myra had better shower us with gratitude when we get back to Harken."

Charlaine gave a tired chuckle as he looked down at her, one hand carding through her hair. "I'm certain he'll be happy to give you whatever you want, as often as you want." He winked.

Jac waggled her eyebrows. "What if I want to watch? Frequently."

"Stop being a brat."

"Never." Energy spent, Jac closed her eyes and focused on ignoring all her aches and pains and how badly she wanted a bath, a bed, and a good meal, and she wasn't particular about the order. "So where are we?"

"Close to the stream we'll need to follow, a little less than two days of walking to reach the pond, another day or so to reach the location where

hopefully the village is."

Jac groaned. "No, I don't want to do anymore walking. I miss traveling with obscenely rich people who make things like horses and carriages magically appear."

"I don't think you could get a carriage, or even a horse, through this dense forest. That word doesn't feel right, even though everyone keeps using it, even Lady Mark. I can't think of the Soltorish word, though. Something that begins with a 'j' like sound. Anyway, I think the best way to travel is by foot, unfortunately. At least we're well-equipped to do so. Without Mark's assistance, we'd be a lot worse off. Get up so we can make camp."

Whining and groaning, Jac nevertheless rolled to her feet and helped him set up camp, greedily devouring the travel bread, dried fruit and meat he tossed her way.

"I'll take first watch," Charlaine said.

Jac started to argue, but what was the point? They were both exhausted. Who went first or second hardly mattered. Instead, she nodded, told him to be careful, and bedded down.

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She was shaken awake sometime later, whimpering into her pillow before finally sitting up. Charlaine pushed a cup of fragrant tea into her hands, then stumbled over to his bedroll, not even bothering to take his boots off first. Before she'd taken two sips of tea, he was snoring.

Smiling faintly, Jac finished the tea as quickly as she could manage, given it was still steaming, then fixed herself some more and pulled out food, devouring rice balls filled with salted fish and wrapped in seaweed.

Once she was finished and everything was clean, she sat on her bedroll and pulled out her knives to clean and sharpen, one ear always attuned to the forest surrounding them, listening for strange noises or suspicious silences.

But the insects hummed and sang and buzzed uninterrupted, and every now and then she could hear the rustle of wings or the slide and rustle of creatures moving through the dense trees and scrub. The movement above her proved to be a snake that, had it held still, could have easily been mistaken for a vine.

Jac tracked it, picking up one of her knives—and threw as it reached a tree, the blade landing right at the join of head and body, smoothly cutting the snake in two. Standing, she crossed over to yank her knife free of the tree and finish the job of removing the head.

Once that was done, she carried the body back to the fire and quickly turned it into breakfast.

A few hours later, as the day went from hot to melting, Charlaine woke. "What smells so good?"

"Snake. Don't ask me what kind, but it's definitely edible."

"That's the only important part." He happily took the cooked snake she handed over, along with tea and more rice balls. "Didn't know you could cook too."

"Any fool can stick meat on a fire."

"That's not true," Charlaine said, expression somewhere between a laugh and grimace.

Thinking of the many burned horrors she'd choked down over the years, Jac could only concede the point with a grunt.

A short time later they were back on their feet, moving slowly and keeping to shade, which wasn't hard in the dense, tangled forest, but also didn't really help much. By the time they stopped to rest and eat, Jac wanted only to strip down, find the nearest body of cold water and remain there indefinitely.

Instead, she managed to catch a few fish from a small pool and quickly made dinner. After making short work of their meager meal, they bedded down and fell immediately asleep, too exhausted even for the precaution of taking turns on watch.

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The smell of coffee woke her, but in the next breath she recalled they hadn't brought coffee along. Jac jerked to her feet, knives out. Nearby, Charlaine rolled to his feet and drew his sword.

A man chuckled softly from where he was cooking over the fire. "It's true what they say—if you want to attract a Harken bird, put out coffee. Sit,

sit. I believe we have a mutual acquaintance, a certain ambassador's daughter? That aside, Dark Tide has no quarrel with you, and plenty of quarrel with our neighbors, which makes us...not enemies, hmm? I do not care for your coffee, and I promise I did not lug it out here as some last meal for you. Strange tradition, that. Who cares if a man sentenced to die gets to eat something pleasant first? Just kill him. You birds are so strange."

Jac grumbled. "Professional killers don't get to call me strange."

The man laughed softly and poured them cups of coffee.

If they'd been anywhere but in the middle of enemy territory in a tenuously not-hostile meeting with an unknown assassin, Jac would have moaned, the coffee was so good. She looked again at their uninvited guest. He resembled Myra in slenderness, skin tone and that ridiculously long hair, though his was twisted and bound, a few strands falling to frame his face. He was handsome, leaning toward pretty, wearing mottled clothes that would make it hard to see him in the dense foliage.

"What do you want?" Charlaine asked, ignoring his own coffee, sword still out and within easy reach.

"My name is Harold, and I am not, in fact, an assassin." His mouth curved into a faintly-sour smile. "My eyesight isn't good enough, and Dark Tide doesn't really do that anymore. I'm merely a scout. Whatever that information is worth, you have it. I am here to escort you to Iron Moon territory."

"Why would you do that?"

"As I said, we have a friend in common, and my clan has a quarrel with Iron Moon." Harold's smile turned sly. "Anything that causes them grief is a gain for Dark Tide. Whatever is going to happen because of the foolish decisions and mistakes made by the Seven and Iron Moon, Dark Tide has no intention of being destroyed and swept away in the aftermath. We prefer to adapt and improvise. Eat."

Since the coffee didn't seem to be poisoned, Jac gladly took the dish he offered and tore quickly through the contents. Beside her, Charlaine worked through his own breakfast with far less enthusiasm. When they'd finished, he said, "So you plan to take us to their territory and...what exactly? Leave? Help us?"

"Direct interference on my part is a violation of clan treaty, and I do not dare do that," Harold replied. "It would do more harm than good, though if the tides ever turn..." He grinned fleetingly. "Rest assured I will happily break treaties."

Jac wanted to punch him in his frustratingly handsome face, but that was the crankiness talking. "We've been doing well enough without an escort."

"Have you? Because you took twice as long to reach this point as was necessary. City maps, I'm guessing. Never as good as trusting a local."

"Trusting anyone from the clans to guide us honestly is a bit like trusting a scorpion not to sting," Charlaine said.

Harold's sly smile reappeared. "I do not know that word. Scor-pi-on." He touched his tongue to his top lip. "But I take the meaning. We have spiders and snakes that are similar. There is one snake, we call it a chaser because if you anger it, the snake will chase you through the jungle until it bites you or loses you—and rarely does it lose track of its prey."

"Jungle, that's the word I couldn't think of," Charlaine muttered. "I can't wait to be home again."

"We can't wait for you Harken birds to be home again too. But I sense we'll be seeing a great deal more of Harken in the future. Shall we clear camp and head out?"

Jac cast him a look but didn't bother arguing, only obeyed. Some people were worth arguing with; others were not. If he got too unbearable she'd stab him.

Settling her pack, she turned—and stopped, staring at the beautiful short bow he carried. It was a composite reflex bow, old and well-cared for. She reflexively ran a finger over the thumb ring she always wore. "I want one."

Harold grinned.

Charlaine shot her a disgusted look. "I'm offended you're looking at that bow the same way you looked at me on the boat."

"Fuck her better," Harold said.

"Shut up," Charlaine snapped as Jac burst out laughing.

"May I?" she asked.

"Stop making nice with the creepy not-an-assassin," Charlaine hissed.

Harold just smirked more and handed over his bow.

"What's the draw?" Jac asked.

"Hmm...I'm afraid I do not know the way to say it in Harken. We would say, my draw is match weight."

Jac beamed. "Match weight is two stone draw in Harken. Not bad."

Harold looked offended, and Charlaine laughed so loudly birds startled and flew crankily off.

"My draw is what you'd call match one."

Harold looked even more offended, and Charlaine laughed even harder.

Jac rolled her eyes and handed back Harold's bow. "Shall we get moving?"

Casting each other looks, Charlaine and Harold nevertheless obeyed, Harold moving forward to overtake the lead.

As much as it pained Jac to admit it, traveling through the jungle was much easier with Harold taking the lead. For one, he had the right equipment to slice through the dense undergrowth, and he knew what to look out for. A trip she suspected would have taken her and Charlaine all day, they completed in at least half that time, and they weren't nearly as exhausted when they stopped for a midday meal.

"We should reach the territory border by nightfall," Harold said as he deftly prepared the two small birds he'd killed earlier in the day. Once they were plucked and butchered, Charlaine somehow took over and soon had them roasting on an improvised spit. If Harold minded being relieved of cooking duties, it didn't show.

Instead, he made them more coffee. Even Charlaine seemed grateful. Jac shot him a look when Harold was busy with his weapons, but Charlaine only shrugged irritably and continued cooking.

Jac didn't roll her eyes but only barely. "So what's your quarrel with Iron Moon?"

Harold slid the dagger he'd been cleaning back into its sheath on his back, where Jac had earlier noted he carried several spread across his shoulder blades. That was only the start of the weapons he carried. "Just about everything, really. We haven't been friends for a very long time. But most immediately, they're arrogant to the point of being a danger to

themselves and others. I don't care if they sink themselves, but their most recent actions combined with the Seven's poor handling of the matter... Well, I think we are definitely in the final days of the Triumvirate."

"What do you mean? Their Majesties aren't going to kill anyone if they can avoid it."

He stared at her, then laughed quietly. "You don't get it, do you? I forget not everyone treats politics like card games. No, little bird, the Harken Empire is a bunch of presumptuous, overbearing bastards, but even your nastiest warbirds do not use violence unnecessarily—mostly, anyway, nobody and nothing is perfect. However, a great many peace treaties have been broken, and to judge from the way the Seven have been panicking, they know what will happen if they do not fix Iron Moon's mistakes—and their own."

Jac wanted to hit him, though mostly she was mad at herself for being too fucking stupid to follow what he was saying. "Would you stop—" She broke off as an arrow sank into Harold's left shoulder, throwing him backwards with a pained cry. Jac dropped to the ground, pulling knives as she scrambled for cover. Across the camp, Charlaine was tucked behind a large tree—relatively safe but also without any way to counter the attack.

"Come out, come out, little Harken birds. You'll never get out of this jungle alive, so you may as well quit delaying the inevitable."

Pulling out one of her firebombs, Jac tensed and waited, watching the shadows that crossed the campsite, listening as the taunting voice drew closer. That arrow hadn't killed Harold, even though they'd had every opportunity to make a kill shot. Which meant their attackers likely wanted them alive—and that gave them the advantage, since they didn't have to worry about not killing anyone.

As the stranger came just barely into view, Jac lobbed the firebomb. "Go fuck your mother!"

The stranger burst into flame, shrieking loudly enough the few remaining birds and insects in the area scattered. Movement nearby snared her attention and Jac lobbed another one—and at Charlaine's direction, a third, adding at least two more screams to the mess.

Jac dove out of cover, rolling as she hit the ground and scooping up Harold's bow and arrows as she dashed across the camp to join Charlaine.

"Where do we go?"

"This way," Charlaine said, looking as grim as Jac felt.

Looking around, Jac spied Harold, who looked pale and strained as he clutched his bleeding shoulder around the arrow still sticking out of it. "Come on!"

"I can go no further, much as I hate to leave you to your own incompetent devices," Harold replied. "I hope to see you again sometime." Before Jac could say anything in reply, he slipped into nearby foliage and was gone.

Swearing loudly, Jac followed Charlaine into the jungle, headed the opposite direction, keeping space enough between them to use the bow if she got the chance, feeling much more herself to finally have a bow again. She would vastly prefer a good crossbow, but this would suffice.

They traveled in silence for what seemed like hours, though it couldn't have been more than a matter of minutes. The silence was the worst part, because it was more silence than two people should have been causing.

So they had pursuers.

Charlaine drew to a halt as they reached a place to cross the stream they'd been keeping in sight, though staying as far from it as they could since staying close would just make them easier targets. "Ever get the feeling you were being herded?"

"I was really hoping that was just me being paranoid," Jac said.

"Afraid not."

They crossed the swift-moving stream, stepping from stone to trapped log to a tiny strip of land and across more stones, slick with wet moss, but Jac hadn't spent an entire month's pay on one pair of boots because they were pretty.

Charlaine offered a hand as he reached the far bank and turned. Jac took it gladly and went easily as he reeled her in, looping her free arm around his neck and meeting him halfway. Normally being so much smaller than her lovers grated because all too often they equated smaller with weaker, someone who needed to be protected. Even people she'd known for years could fall into that pattern.

Not so with Charlaine, who'd never treated her as anything but an equal, who'd said on multiple occasions that she was *more*. Jac was getting to be entirely too fond of how it felt when he held her. Strength she could rely on, but he'd never use it do everything for her, or against her.

Drawing back, Charlaine nuzzled her cheek then said, "Let's go, Dragon. Assassins and a secretary await. This isn't going to be pleasant."

"We already knew that. Get moving, Lieutenant. I'm in the mood for a fight and there's one waiting."

"Ma'am, yes, ma'am," Charlaine said, and reclaimed the lead as they continued on, pausing occasionally to make certain they were still headed the right way.

Iron Moon came for them a short time later, a group of approximately twenty, heavily armed and more menacing than Jac liked admitting, even in the privacy of her own head.

A man who resembled Myra, lanky frame, beautiful hair, gray eyes and all, stepped forward. The men on either side of him shifted to close the gap in the tight circle they'd formed. "So you are the two I've heard so much about. What did you think you would accomplish by storming in here this way?"

"We're here for Myra, and we'll do whatever we must to get him back," Jac said.

The man's lips curled. "He is to be executed, and nothing a couple of pathetic Harken warbirds can do will change that."

"I'm getting really fucking tired of being called a bird," Jac muttered. It was a reference to the impressive system of messenger birds Harken bred and trained, various species for distance, strength, and so forth that could travel across the empire and even oceans. Accidents happened, of course, but Harken messenger birds were the most reliable in the world.

But it had also become a way to insult Harken citizens, the implication being they were always flitting and flying about, getting into things they shouldn't, going where they weren't allowed, carrying secrets and other private matters to people who shouldn't have them, stealing whatever shiny objects took their fancy... The list went on and on, and none of it was flattering.

"What are you, if not a foreign bird going where it shouldn't?" the man asked. "Secure them."

Jac didn't bother fighting—she and Charlaine were good, but they weren't twenty assassins good.

Her hands were bound tightly behind her back, and a black bag made of some scratchy, smelly material dropped over her head. Someone slung her over their shoulder, and then they were moving. Ugh, if she threw up she was going to kill someone.

But the far bigger concern occupying her thoughts was: why was Iron Moon taking them alive?

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Myra looked up blearily as he heard footsteps. The door swung open a moment later, and Ryan stepped through, followed by the others. One of them picked him up, carrying Myra in both arms since he was still recovering from the beating he'd taken. They didn't want him to die too quickly after being staked in the field, after all. "Where are we?"

Ryan cast him a disgusted look. "You don't recognize the place?"

"It's been twenty years. Why would I remember everything clearly?"

"Che. We're at the hunting cabin at the Horn."

Myra closed his eyes. The Horn. They were not even half a day from the clan's primary village. Iron Moon was actually spread over three villages, but two of them were small, barely more than elaborate, long-term camps.

He drifted in and out of consciousness as they traveled, too exhausted and in pain to stay awake the whole time, and the stifling heat and humidity he hadn't missed didn't help matters. Even Harken in peak summer wasn't as bad as Soltorin on its coolest day.

Mosquitos feasted on him, adding irritating itching on top of everything else. They stopped once, for food and rest, and to give him more medicine, then were moving relentlessly on again.

Myra could smell the village long before they reached it. Many took that to mean it would be easy to find from that point, but the jungle could be confusing and disorienting, even for the people who'd grown up there.

Even with the pain medication, he was near to tears by the time they finally stopped. And now everything was only going to get worse.

The village was quiet, the square deserted when they reached it, save for the one person Myra had most dreaded seeing after his mother: Matthew. As Myra had expected, he wore the marks of the village chief. Of all of them, Matthew had always been the most obedient, the most faithful. Whatever he was told to do, he did it, sinking deeply and happily into the cultish existence Myra had despised.

"Eliza."

Myra glared as he was set on his own feet—then promptly pushed to a kneeling position, which did nothing for his ribs. Holding one hand to them, for all the good that actually did, he looked at Matthew. "My name is Myra."

"Your name is irrelevant, as it will be stricken from Clan records and banned from ever being used again once you're dead. Tonight, we welcome back our comrades and mourn those who died in the mission. Tomorrow is your trial and sentencing, and the day after that your execution will take place at dawn."

"You mean begins at dawn."

Matthew smiled coldly and jerked his head. "Lock *Myra* up in the holding cell." As they passed him, he reached out and playfully slapped Myra's cheek three times, leaving it stinging. "Look on the bright side: you'll have company in there—company you'll keep when you die."

"What are you talking about?" Myra asked, fear slicing through him, leaving him cold. Who else was the clan executing, and why did it sound like he knew them? That didn't make any sense.

Pantheon, please don't say they'd managed...

His thoughts scattered as a door was yanked open and he was thrown inside. The building was one of the few that remained strong in his memories, though he'd only ever seen the outside of it: a small, one room building reinforced with metal bars so whoever was inside could not get out. It kept out the elements, but only minimally, just enough to keep captives alive and healthy enough to face trial and execution.

Plenty of people could come up to the windows to gawk and shout and spit at the people inside, since traitors to the clan deserved nothing but contempt.

But Matthew must have ordered everyone to stay in their homes so nothing would get out of hand. If the rest of the village was as angry as Ryan and Matthew...

Maybe someone would show him twisted mercy and kill him before hours of exposure did.

"Myra?"

He jerked up, moaned as that pulled at his ribs, and clung to the ache as he peered through the gloom. "J-Jac?"

"Myra!" She came rushing toward him, looking more than a little battered and bruised herself, and dropped down beside him. "Oh, my gods, what have they done to you?"

Before he could reply, further movement drew his eye, and Myra started crying. "Why are you two here? They're going to kill you, damn it."

"We weren't going to stand by and do nothing while they dragged you off to die," Jac said fiercely. "You belong to us, not this crazy cult."

Myra leaned into Charlaine as an arm slid across his shoulders and pulled him close. Jac reached out to hold his hands, and Pantheon, Myra didn't want either of them to ever let go. "Do you know how nice it is to hear people call me 'Myra,' without mockery or derision?"

Fresh fury filled Jac's face. "I'm going to kick every last one of these motherfucking bastards in the groin, break all their noses, and throw them in the ocean to be shark food."

Charlaine cast her an amused look. "You've been spending too much time with Jader and Shemal."

"You be quiet," Jac said, but smiled. "Come on, let's make you more comfortable—as much as anyone can be comfortable in this wretched place."

They gently got Myra to his feet and across the room, where normally four small beds were arrayed along the wall in a row, with just enough space between each to maneuver.

But Jac and Charlaine had pushed three of the beds together in a corner, the pillows piled on the left side, to make one long, wide bed. They got him onto it, and Jac settled next to him. "Do you need anything? Looks like you're favoring your ribs."

"They're bruised, I think," Myra said. "Thankfully not broken."

"What happened?" Charlaine asked, sitting on his other side, running the backs of his fingers along the still-healing cuts on Myra's right cheek.

The gentle gesture stung his eyes anew, and he clung tightly to Jac's hand where she'd taken hold of his again. Myra swallowed. "My mother. She's part of the Seven and the clans' liaison, and she wasn't happy to learn I was

still alive and all that I did. She ordered me beaten to make up for the fact she wouldn't be able to see my trial and execution."

"Pantheon," Jac muttered. "I'll never whine about my shitty childhood ever again. I wish had something to give you, but they only give us food and water and check twice a day to make certain we're not up to anything."

"I still don't understand why we're alive," Charlaine said. "It makes no sense. I'm not complaining, mind, but it can't be smart to keep us alive."

"They're going to put you with me." Myra closed his eyes, then forced them open again. "My 'trial' is tomorrow, and shortly before dawn the next day they'll stake me in the execution field. You're going to be staked too. So I can watch you suffer and die, because I have every faith they intend to keep me alive long enough to see that, and only then will I be allowed to die."

Charlaine's fingers curled where they rested on Myra's stomach. "I'll kill every last one of them myself. The more I learn, the more I wonder why you didn't leave sooner and kill more along the way."

"I had to make it look like I was dead. Harder to do with a trail of bodies," Myra said. His eyes slid shut again, despite his efforts to stay awake. "It's good to see you both again, though I wish the circumstances were anything else. You should have stayed in Harken."

"Shut up," Jac said. "Get some rest. We'll talk more when you wake up."

Myra tried to reply, but speaking was difficult, and they were both so warm and reassuring...

\*~\*~\*

He woke to the crackle of a fire and soft voices lost in conversation. Myra dragged his eyes open and saw Jac and Charlaine sitting close together in the middle of the room, tending a small fire and eating bowls of what looked like rice noodles.

Jac laughed at something Charlaine said, then jabbed him with her chopsticks and stole something from his bowl. Charlaine protested and stole something in turn. Myra smiled and started to sit up—and froze in shock, dropping back down as Jac leaned in and planted a kiss on Charlaine's mouth. Not a first time doing it kind of kiss, either. No, that was definitely a 'we've done this before' kind of kiss.

Myra didn't know whether to laugh or cry or simply give up and try to go back to sleep and pretend he hadn't seen it. How could he be so happy to be reunited with them and now so miserable?

Well, maybe that was what he got for being torn between them, for kissing them both and not having the guts to make a decision—for wanting to have them both, after the life he'd already stolen.

He must have made some noise because they broke apart and turned in his direction. Both looked chagrined as they saw he was awake.

"How are you feeling?" Jac asked as she hastily set her bowl aside. "Up for food?"

"Yes, food would be lovely." Myra managed to get out of bed mostly on his own and needed Jac only to help him over to the fire.

A pang cut through him as long-faded memories stirred, of the few happy times he'd sat like this with his family talking over the parts of their days that did not make someone upset or angry. Laughing with his siblings, bragging about how practice had gone or who had been seen flirting with who, an approaching festival or pending hunt.

He managed to eat a few bites before the awkward silence grew unbearable. Mustering a smile he didn't remotely feel, Myra said, "So is there a new development you'd like to tell me about? Did you realize you asked the wrong person to tea, Jac?"

Jac's answering smile was teasing but hesitant as she shared a look with Charlaine before turning back to Myra and saying, "More like I realized I should have asked you *both* to tea."

Myra choked on a bite of noodle and hastily set the bowl aside before he spilled the rest of his dinner. "What?" he gasped out.

"It was hard not to notice that we both wanted you," Charlaine said. "I already knew Jac asked you to tea, and apparently I do a lot of ridiculous staring in your direction."

Jac's hesitance vanished beneath a brilliant grin. "We thought maybe there was a better solution to be had than one of us walking away. Although I hadn't thought we'd be discussing any of this until we were safe again."

"Better to say what we can while we can," Charlaine said, reaching out to take her hand, curling their fingers together. He looked at Myra and offered his other hand. "Would you be willing to consider it, High Secretary?"

Myra clung tightly to Charlaine's hand, laughing shakily. When Jac reached out with her free hand, he took it and held fast. "We really do have the worst timing. Is it terrible I had thought about it too? I felt like a greedy, selfish fool and dismissed the idea. So far as I knew, you two didn't even know each other well."

"We know each other well now," Jac said with another of her beautiful smiles. "Not as well as we *could*, but Charlaine won't let me near his well-shaped ass—"

"Stop making jokes about my ass," Charlaine hissed.

Myra laughed, even though he had to let go of Jac's hand when it hurt his ribs. "You do have a nice ass, Charlaine. Hasn't anyone ever told you?"

"I don't think you two understand how much people don't actually like me."

"I don't think you realize how many people would say yes before you finished asking if they'd like to fuck," Jac retorted.

Charlaine threw a bit of fish at her, causing Jac to shriek and throw it back.

Myra laughed, clutching at his ribs and hurting with every jolt, but oh it was worth it. They turned to face him, and then suddenly they were on either side of him, a warm and reassuring presence when the rest of his life had been dashed to pieces and lost forever.

"I really wish we were somewhere else," he said, voice catching.

"It's not over yet," Charlaine, and gently tilted his head up. There was a breath, a hesitation, and then they were kissing. This was nothing like the desperate kiss Myra had stolen in the hallway outside his suite when he'd been certain it was the only kiss he'd ever get, when he'd been certain he was saying goodbye to his oldest and dearest friend. Or the rough kiss they'd exchanged before going to save Jac. Charlaine kissed sweetly, which did not surprise Myra at all. Beneath all his layers of natural reserve and military severity, Charlaine was nothing but quiet sweetness.

Drawing back, Myra licked his lips, unable to tear his eyes away—until he felt a soft touch to his other arm, and as he turned Jac twined her arms

around his neck and kissed him soundly, equal parts intense and playful. Myra sensed she was going to be delightfully bossy in bed and tried not to think too hard about the fact he might never get to find out.

Tearing away, he licked his lips again, loving he could taste them both there. Jac leaned across him and curled her fingers into Charlaine's hair, tugging him into just the right position to kiss him hard and filthy. Myra groaned, heart pounding in his chest and ears, the burn of want clashing with the cold fear still prickling at the back of his neck and occasionally crawling along his spine.

When they broke apart, he said, "There has to be a way for us to get out of here, but I'm afraid I don't know it. I thought I'd succeeded in gaining myself an ally, but I have not seen her since we reached clan territory. She slipped away from the group, following orders I didn't catch. I've no idea where she is now." As they all picked up their bowls to resume eating, he told them all that had happened since he was taken away, all he'd tried to do to convince Kimberly to turn on the clans.

At the very least, he hoped she had the sense to leave the moment an opportunity presented itself. He could understand her not wanting to risk her life to help him, but Pantheon, she'd better have the sense to save herself.

"Our only chance is to sneak out, but I don't see that ending well," Jac said. "Not given how easily all these creepy fuckers slink around the jungle."

"The training required to be able to do that is arduous." Myra grimaced at the memories. "I passed out three times, and that is considered impressive."

"How are the clans still around? As brutal and unbending as they are..."

Myra jerked one shoulder. "There's a lot of money to be made killing people for the rest of the world, and the Seven are good at keeping the whole of the Triumvirate exactly where they want them—largely thanks to the clans, who don't mind spilling blood at home when the price is right, and the Triumvirate is as happy to pay in power as in coin." He frowned. "How are you two here? Surely Sarrica would have forbidden and prevented it."

"After you were taken away, we never made it back to the palace. Captain Chass showed up," Charlaine replied, and told him their side of the tale.

When he came to the ship, Jac buried her face in her hands as Myra laughed and laughed. "Oh, I want to see you dance. I didn't know you could. Were you going to take me dancing if tea went well? We could have danced at the festival."

"I was on duty, so no, we couldn't." When Myra frowned, Jac winked and added, "At least, not until my shift was over, but I doubt I would have worked up the nerve to ask you. We hadn't even had tea yet."

Myra scoffed. "I'd much rather dance."

"How have I never known that all these years?" Charlaine asked, shaking his head.

"I don't dance well, but I like trying, especially when I'm drunk," Myra said. "Which is not something I've ever let myself be, between my secrets and my position as imperial head secretary." He sighed. "After twenty years, I had stupidly come to believe I was truly free. Now I'm going to die in the place I fought to escape, the place I hate most in the world. Why did you come after me? You shouldn't have to die here too." He buried his face in his hands in a futile attempt to smother the tears that had gotten the better of him once more.

"Myra..." Charlaine was pressed close again, pulling his hands away and tightly holding one of them as Jac took the other, their free arms wrapping around his back, and Myra cried all over again to feel so safe and warm after so many weeks of constant terror. "No one is going to die. I don't know how we're getting out of this, I admit it, but we didn't come this far, fight through so much, and throw away three perfectly good careers only to die. We'll figure something out."

Myra nodded, but even with their soft kisses and caresses, all he could think was that their lives were now numbered in hours, and he was going to have to watch them die slowly, in increasing agony, until dehydration and exposure broke their minds and they died not even knowing where they were—or possibly even *who* they were.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "I wanted you to stay safe in Harken."

"And we're not going anywhere without you," Jac said, and kissed him hard once more, biting and sucking at his lips, not withdrawing until his mouth throbbed. "We are two mercenaries and a former assassin. We will figure something out. For now, I say we go back to sleep. Myra looks exhausted and needs all the recovery he can get if we're going to escape tomorrow night. After that last guard I tangled with, I could use some rest myself." She sighed. "I finally have you both in bed and all we're going to do is snore."

"You'll get your chance at us once we're safe, Dragon, never fear," Charlaine said, and despite everything, Myra laughed.

They helped him to his feet and back to bed, and if he wasn't so tired and wrung out, he might have cried all over again once they finished cleaning up and tending the fire and crawled into bed with him.

Though he would have liked to stay awake simply to savor the pleasure of being caught warm and safe between them, Myra was asleep within moments.

For the first time in weeks, he slept without nightmares.

\*~\*~\*

When he woke, he was pressed against Charlaine, nose to chest, and a more slender arm was curled over his hip. Myra's breath hitched as the night before rushed through his mind. He'd been so tired, even after all the sleeping he'd done, that the whole night had possessed a surreal quality. Had they really all kissed? Had he truly agreed to give the three of them a try should they survive to do so?

His heart drummed in his ears. Pantheon, he wanted more than anything to go home, resume his place as head secretary, and let the whole palace gossip endlessly about who had been coming and going from his suite at all hours and in various states of disarray.

Not that Sarrica would be taking him back as head secretary. After his story got out, and the infinitely more scandalous rumors spread, he'd be lucky to get a job anywhere in Harkenesten City—or even Harken. He'd probably have to go far south to find someone willing to hire him.

It would be even worse for Jac and Charlaine. Damn it, what had he done? Why had they come? Whatever they said, he wasn't worth throwing away their lives and livelihoods. He had to make certain they lived, and

whatever it took, he'd make certain they'd be well when they returned to Harken.

If only doing was as easy as thinking.

"Stop thinking so much," Charlaine said, in a voice rough-edged with sleep. Over the years, Myra had heard that voice only a handful of times, but this was the first time he allowed himself to fully enjoy it.

"I can't help it."

Charlaine opened his eyes, the good one staring intently, just visible in the flickering firelight. "Then at least think of something more pleasant. Thinking about what's coming won't do any good. What would you be doing if we were home right now and everything was as it's been?"

Myra smiled faintly. "Realistically, I'd probably be acting like a selfish jerk, caught between my oldest friend and the lovely young woman who asked me to tea. I doubt I'd have ever worked up the nerve to suggest we try all three of us."

"Don't worry, I'm fairly certain Jac would have gotten there," Charlaine said.

"I feel I'm being insulted, but I'm not awake enough to be sure," Jac replied groggily, her arm tightening on Myra's hip as she levered herself up.

Myra shifted to lie on his back so he could see them both, reaching up tentatively to touch Charlaine's cheek, smiling faintly when Charlaine turned his head to kiss Myra's fingers. He pulled his fingers away after a moment, only for his hand to be captured by Jac and treated to more kisses. Drawing a shaky breath, Myra said, "I'm pretty certain this is more than I deserve after a lifetime of murder and deceit."

"You've suffered more than enough," Charlaine said. "I can't judge you on the murders. I've killed far more people than you, in battle and in stealth. It counts for much, though, that you didn't enjoy it and stopped doing it."

Jac snorted. "I've already lost track of how many people I've killed on this trip alone, and firebombs are meant to be nasty." She leaned down and kissed him again.

Myra clung tightly, desperate to have as many good memories as possible to take with him when he died.

When she pulled back a few minutes later, Jac ran a hand over Myra's hair, a little longer than when he'd been taken in Harken but still too short. He hated it. "I wanted to have a gift when we went for tea, so I bought you hair ribbons."

"I'm sorry."

Jac smiled. "Don't be. We'll just have to find another use for them. I'm thinking Charlaine."

"Woman—"

Myra cut him off with a kiss, more undone than he was going to admit by the idea of Charlaine bound to his bed and completely at their mercy.

Unfortunately, when he pushed Charlaine over, his ribs reminded him why he couldn't do all the delightful things filling his mind. Myra pulled back with a hiss and pressed a hand to his ribs.

Charlaine scowled. "Be careful."

"They're only bruised," Myra said. "This is wholly unfair. If I'm not going to get a last meal, I should get a last fuck, especially since I can't remember the last time I *had* a fuck."

Jac snickered and sprawled gently along his side, one leg draping between his, head on his chest. "Given I can barely remember the last time I bathed properly, it's probably for the best. But I promise once we're out of here, you'll get a fuck you won't be forgetting any time soon. I refuse to die before I've had a chance to fuck you both."

Charlaine groaned. "Why did I ever think you were shy?"

"Depends on the time and the place, Lieutenant." Jac winked, then shifted enough to lean up and kiss him.

Myra could watch that forever. "I don't know how I came to be this fortunate, but I'm grateful."

"Be grateful when we're home and can make a proper effort to see what we can become," Charlaine replied, and bent to kiss him.

After that, the world was reduced to easy kisses and soft caresses, quiet words of affection and teasing comments. In the dark and fading firelight, it was easy to forget that he was hours away from a trial that would sentence him to a slow, torturous death.

Someone's hands were moving from easy to bold when a sharp pounding at the door made them all jerk apart.

The door was flung open a moment later, and dull, hazy light spilled in, followed by a quartet of woman lugging buckets of hot water, a small bathing tub, a bundle of soap and rags, and clean clothes. "Get clean," one of the woman said, casting Myra a look full of loathing as she said in Soltorish, "Your trial begins in an hour, and you are to look presentable." She spat on the floor and followed the other women out.

"I can't wait until we're out of this place," Jac said with a sigh.

"In their defense, they do regard me as a traitor and murderer." Myra climbed carefully out of bed and crossed the room—but when he started to lift one of the buckets, Charlaine was there to take it away and give him an admonishing look. Smiling sheepishly, Myra stepped away and let him arrange the bath.

Jac came up behind and gently wrapped arms around his waist, nuzzling against his back. "What would they do if you refused to wash and showed up as you are?"

"They'd drag out the tub and cold water and bath me clean right there in the square, then force me into clothes and begin the trial only once I looked presentable. It's been done before, though I never saw it. This sort of thing doesn't actually happen often."

Jac swore softly and held him more tightly. "We'll figure out how to get out of here. You just endure the fucking trial."

Myra nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

"Bath's ready." Charlaine stepped in and started on the fastenings of his clothes.

Myra grabbed his wrists. "I can—"

"Do what you're told," Charlaine cut in. "We've worked damned hard to get to you, and it's going to get worse before it gets better. Let us fuss."

Sighing softly, Myra let go and let them have their way. After weeks of being grabbed, punched, thrown and otherwise bruised—after that brutal beating ordered by his mother—he almost cried to be touched gently, like he was wanted and loved.

"I didn't know you had a tattoo," Charlaine said quietly. "All the years we've known each other..." He reached out to rest a hand gently on Myra's chest.

Jac came around to join them and whistled. "That must have taken weeks."

Myra grimaced. "Yes. My badge of honor, a highly skilled and blooded assassin of Clan Iron Moon. A Shadow of the Iron Moon, is the title. I should have been proud the day it was completed—there was a celebration for me and the others who finished that same day. I hated every minute of it. I've always wished I could get rid of it. The only thing it's ever been good for is hiding the surgical scars." He traced the places where the scars were barely visible, memories of waking up swathed in bandages, the knowledge that part of his body was gone forever—a part he hadn't minded, even if breasts were considered 'feminine' by Soldonir, but getting rid of them was the only way to get what he wanted, and that was for his clan to consider him a man.

Fingers curled beneath his chin and urged his head up, and Myra was met by Charlaine's soft kiss, a thumb brushing along his cheek, wiping away tears. Jac kissed his throat, stroked his side, and as easy as that bad memories slipped away.

Pulling away, they led him to the bath—and again insisted he let them do all the work. Myra only wished they were in a time and place he could enjoy it more, have fun with it, leave them all one big mess in need of another bath because the first one had failed so spectacularly.

Instead he simply enjoyed the gentle touches, the scrub of rough cloth and soft, lightly-scented soap. Jac's fingers scrubbed his hair, while Charlaine quickly and causally cleaned his intimate parts, scattering odd kisses to his hip and stomach and chest as he worked.

When he was clean, they dried him off—and faltered at the clothes. Jac shook her head. "I am used to watching Allen's intricate layers go on and still I have no idea what to do with all of this."

Myra laughed and took the undertunic from her, shrugging it on before he retrieved the small clothes from the floor, pulled them on, and tied them off. Then he made certain the undertunic rested tightly but comfortably and had Jac tie it off for him. Over that went the underrobe, dyed blood red and falling to just shy of the floor. How they'd found clothes that fit him so well, he didn't know—and didn't want to know.

The billowy sleeves were more annoying than he recalled, though more likely he was just used to the tighter sleeves favored in Harken, since billowy sleeves would only get in the way there, especially for those who sat at desks and dining tables all day.

Over that went the overrobe, made of stiffer black material, sleeveless and embroidered all over with designs similar to his tattoos. There were discreet pockets and slits meant to store weapons, and he was still welltrained enough he hated they were empty.

"How do I look?" he asked when he was finally dressed—even down to slippers that could almost have been made for him.

"Beautiful, but like a beautiful stranger," Charlaine said. "You don't look like our Myra."

Jac fussed with the laces on either side of the overrobe. "Agreed. I want our secretary back. This Myra looks like some prince I'm not allowed to touch."

"Princess, strictly speaking," Myra said sourly, though it was endearing as always that Harkens failed so miserably at such things. There were gendered clothes in Harken, though it was by accident rather than design. Women, for instance, tended toward certain gowns more than men. Certain styles of breeches and other pants were slightly more favored by men, and other styles by women. But all clothes in Harken were worn by everybody, and Harkens often stumbled abroad when it came to such things. It was, in Myra's opinion, one of their best qualities. "These are women's clothes."

Anger filled Jac's face. "Why would they do that?"

"Because I'm in disgrace, and so all my privileges—including living as a man—have been stripped."

"That's not—"

Myra cut her off with a kiss. "Don't worry about it. In the grand scheme of things, this is a trifling." He smiled faintly. "At least you think I'm beautiful."

"You'd be more beautiful at home in your bed," Charlaine said.

Managing a faint smile, Myra replied, "Hopefully it will be our bed."

"Damn straight it will be," Jac added.

They both kissed him, and Myra swallowed against the tears that threatened.

The dreaded pounding at the door came a few minutes later, and the door swung open to admit Ryan. "Let's go."

Myra stepped forward, but Charlaine and Jac stopped him, each giving him one last, hard kiss. "We'll be here, and we'll find a way to escape," Jac said.

Charlaine simply said, "Above all, with a steel heart."

That nearly undid Myra. Even Ryan's sneering could not touch him right then. That was a line from the Harkenos family motto—not the imperial motto, which was simply *We serve the people*. But their personal family motto, which was almost universally misunderstood by the rest of the world: *We command with a steel sword and steel mind, but above all with a steel heart*. Most took it to mean a hard heart, or at best a strong heart—which was closer to the truth.

In Harken, the word for 'steel' was the same as the word for 'steadfast', the former taken from the latter when steel was first developed and used. That word was 'hark', and Harkenos meant both 'bright steel' and 'blindingly loyal'.

There was nothing more reassuring and heartening that Charlaine could have said.

Myra squeezed their hands tightly and finally walked away, following Ryan out of the room and across the village. Those who couldn't attend the trial stood in doorways and windows, spitting and hurtling insults and curses. Nobody threw anything at him, thankfully, because that would be disrespectful to the elders at the trial—but he would not be so lucky after the trial.

Silence fell as they reached the square, though the glares of those assembled were no less hostile than the hurtled words.

Ryan shoved him toward the middle of the square, and Myra sat as he reached it, legs tucked under him and robes spread out, hands resting on his lap. He hated these robes—the clothes of a woman, a last humiliation to put

him in his place, a reminder that in their eyes, he was only allowed to be himself if he met their conditions.

Pantheon, he just wanted to go home.

Matthew, sitting at the center of the gathered elders, pounded on the table for silence. When only the rustle of clothes and the odd cough could be heard, he said, "We gather today to put on trial Eliza Karlota, my revoked sister. She is charged with betrayal of the clan, murder of her own father, Lord Karl Voker, esteemed warrior of Clan Iron Moon, and murder of Master Joseph Franko, beloved warrior of Clan Iron Moon."

Myra didn't sneer at that, but it was a near thing. Joseph hadn't been beloved—he'd been the bane of the village, and if Myra hadn't killed him, somebody else would have.

"Lady Eliza, you may speak in your defense," Matthew said.

Bowing his head, but eschewing the rote phrases of gratitude, Myra said, "Whatever name given to me upon my birth, I am now Myra Kemoor, citizen of the Harken Empire, citizen of Harkenesten, and have been so for the past twenty years. Legally you are not allowed to punish me without the permission of the Harken Imperial Throne. You are in violation of the peace treaty between the Harken Empire and the Triumvirate and the International Peace Agreements."

"You are a traitor. We deserve justice for the wrongs you've committed against us, and Soltorin does not give a damn about that arrogant, interfering Emperor." Raising his voice, Matthew called out, "Are there any here who would speak in defense of the accused?" When only silence fell, he then asked, "Are there any here who thinks he may not be guilty of the crimes of which he has been accused?" More silence.

"What about my companions? They're Harken citizens. You have no right to punish them. They've done nothing wrong that you haven't done far worse, invading Harken to assassinate Prince Larren and—"

"You will be silent," Matthew snarled. "What we do with the invaders is none of your concern. Their fate has already been decided."

Myra laughed bitterly. "And they probably won't even get a farce of a trial."

"Be quiet," Matthew replied coldly. "It is the decision of the village elders, approved by myself, Chief Iron Moon, that Eliza Karlota is guilty on all counts and is to be punished by execution. According to the laws of the clan, you are sentenced to death by exposure. Tomorrow at dawn you will be taken to the execution field and left for the gods. May they show you the mercy you did not show those who trusted you with their lives."

Myra said nothing. He refused to go through the damned platitudes, and nothing he said in protest would be heard.

Instead, he let guards drag him to his feet and escort him back to the cabin—and this time the clan did not limit themselves to only words and spitting. By the time they opened the door and shoved him in, he was covered in everything from rotten food to feces.

Jac and Charlaine rushed up to him, and Myra finally broke down in tears, going easily as they led him to the fireplace.

"We managed to keep some water," Charlaine said, and quickly stripped off Myra's clothes, throwing them carelessly aside. Myra was not a bit sorry when the sleeve of the underrobe fell in the fire.

"Leave it," he said, voice raspy, when Charlaine went to get it. "I don't want to look at them. Let it all burn."

Jac cleaned his face gently and kissed him, which somehow just made Myra cry harder.

When he was naked, they used the bucket of water they'd managed to keep to clean him off, kissing and caressing as they went, until Myra's tears finally eased and his misery had faded just a bit. They led him to bed and got him settled and crawled in on either side of him.

"I'm glad you're here," Myra whispered, "even if I wish you weren't."

They kissed him again, warm and reassuring, the only thing keeping terror and depression at bay. Settled between them, Myra closed his eyes and tried to relax. Either they were going to have to escape before dawn, or they were going to have to figure out how to escape the field, and either way, they needed to be ready.

And if they failed, there were worse ways to spend the last day of his life.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Charlaine woke to the sound of soft rustling. He disentangled himself from the lovely, warm pile he'd somehow wound up in the middle of while they slept and searched around for the source of the sound—then stared as something small slipped through a tiny slit in the roof.

The object dropped only a step from the fireplace, making his stomach clench with how close it had come to being lost.

Sliding out of bed, smiling faintly at the moan of protest that came from a still-sleeping Jac, Charlaine padded over to the object and picked up what proved to be a small piece of thick folded paper. He unfolded it, but the words were Soltorish.

Charlaine sighed and looked at the bed, where his lovers had moved to twine around each other. They were so beautiful he ached. Whatever it took, he would get them safely home.

Even if at present he wasn't entirely certain where home would be—but that was a problem for later. The first step was getting out of Soldonir. The second step would be ensuring Iron Moon left them alone, but the first step was daunting enough. One thing at a time.

Going over to the bed, he gently shook their feet to wake them up. Both jerked, protested, reached for weapons that weren't there—then Myra stared blearily and Jac glared-pouted. "What?"

Charlaine held the note up. "This just came in through the roof."

"What?" Myra sat up, winced slightly, but then pushed on, climbing out of bed and taking the note. He frowned as he read it, then smiled—the first real smile Charlaine had seen on him since he'd been thrown into the cabin.

Jac groaned and rolled over in bed. "What's it say?"

"It's from Kimberly," Myra said, hands trembling. "She says she will get us free tomorrow night if we can last that long. She can't do it sooner, she's sorry." He laughed shakily. "I guess we have an ally after all."

"I am not looking forward to a whole day of sitting in a field baking, but it sure beats doing that for several days until death—or attempting to fight our way out."

"Or sneak away, which we've already proved abysmal at," Charlaine added wryly. "Can we trust her?"

Myra cast the note into the fire. "Yes. She risked plenty just giving us the note. If we can last until nightfall, as miserable as that is going to be, she'll do her best to get us out. I do not know what finally changed her mind, but I'm not going to question it."

"I just hope she has a plan to get us to sea, because that's the only chance we stand of getting away."

"You don't think they'd just hunt us down in Harken?" Jac asked.

Charlaine shook his head. "No. They've already thrown too much away. If we get can get back to Harken, or even just Kin del Kar, we'll be safe enough. Of course, getting out of here is probably harder than finding our ways out of the Penance Realms."

"I don't think it's quite that bad," Myra said as he turned to face them again. "So our current plan is still the same as before: we wait. At least this time we're waiting for something a bit more solid than an opportunity."

Jac grinned. "Guess we'd better find a way to pass the time, now we're all cleaned up with nowhere to go."

Charlaine cast her a look, mouth twitching. "Young people and your single-mindedness."

"Young people," Jac mimicked. "Like you're ancient."

"Forty-two feels ancient some days."

"Especially after the past several weeks," Myra said. "Are you certain you want to fall in with two old men, Jac?"

Jac reached out, grabbed Myra's shirt, and hauled him close. Throwing her arms around his neck, she leaned up and kissed him hard.

Charlaine sucked in air through his nostrils, eye locked on the beautiful sight. He wished only that there was more light to see by. Mercy of the Pantheon, he was glad Jac had possessed the good sense to suggest they try something unconventional.

Myra moaned and loosened the arms he'd wrapped around Jac's waist to slide them lower, pulling her flush and holding fast, eliciting a soft gasp before Jac dove into another kiss. Jac loosened her own grip, putting just enough space between them to get hands up beneath Myra's clothes—and jerked back when Myra hissed in pain. "Sorry."

"Get back here," Myra said, reeling Jac back in and diving into another kiss.

Charlaine slowly stripped, piling his clothes neatly near the beds so they wouldn't get mussed or dirty—well, *more* mussed and dirty. Returning to the still-kissing pair, he rested hands on their backs, drawing their attention. Myra smiled and leaned in to kiss him, soft and easy at first but swiftly turning hungry. Charlaine groaned at the taste of Jac in Myra's mouth.

Pulling back slightly, Myra said, "You shouldn't have come for me, but I can't be sorry you did. Does that make me terrible?"

"That makes you determined to live. It also makes you ours," Charlaine replied, and kissed him again.

He was tugged away a moment later by Jac, who tasted of Myra and kissed like a soldier intent on their mission, with all the zeal Charlaine hadn't felt since he'd left his younger days well behind him. But Pantheon, did Jac make him want to try for such fervor again. Curling a hand into Jac's hair, Charlaine kissed her deeply, tasting every crevice of her mouth, sucking on her tongue, drawing away slowly, sucking on her lips and dragging his teeth along them before finally pulling fully away.

Jac slowly opened her eyes, mouth curving. "I'm going to win so many bets."

Charlaine scowled. "Bets? What bets?"

"About what Second Lieutenant Astor enjoys in bed." Jac fluttered her lashes. "At least half of Fathoms Deep has money on spanking."

"What!" Charlaine's face burned. "You'd better be joking."

"She's not," Myra said.

Charlaine cast him a wounded look. "You knew about this?"

"I love you, Charlaine, but for a man who has spent most of his career essentially a spy, you are breathtakingly oblivious to how much gossip surrounds you and your Pantheon-blessed ass."

Charlaine's face burned even hotter, both at the careless profession and the remark about his ass. "I'm never talking to Fathoms Deep again, those

fucking traitors."

Jac giggled. "So spanking?"

"No," Charlaine hissed. "But I'm going to give *you* an unpleasant one if you don't stop!"

That just made Jac giggle harder.

Charlaine swept her feet out from under her and followed her down, pinning her wrists and trapping her legs with his own. "What does our bratty little dragon like, then?" He kissed her hard, biting and sucking on her lower lip as he slowly pulled away.

Jac thrust up against him, looking smug as Charlaine groaned at the friction against his cock. "I like putting handsome men on their hands and knees and fucking them."

That just made Charlaine groan again, longer and deeper. Jac licked his throat, sucked at his pulse point. Charlaine chased her mouth, tongue thrusting deep, consumed by the image of Jac with a strap-on cock taking Myra from behind. Or Jac fucking him while he made Myra scream. She was going to put Charlaine on his pyre, he could feel it. But what a way to go.

Drawing back, laughing softly, Jac said, "Oh, I think I found something you like."

"I've never minded people enjoying my ass," Charlaine said, and finally let her go, but only so he could get to work on her clothes. Movement caught his eye, and he quirked a brow as he saw Myra settle on the floor just out of reach. But at the jerk of his chin and the look in his eye, Charlaine happily went back to putting on a show.

Throwing Jac's shirt aside, he finally allowed himself to look his fill at the utterly perfect breasts he hadn't been able to stop thinking about since watching Jac dance.

"Are you going to do something, Lieutenant, or just keep staring?"

Charlaine finally smiled, slow and evil, enjoying the way Jac's breath hitched. "Oh, I'm going to do something, Sergeant. You want to know what I like best?" He shifted so he could lower himself down to easily reach her breasts, dragging his tongue across one before suckling the nipple briefly.

Drawing back to blow on it, watching it harden further, he looked up through his lashes and said, "Using my mouth."

Jac and Myra groaned in unison, and Myra finally joined them. While he kissed Jac, Charlaine resumed tasting and teasing every part of Jac he could reach, beginning with those breasts. Pantheon, now that he'd gotten to enjoy them, touch and taste, he might die if he didn't get to do so every day.

Eventually he moved on because delightful as Jac's breasts were, there was plenty more of her he wanted to taste. He worked his mouth down her body, alternating sucking kisses with nips of teeth and long, wet drags of his tongue, savoring the taste of her skin, drunk on every flex of muscle and hitch of breath, the fingers that skittered along his skin. By the time he reached his goal, Jac was alternating between cursing his name and moaning it, one hand tangled tightly in his hair.

Charlaine dragged his tongue across her clit, then wrapped his lips around it and sucked. Jac cried out, hips jerking, but whatever she said was lost in Myra's mouth. Dipping lower, Charlaine got her thighs over his shoulders and held loosely to them as he thrust his tongue into her wet heat. *This* was what he liked: taking people apart with his mouth, hearing and feeling them shatter, the flavor and heat of eating someone out or swallowing their cock, the ripple of muscle in their thighs, the ache in his jaw and the mess he was making of his face and throat. Having them completely at his mercy and making them scream with pleasure. He always enjoyed using his cock or getting fucked, but having his mouth on a lover was his absolute favorite.

Jac made a rough, ragged noise, and Charlaine just fucked her harder, deeper, lips and tongue working as best he knew how. He could feel the fine tension in her body right before she cried out his name and came and continued to fuck her through the climax and aftermath, until she finally went lax.

Finally withdrawing, Charlaine rose to his knees and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand as he took in the results of his work.

Jac looked at him like she couldn't remember how to speak for a moment—then reeled up and knocked him over, splayed atop him and kissed him wet and filthy. "Pantheon, you're good at that."

"I'll say," Myra said, voice a bit hoarse. "I was only watching and I nearly came."

Hot sparks ran down Charlaine's spine, and Jac's warm chuckles wafted over his skin before she rolled away so he could sit up. Reaching out, Charlaine dragged Myra into his lap and kissed him hard, groaning as he shifted to ride one of Charlaine's thighs, leaving damp trails and making his cock twitch hard. It was a good thing he wasn't young anymore: he would have already come and made an embarrassment of himself.

Charlaine spread Myra on the floor and kissed him again, dragging his tongue across those swollen lips, absorbing every shiver and breathy moan. He was dizzy with the knowledge this was Myra, whom he'd loved for so long, as a friend and then romantically.

Strong, slender arms wrapped around him from behind, Jac's breasts pushing against his back, a hot mouth licking his overheated skin, doing nothing to cool him off. As though it wasn't heady enough having Myra to call lover, he also had the fiercest woman in the palace.

"I really can't wait to be home," Jac said in his ear, pausing to nibble on the lobe before adding, "I have a few cocks, you know. Different sizes, some with ridges and such all over." She grinded against him. "I'll be able to buy more with the money I make from winning the bet—"

Charlaine whipped around and grabbed her, laughing as Jac shrieked delightedly. "One more comment about bets or my ass and you won't be fucking it for a long time."

Jac pouted.

"Behave," Charlaine said, and gave her a toothy kiss before returning his attention to Myra, leaving them to kiss and touch each other.

He lapped at the damp smears on Myra's thighs, nibbled and sucked at the soft skin, shivering at the taste of him, slightly sweeter than Jac and just as addictive. When Myra moaned his name and those thighs tensed, Charlaine spread them wider and went to work, sucking and tonguing his clit until Myra was stuttering his name, grasping at his hair, struggling not to clamp his thighs down too tightly against Charlaine's head.

Charlaine combed his fingers through the thick thatch of damp curls then spread Myra open wide and plunged his tongue deep, chuckling briefly at the howl that got him. Shifting, he used his thumb to keep working Myra's

clit, the other arm wrapped around one thigh as he fucked Myra senseless with tongue and fingers, drunk on the noises, the heat and salt-sweet taste.

Hot hands skated along his body, nails raking here, a softer touch there, fingers flitting oh so briefly over his cock.

"Charlaine—" Myra groaned, shuddering through his climax, fingers clamping down on Charlaine's head.

When he finally stilled, Charlaine drew back—and yelped as Myra and Jac both shoved him to the floor, each taking a kiss before they moved down his body to his cock. Oh, Pantheon. Charlaine propped himself on his elbows so he could enjoy the sight of Myra and Jac sharing his cock, sucking and licking in turns, someone's hands gently fondling his balls. Occasionally they paused to kiss around or over his cock before getting back to work.

Charlaine moaned and toppled to the ground, spreading his legs slightly when the hand on his balls moved further down, teasing at his hole, which hadn't had any attention but his own for years. That must be Jac; Myra's fingers were larger.

"I really can't wait to fuck you," Jac said.

Myra moaned, pausing to add, "I really want someone to fuck *me*."

"He can do you while I do him."

"Less talking, more sucking," Charlaine said.

They laughed but obeyed, and it took only a moment more before Charlaine spilled down Myra's throat. They crawled back up his body and took a kiss each, then kissed each other before sprawling along his sides, hot and sweaty but oh so wonderful.

"It's really not fair we're here and not at home," Myra said eventually. "Although I don't know where at home we'd be. My bed certainly isn't big enough for three people."

Jac laughed into Charlaine's shoulder. "We'll have to see about getting a family suite at some point."

"I'm never going to hear the end of this," Charlaine said with a sigh. "I'm going to have to kill all of Fathoms Deep and Shattered Wind—just to start with."

That just made Jac laugh harder, and even Myra chuckled.

It was easy to forget, beneath the jesting and the warm lethargy of sated lust, that they'd be lucky if the worst they found themselves was out on the street with no home and no job.

Charlaine had almost drifted off to sleep when Jac said, "So I have a question."

"That sounds more serious than I want to deal with right now," Charlaine said with a groan.

Jac jabbed him in the ribs. "Harold was trying to say something before we had to run, about the Triumvirate going too far and what Harken was probably going to do to them or something."

"They did assassinate Crown Prince Larren," Myra replied. "That's not just a breach of peace treaties—it's an act of war. Under the International Convention for Settlement of Disputes, the High Court doesn't have to go through the usual steps to resolve the matter peacefully."

"Especially since first Jac and then you were kidnapped, and now they're going to execute all three of us," Charlaine said. "I think Their Majesties are trying to resolve the matter peacefully, though. The Triumvirate, or at least Soltorin, isn't having it."

Jac sat up slightly. "So what does that mean? Sarrica and Allen are going to declare war? It won't be much of a fight. The Triumvirate is too small to face Harken in direct war. We'd—oh, Pantheon. I get it now. No wonder that ass kept laughing at me. Would Sarrica really do that?"

"Take the Triumvirate over?" Myra asked. "Yes. Which isn't going to please Treya Mencee, and who even knows what the Bentan rebels will make of it. What the Bentan throne will make of it. We may soon have another full-scale war on our hands, though I know that's the last thing Their Majesties want."

"That's probably why they were trying to find us," Charlaine said. "Unfortunately, so was Iron Moon. I'm surprised the Triumvirate hasn't sent someone after the clan."

"It's entirely possibly they have or will," Myra said. "The clans have always been their own entity, though. Even after Benta took over and the Triumvirate was formed and so much was changed, including making it illegal even to have 'heathen names.' By Triumvirate law, it's still illegal, even though we're no longer under Bentan control. They want very much to

meet the standards of places like Benta and Treya Mencee. It's part of the reason for the underlying strife and discord. I'm not sure what will happen if Harken decides to make the Triumvirate a colony."

Charlaine made a face. "Enough. That's a problem beyond our scope. I'd rather focus on us while we can, since who knows what tomorrow will bring."

"Sorry," Jac murmured and kissed him. That was followed by Myra kissing him, which led to a second round of fucking as hot and messy and wonderful as the first.

\*~\*~\*

They were woken just before drawn, dragged out of their beds in the dark, and roughly stripped of their clothes. Charlaine briefly considered struggling, but there were too many people and too much jungle for escape to be possible. This wasn't a play. There would be no clever, heroic escape accompanied by a loud, brash chorus.

No, their only hope was a woman who seemed willing to turn traitor, who could very well change her mind or be killed before she could help them.

But Charlaine couldn't be sorry. He didn't want to die, and certainly not in such a horrific way, but he would have hated himself for staying safely in Harken while Myra faced this alone.

The air was so thick with humidity he could practically drink it, birds and insects filling the still-dark morning with noise that would be soothing at any other time. He stumbled along as he was dragged across unfamiliar ground faster than he could handle, hands standing him back upright with bruising force before the dragging resumed.

When they finally stopped, it was in a large, clear field. He could see a hint of sunrise on the far side, which meant they were almost directly east of the village.

Four men hauled him over to a massive stake driven into the ground. Near the top and bottom of the stake was a dull iron ring with chains. His arms were dragged up and secured to the topmost ring, and his feet were wrapped in manacles and secured to the lower ring. Charlaine tested them, but everything seemed secure and well-maintained. He wouldn't be getting out of them short of a key or good lockpicks.

Myra was secured to a stake several paces to his right, and Jac was on Myra's other side.

The man who looked like Myra stood before them surrounded by people who looked like they either had never possessed the spine to stand up to the wrongs of their clan or had those spines broken a long time ago. Thankfully, his little speech—smug and irritating even when Charlaine didn't understand a word of it—didn't last long.

"This is not how I thought I would die," Charlaine said, the words coming out not quite as flippant as he'd wanted. Perhaps reality was finally sinking in. That was unfortunate.

Myra sighed. "I always thought some noble would finally lose their mind and come at me with my own letter opener."

"You two think about really morbid things," Jac said. "Who sits there and contemplates how they might die? No thank you. I prefer to focus on the fact I've been trained to overcome a great many situations." She sighed. "Pity this wasn't one of them. Spending a few hours in the stocks isn't really the same thing, not when there are rules about breaks and water and such so nobody dies or is permanently harmed."

"It could be worse, I'm sure," Charlaine said. "Back before the Empire existed, some of the punishments throughout the various kingdoms included leaving people out for animals, dumping them too far out to sea to reach shore, and burning them at the stake."

"Pantheon be merciful," Jac said. "How do you know all that? Since when are you an historian?"

"I'm not," Charlaine said. "But I do know my plays, and the really old ones include those elements because they would have been perfectly normal and expected in their day."

Myra said softly, "His Imperial Majesty has done a lot for Harken. His father and grandmother made a great many improvements, but combined they do not compare to what he's accomplished—and what he and High Consort Allen will further accomplish. I hate I have probably tarnished his reputation."

"Sarrica would be the first to say that anyone who looks down on him or you for this mess can shut up," Jac said. "Everyone deserves to choose how they live their life, as much as possible. We can't control what the Pantheon throws at us, but that doesn't mean we should just sit there and accept the life others hand us. If I'd been you, I'd have done the same damn thing."

"It takes unfathomable courage to turn on your family, your clan, your entire country to save their mortal enemy and then work for him your whole life," Charlaine added. "Leave off the self-recrimination. We have enough to deal with right now. Like the way my dick is just hanging out, waiting to be sunburned. I hope you got your fill of my ass last night because it's not going to look so perfect in a few hours."

Jac's chains rattled as she struggled to lean forward enough that he could just see her past Myra. "No one is dying until I get to fuck you. Even the Pantheon isn't taking that pleasure from me, or I'll fight all of the Penance Gate twenty times to come back in this life."

"If anyone could, it's you," Charlaine said, and tried to say more, but the words stuck in his throat like paste.

Myra and Jac were silent. But there really wasn't much left to say, nothing that wouldn't turn maudlin, and Charlaine wasn't ready for that. It felt too much like giving up.

Instead, he focused on what was coming. They were completely naked, in an open field, in a place of extreme heat and humidity. They were going to overheat fast. If they weren't delirious by nightfall it would be the blessing of the Pantheon alone that spared them.

There was nothing they could do about shade. No way to get water unless they got lucky and it rained. They'd sweat out all the water in their bodies in hours. Never mind all the fun little details like sunburn and shitting themselves.

All right, enough thinking about that. The only way they'd get through this was with distractions. The sun was rising now. It probably wouldn't set for at least twelve hours, probably closer to fourteen.

Pantheon, let Myra's mysterious Kimberly come through for them. He'd settle for Harold the smarmy scout, but given his firm 'I'll help you, but only to a point' stance that seemed highly unlikely.

Charlaine closed his eyes and tried to focus on happy thoughts. Like taking Myra and Jac to the theatre and then to his favorite tavern for drinks, renting a room at a good inn and enjoying themselves. Taking them somewhere they could dance until they fell over. Sparring with Jac on their days off, and all the delightful things they could each demand when they won a round. Flirting with them both in the imperial office when duty permitted. All the teasing he would take from his comrades. Seeing Kamir again, holding his baby so he could have a few minutes' break, no matter how much Kamir insisted he was fine.

Hopefully Kamir wasn't worrying himself to death, between Charlaine and the others being gone and Jader right in the middle of the fray to sort the mess out. If Myra was right about Harken invading the Triumvirate and taking it over as a colony, Jader would be on his way here—along with Sarrica, which meant Allen was probably something of a mess himself.

Had they done the right thing, coming after Myra, or had they just made an already terrible situation worse? But if they weren't here, Myra would most certainly have died. Charlaine stifled a sigh and opened his eyes to look up at the sky, where the starlight was steadily fading beneath the increasing sunlight. The air was rapidly going from bearable to miserable.

"What's the longest anyone has ever survived this particularly repugnant form of execution?" Charlaine asked.

"Five days is the longest I ever heard about. It's said that any person who can survive ten is set free, all sins forgiven and forgotten, but it's a false hope goal. If the sun or dehydration doesn't kill, eventually the leopards see easy prey."

"Leopard," Charlaine repeated slowly. "What is a leopard?"

"You don't want to know."

Charlaine almost argued, then decided Myra was probably right. "Let's hope your friend keeps her promise."

"She will."

"I'm more concerned," Jac said, "that we won't be in any fit state to escape by the time night falls."

"You've come through worse, Dragon, and so have I. Just think of the bragging rights we'll have when we get home."

Jac gave a derisive snort. "I don't want bragging rights."

Charlaine smiled faintly. "You've already said you won't die before you can fuck me. So just think of my ass and stay strong."

And he'd focus on reciting every scrap of every play he could remember and not dwell on the fact that death was far more likely than rescue.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jac had thought the worst she could feel was in the aftermath of escaping Cartha. No matter the years that passed, she couldn't forget the anguish of abandoning Allen, the fear that had jerked her heart at every sound, the scream of her horse, the foam at its mouth. The fists, the knives, the crude words hurtled at her by people who hated her for the place of her birth. Worse had been all the people who'd criticized her, whispered and shouted and ranted that she should have acted differently, that she was too young, too inexperienced. If not for the support of the High Throne, Jac would have lost her fucking mind. It had taken months to fully recover, and she would always carry the scars, inside and out, of that terrifying ride.

She had the sinking feeling that was going to seem like a happy jaunt through a forest if she survived this latest bout of terror. They'd only been in the field for roughly an hour or so, judging by the sun, and already she wanted to die. This was nothing at all like being in the stocks, which had been her desperate hope. But the stocks came with rules and regulations. They were meant to make you miserable enough you'd think twice the next time you were about to break a rule or doing something stupid. The days of stocks doing permanent damage—the ever further back days of public ridicule—were long gone, banished permanently to history by Sarrica's great-grandmother.

An hour of unfiltered sunlight was not the worst thing she'd ever endured, but as the start to a very long day, it was less than stellar. Were those storm clouds slowly coming their way a good or bad thing? She almost asked the question aloud, but Myra and Charlaine were the type to go quiet in situations like this, and forcing them to talk probably wouldn't help.

But it was going to be an even longer day if she had to be quiet the whole time.

Jac stared at the approaching clouds and tried to put her mind on happier thoughts. Not sex, despite Charlaine's earlier jest. She was far too stressed and scared to think about that. But it wasn't hard to daydream of the other things she'd like to do with Charlaine and Myra. Eat dinner together after a

long day, exchanging gossip and stories. Manage to get the same day off and go into the city to shop and eat and dance. Exchange looks and brief words as they crossed paths throughout the day. Spar with them, if Myra could be coaxed into doing so. Tease Charlaine mercilessly because he made it so, so easy.

Pantheon, she missed home. She always did when she went abroad, but it wasn't usually this cutting. She missed Allen, missed watching him, Sarrica and the others throughout the day. Missed her bed and familiar food, her friends and the comforting chaos of Harkenesten.

Even if they made it home, she had no idea what was in store for them. Would she get to resume her place as Allen's bodyguard? Or would she be discharged completely, from that and the Dragons. The idea of having to start her life over completely was terrifying. Charlaine's assurances on the boat had been comforting, as was the idea they would figure it out together, all three of them. But right then all she wanted was to be back in the midst of the life she dearly loved.

Was Allen all right? Pantheon, she would give anything to have been able to save Larren. But there hadn't been time to save them both, and Chass had been the first one the assassins had gone after in order to clear a path. Jac remembered his face when she'd offered condolences. She'd never cared about Chass one way or another, until she'd learned what he'd done to Allen. Then she'd thoroughly despised him. But even he didn't deserve the misery and anguish he must be suffering.

Ugh, if these were the kinds of thoughts that were going to occupy her mind for the next too many hours, she almost preferred the mysterious leopards Myra hadn't elaborated on.

Hopefully this Kimberly came through. It was hard to trust her last chance at survival to a woman who had helped to kidnap Myra in the first place.

But even that was better than dying here, slowly and miserably, as the pain grew with every passing minute. If thirst didn't get them, too much sun would, and if they somehow survived those...well, there was rain, animals, and starvation to look forward to.

Time to think about something else.

Her thoughts remained on worries, however, no matter how hard she tried to put them on happier things. Allen. Escape. Getting home. Punishment. Starting a new life somewhere in Harken that was far away from Harkenesten, because staying there would hurt too damn much.

The slow, deep rumble of thunder drew Jac from her thoughts, and she looked up from staring holes in the grass to see the distant clouds had drawn close much faster than expected. "Is that good or bad?" She had a feeling she knew the answer, even as she asked.

"Bad," Myra and Charlaine said at the same time.

Jac sighed. "At least we won't freeze to death? I don't know if that would be better or worse."

"I hope we never have to find out," Charlaine said, voice the grimmest she'd ever heard. "But I've seen people who died of the cold, and one extreme is as bad as another." He said something else, but Jac didn't hear it, first distracted by a blinding slash of lightning, then the deafening boom of thunder that immediately followed.

The storm that had seemed some distance away suddenly was far too close, heralded by a cool breeze that would have been refreshing under any other circumstances. Jac watched, fascinated, as sheets of rain steadily drew closer, the pounding of it nearly equal to the booming-cracking thunder, interspersed with shards of searing lightning.

For a moment, the cool rain felt good, as only cold after summer heat could.

Then she registered the sting of it. It was the sort of downpour that seemed like it would leave the world forever immersed in water, the kind that shrank the world because nothing could be seen or heard past the relentless sheets of pounding rain. The ground was already soggy. She didn't think they'd drown, but then again the water was already up to her ankles and the deluge wasn't slowing.

There was so much noise, it took a moment to realize the latest boom wasn't thunder. Jac jerked her head up, tried to shake her sodden hair from her face as a second explosion briefly overwhelmed the driving rain.

Not much in the world could burn in the face of a torrential downpour. But among those few substances, the Dragon's firebombs were pretty near the top. It was just one more reason they kept them closely guarded.

Jac turned her head, shared a brief look with Myra before their attention was jerked back in the direction of the village, where smoke was now billowing in such great quantities it was visible in the rain. For a moment, Jac swore she could hear screams.

Another explosion, but Jac was distracted by a flash of movement at the tree lines.

"Someone's coming!" Charlaine bellowed.

"I see them!" Jac turned toward Myra—and realized he was looking in the direction of the village. She followed his gaze, and sure enough, there was another figure running toward them.

The rain had lessoned slightly, though not enough to make life any easier. "There's another coming from the trees!" Myra said.

The two figures spied each other as they drew close.

"Get back!" the figure to Jac's right snarled, throwing something at the second figure.

Harold. That was Harold. Wan and haggard, with blood sluicing from a wound that hadn't been bandaged well, but *there*. "Back off, Iron Moon, your clan has caused us all enough trouble! I mean to—" He broke off as the other figure went at him with a sword.

"Stop!" Charlaine and Myra bellowed. "Stop! We're all on the same side!"

It was less the shouting that stopped them and more that both Harold and the woman—who must be Kimberly—lost their footing and tumbled down into the water. The field was rapidly becoming a pond.

Getting back up, they went right back to fighting, snarling at each other now in words Jac couldn't understand.

"Stop!" Myra shouted again. "Kimberly! He's an ally." He twisted his head to look at Jac. "Right? This is the one you were telling me about. Harold, from Dark Tide."

Jac nodded. Myra shifted back to the hostile pair and started shouting again, this time speaking Soltorish. Kimberly went down again as Harold swept her feet out from under her, but as he went in for the kill, she slammed a fist into his nose.

Myra bellowed louder than ever, so loud it must have hurt, and finally they stopped. They glared at each other a moment before dragging their eyes slowly to Myra, who hoarsely barked out several more sentences.

When he stopped, Harold gave a jerky nod and said something in reply as he knelt in the water, likely searching for his dropped weapons. "I want nothing to do with this woman, with Iron Moon—" Whatever he said then was outside Jac's limited Soltorish vocabulary, but it didn't take fluency or the glare on Kimberly's face to know he hadn't said anything flattering.

"Enough," Charlaine said, with all the command of a Second Lieutenant of Fathoms Deep and Shattered Wind. "We need to get out of here. I assume that's why you're both here, yes? Time is short. Someone will figure out whatever you did in the village was a distraction."

"Not the method I'd have gone with," Harold said tersely, sneering slightly as he waded over to Jac. He stared up at her manacled hands. "Can I borrow your shoulders?"

Jac gave him a look. "Please do."

With a fleeting grin, Harold deftly scaled up Jac and the pole, balancing on her shoulders as he picked the lock on her manacles.

Nearby, Kimberly was doing the same for Myra. As they both finished, they leapt down and tackled the far more difficult task of picking locks that were underwater.

Jac gingerly flexed and stretched her poor arms, scowling at the bruises and cuts on her wrists. She needed those wrists, Pantheon damn everyone and everything.

"There," Harold said, at the same time Jac felt the manacles around her ankles go loose.

Forcing back the sudden tears that wanted out, she pulled him to his feet and squeezed his hands in gratitude she couldn't yet voice. He smiled briefly, understanding in his eyes, and darted off to tackle Charlaine's legs while Kimberly got his arms.

Myra swept her up and kissed her hard, lips cold but his mouth warm, and if she thought she tasted salt water in there somewhere, it could have come from her as easily as Myra. A heavy hand on her back drew them apart, and then Charlaine was kissing them both.

For a moment, they lingered, clinging tightly to each other and crying in the rain.

"Come on," Harold called out over the rain that was rapidly lessening now. "We need to *go*. If we don't reach Dark Tide before Iron Moon catches up to us, we're all dead, and they won't be nice enough to do it slowly a second time."

Snorting at that, and ignoring that she was still very, very naked, Jac followed Harold into the jungle.

They didn't stop moving for what felt like hours, though it couldn't have been more than one hour at most. Somewhere in the midst of the trudge, the rain tapered off and left a sweltering, exhausting humidity in its wake, the swiftly returning sun setting rocks and other surfaces to gently steaming.

When they finally stopped by a small waterfall, Jac sank to her knees on what seemed to be a relatively safe patch of dirt. "Can I please have some Pantheon-damped clothes now."

"Sorry," Harold said. "I thought we'd be able to stop sooner, but the back of my neck has been prickling."

"Too bad it didn't prickle before we got captured," Charlaine said.

Harold grunted. "I let down my guard. I should not have."

With a sigh, Charlaine replied, "We all did. Without you we wouldn't have survived this damned jungle. We owe you—and you," he added, turning to Kimberly, "our lives." He started to say more but was cut off as Kimberly threw the pack she'd been carrying at him, catching him soundly in the chest.

"You can start repaying me by putting on some clothes," she said, but smiled fleetingly before turning away.

Charlaine knelt and rifled through the pack, throwing clothes at Myra and Jac before starting on his own.

Jac watched Myra for a moment, to be sure she understood how to put the clothes on correctly. There were long dark brown trousers that stopped at mid-shin, which were obvious enough; then a sort of jacket-shirt thing that had to be folded a certain way. She fumbled it the first time, and Kimberly stepped forward to help the second, binding it with a thin strip of fabric before wrapping a thicker, sturdier sash around her waist. Harold offered her a thumb ring of gleaming gold and carved with flowers. It was prettier than the usual leather and wood ones Jac bought but seemed functional enough. It also fit.

"A spare, but your fingers looked about my size," Harold said with a smile when she looked at him, and then handed her a bow that was nearly a perfect match of his.

"Thank you," Jac said, eyes stinging. "For everything."

"I'm glad you're still alive, warbird," Harold said with an answering smile as he handed over some knives and sheaths as well. "Not least of all because if I had failed to save you, my chief would have put a few more arrows in me."

Myra frowned. "Why does Chief Dark Tide care whether we live or die?"

Harold's smile turned grim as they all looked at him. "Haven't you heard? Harken warships have landed at Odokka."

"Fuck," Charlaine said.

"The emperor himself is here to supervise Harken's overtaking the Triumvirate."

"Oh, Realms." Jac shared a look with Charlaine and Myra, who looked the way she felt.

Harold wasn't finished. "We haven't received further missives on the matter, save one: that you three are to be returned alive or else."

Myra closed his eyes and swore softly. "Then we'd better get back before Sarrica loses patience."

"Spirits spare me ever being in a position that I would so casually refer to an emperor by his given name," Harold said. He dug into the pack he was holding and handed out food and a heavy skin. "Eat, drink. They're both intended to provide a great deal of energy for a few hours, but you'll sleep hard once we stop."

Charlaine and Jac nodded in unison and started wolfing down the food. Myra grimaced and ate at a slightly slower pace. When the whole group had finished, Jac pulled on the shoes she was tossed, strung her bow, and took up the rear position as they continued on through the jungle.

They traveled until the sun was just starting to set, finally breaking free of the dense jungle into a clearing that looked almost exactly like the village they'd recently fled, save for the colors of the banners scattered about.

Harold led them to the large house that overlooked the village square, where a solemn woman motioned them to enter. Leaving their shoes and weapons at the entryway, the exhausted, haggard group followed her into the sitting area, where a table had been laid with dinner.

Gratefully taking a seat, Jac half-listened as Myra recited what sounded like formal platitudes until finally they were allowed to eat.

Silence stretched taut over the meal, until the woman finally broke it. "Hibiki, tell me what you saw of Iron Moon."

Myra's brows rose as Jac and Charlaine's furrowed, but before they could ask, Harold said, "I found these three staked out, but before I reached the village to cause a suitable distraction, someone else had already done so. I added my own bits to the chaos then returned to rescue them. I wasn't able to explore further as everything happened faster than I intended. My impression, though, was that they were planning to move out soon. There were gliders waiting and several bags of supplies."

"Forgive me for speaking out of turn," Kimberly said, "but yes, you are correct. The elders—and some of the higher-ranking assassins—were planning to leave. The rest of the village was believed to be safe enough if Harken came for us."

"I see," the woman said, and set down her half-empty bowl of rice. She glanced over the table, then said, "Forgive me. I have failed to give proper introductions. You've met my youngest son. I am Chief Dark Tide, but you may address me as Chief Yugao."

"You use traditional names," Myra said.

Yugao nodded.

"I'm sorry for my ignorance," Jac said, "but what do you mean by traditional names?"

Myra glanced at Yugao, and at her minute nod, replied, "Back when this island was colonized by Benta, they installed their own government and, to make the islands more like Benta and less like our uncivilized selves, they forbade all manner of things, including most dialects and native names.

Even after we were freed, those changes persisted, mostly because those in power prefer it that way so we 'fit in' more with the most influential nations like Benta and Treya Mencee. But some clans and villages still use traditional names, if only in secret. Iron Moon was not one of them."

"Dark Tide has never needed Benta to tell us how to exist, and we certainly don't need to keep mimicking them," Yugao said, mouth curling into a sneer. "Thanks to those Iron Fools, we will get to see what rules and changes Harken will force upon us."

To that, Jac could say nothing. Harken, especially under Sarrica, had a reputation for being fair and kind where few other nations were not, but cruel or kind, a master was a master, and the Triumvirate was not strong enough to stand against the Harken Empire out for blood, especially when they were still recovering from decades of Bentan oppression.

Pantheon and all the ancestors, why hadn't she been able to save Larren?

She drained her cup and bowed her head when Harold—Hibiki—refilled it. "Thank you for saving us." The wine was warm, bitter, made from rice and flavored with flowers. It reminded her of the meal they'd had with Lady Mark at the inn where they'd first been attacked, but this was even better.

Hibiki grunted and nodded at Kimberly. "I think she did most of the work, though I confess I am surprised to see anyone from Iron Moon turn traitor." His eyes shifted to Myra, mouth ticking up. "Anyone else, that is."

Kimberly toyed with the rim of her small wine cup, then took a sip. "I worked hard to be taken seriously by Iron Moon, instead of being one more woman shunted to the side to spend my life serving men and tending children. But I've never enjoyed being a glorified murderer, and I have liked even less this ridiculous vendetta. The more time passed, the more I detested it..." She glanced at Myra, then looked away. "Everything Myra said made sense. Even if he only said them in the hopes of persuading me to help him and betray Iron Mon, that doesn't make the words any less true."

"I'm grateful you were willing to listen and risk so much for someone you didn't even know," Charlaine said.

"We're all grateful," Yugao said. "Bad enough that Iron Moon has angered Harken to the point they have invaded us. I do not want to think how much worse it would be for all of us if we were returning your bodies. But please, you would probably like to rest now. We will be leaving at first

light to take you to Odokka. Ideally it should only take a few days to reach. We do not deserve it, but I would ask of you to speak well of Dark Tide and the rest of the island, for most of us are not Iron Moon. We simply want to be left in peace."

Jac, Charlaine and Myra nodded. "Of course. Thank you again, Chief Yugao," Jac said.

She grunted softly and motioned for Hibiki to show them to their beds.

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He took them first to a bathing room, where they washed quickly and changed into provided sleeping clothes. Several minutes later, they were in a small bedroom, most of the space taken up by the bed for three made up on the floor. The unexpected consideration stung Jac's eyes. She blinked the tears away and went when Myra motioned for them to get into bed. Myra then doused the light before joining them, with Jac in the middle. She slid her arms around him, holding tight as they both trembled and cried. Behind her, Charlaine pressed close, one arm draped across both of them, and she could feel his tears as he nuzzled her hair.

"I was really starting to think we wouldn't make it," Jac whispered. "Soldiers don't usually live long lives, but I didn't ever think that was how I would go."

"It's not how we went," Myra said.

Thank the Pantheon for that. But she would do it all again if that was what it took to save Myra.

She had no idea what was coming next, what would happen when they reunited with Sarrica, but they'd made it this far. They'd make it the rest of the way, all three of them.

Jac gave a small, shaky, but happy laugh.

"What's so funny?" Charlaine grumbled.

"Of all the things I expected to happen to me, winding up with both of you as my lovers never even occurred to me. Well, not seriously, anyway. I honestly wasn't sure what you'd do when I brought the matter up on the boat." She gave another shaky laugh. "I just figured it couldn't hurt to try, especially when there was no guarantee we'd be alive much longer."

She couldn't see him, but Charlaine's smile was in his voice as he replied, "I'm glad you said something. I doubt I ever would have had the nerve or the sense."

"I was too convinced I was being a selfish bastard to have ever asked," Myra said. "It's a good thing we have Jac to be the sensible one."

"I wouldn't go that far," Charlaine said with a snort—and laughed when Jac elbowed him.

Jac shifted, pushing her thigh between Myra's legs, head turning so she could nibble at his jaw. "It just seemed stupid that one of us should walk away when we agreed so vehemently about you. Why argue over who gets to love you when we can both do it?"

Myra swallowed audibly and shifted to take Jac's mouth in a hard, deep kiss that seemed to echo every emotion running through Jac. She returned the kiss heatedly, one of her hands sliding into his hair, the other sliding down and tangling with Charlaine's hand where it still curled over his hip. Myra whimpered and clung as tightly as he could—and whined when they abruptly drew back.

Jac smiled in the dark and together with Charlaine, dragged him into the middle of the bed, settled on either side of him, and set to driving him mad. Jac used her fingers to tease, pinch, stroke, and caress. And Charlaine—fuck, Charlaine had a hungry mouth. Jac couldn't remember a single other lover who'd been as enthusiastic as Charlaine was to put his mouth to every place he could reach and had the skills of a high-end whore. Watching him drive Myra wild was almost better than being the focus of all that ardent attention.

"Charlaine—"

Chuckling, Charlaine looked up briefly, lips swollen with use, mouth wet with spit and Myra's want, some of it trailing down his throat in gleaming drops. His good eye burned and sweat made his skin shine. "Should I stop?"

"I'll kill you if you do," Myra gasped out as Jac pushed a finger inside of him and twisted it. She bent to kiss him, then pulled away to drag Charlaine into a wet, filthy kiss that tasted of all three of them. No other kisses would do, not after this.

Pulling away, Charlaine dragged his tongue across Myra's lips, then nibbled and sucked and licked his way down Myra's throat, back to where'd left off between Myra's thighs, immediately setting Myra to moaning and pleading again.

Jac moaned with him, remembering vividly how it had felt to be spread open and fucked on that tongue. She kissed Myra wet and filthy, sucking on his bottom lip before pulling away. "I want to fuck you. The moment we get home and have a moment to spare, I'm going to spread you open on our bed and fuck you until you scream. I bet you could take the largest cock I own. Would you suck it first, before I stuffed you full?"

Myra tried to reply, but between Jac's fingers and Charlaine's mouth, all he could really do was pant and gasp and beg for more.

Then Jac pulled away and went to retrieve something from her pack. At Myra's curious expression, she held up one of the jars of lotion from the bathhouse. Myra snickered.

Charlaine looked up, a question on his face, but before he could voice it, his breath punched out in surprise, followed by a soft groan as Jac's fingers deftly found the spot they'd been seeking. "Where did you get something slick, Dragon?"

"A bit of theft," Jac replied before curving over Charlaine to trail kisses along his shoulders and down his spine. "Get back to work before Myra starts pouting."

"Bossy," Charlaine muttered, but without heat, and went back to work extracting cries and moans that Myra seemed to surrender eagerly.

He came moments later, shuddering hard and barely muffling a shout in time. Charlaine drew back, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, and mercy of all the gods in existence, Jac loved him like that: mussed and sweaty, lips flushed and swollen, chin and throat wet from eating Myra out, that smug cat expression on his face.

Jac yelped gleefully as Charlaine grabbed her and shoved her onto the bedding next to Myra. She dragged him down and kissed him—then abruptly flipped them over, snickering at the look on Charlaine's face. Myra laughed and kissed him, then rose up to kiss Jac as well.

Tearing away, flushed and panting, eyes bright, Jac took hold of Charlaine's cock and stroked it roughly. "You want my mouth or do you want to fuck me?"

Charlaine groaned. "Is fucking you going to result in complications?"

Jac smirked. "No. While you two were bathing, I was asking Hibiki things."

Myra laughed.

"You did not," Charlaine said, pinching his eyes shut.

"Of course I did," Jac replied, rolling her eyes at his horrified expressions. Honestly, what else was she supposed to have done? "Would you prefer not to be able to fuck me? Because I'd rather have the option. I'm happy to be alive and had every intention of celebrating that fact as soon as possible. I'm only sad I don't have my toys. But that just means I'll have to really enjoy myself when I do have them again."

"I had no idea you were so evil," Charlaine said and grabbed her hips. "Ride me, Dragon."

Jac laughed delightedly, then shifted and rose up so she could take his cock. She lowered herself down slowly, making Charlaine sweat and curse, both of them groaning. Myra rolled to his feet and settled behind her, licking and sucking at her sweaty skin, wrapping one arm around her to tease at her clit, the other coming up to fondle her breasts. As she began to move, Myra matched her rhythm, clinging and rubbing against her.

She moaned as Myra pushed two fingers into her mouth, moaning against her throat at the way she licked and sucked them.

She came shortly thereafter, tearing free of Myra's fingers to let out a groan, head dipping as she shuddered through her climax. Charlaine fucked into her a few more quick, graceless times and came. It took only a few harsh thrusts with his own fingers for Myra to come again, muffling a sleepy groan against Jac's sweaty back.

They sprawled across the mussed bedding, Charlaine in the middle this time, Myra on the side opposite where he'd started. He hooked one leg over Charlaine's, and draped an arm over his chest, tangling with Jac's.

"Thank you again for coming after me," he said into the silence.

Charlaine yawned, eyes slipping shut as he replied, "We'll always come for you, halfwit. Not that we did much in the end."

"You came for me—that's all that matters."

"And now we can all go home," Jac said sleepily. "Whatever happens next, we'll face it together. Though after this morning's attempted execution, nothing else seems nearly as terrifying. Well, except maybe Sarrica, but I'm going to hide behind Myra." She smiled when Myra laughed and shifted a bit closer before finally closing her eyes, taking into dreams the image of the three of them twined together and bathed in scattered moonlight.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As threatened, they were woken in the dark and leaving the village as the sun was little more than a whisper on the horizon. Myra could have easily slept another twelve hours if allowed but couldn't really complain as this was the first step toward finally going home.

Their trek through the jungle, bound for the lake, was slower than the previous day, for which he was grateful, as every single part of his body ached from bruised ribs, hours of being chained to a stake, followed by a long, brutal hike, and of course the enthusiastic sex that had ended their day. He didn't regret it, but his body was reminding him today that he wasn't young anymore and needed to stop acting like it, especially as he was still recovering from a brutal beating.

He shared a look with Charlaine, who was his usual reserved self, save for a tightness around the eyes, and they both scowled at Jac's back. She was merrily hiking alongside Hibiki and chatting a league a minute about archery and related matters, as though the previous day's exertions had never happened.

"She's going to be the death of us."

"After these past Pantheon-damned weeks, that's a death I will cheerfully take," Myra replied with a smile that Charlaine matched. But the happiness faded as Myra added, "Though I won't argue much if Sarrica wrings my neck the moment he sees me."

Charlaine gave him a light shove. "None of this is your fault. If you'll recall, you did everything you could—including sacrificing yourself—to *help*. Stop forgetting that part. Anyway, wringing necks isn't really His Majesty's style. He can't fine us, so he's more likely to hand me and Jac over to Jader. I've never been so grateful that Lesto is retired."

Myra pinched his eyes closed briefly. "Spirits have shown that much mercy."

"Spirits?" Charlaine gave him a look. "You're sounding more and more like you're from here. Usually you say 'Pantheon' and such like the rest of us Harkens."

"Ugh. Being here is bringing it all back. I can't wait to be home. There's nothing I've missed about this place."

Charlaine reached out to grasp his hand and give it a gentle squeeze. "Soon."

Myra smiled and squeezed back, but there was no chance to reply further as they finally cleared the oppressive jungle and crossed a small clearing to a waiting boat.

They all clambered inside. Myra sat with a sigh, groaning as he stretched out tired, aching muscles. What he wouldn't give for a long, hot soak and hours of sleep.

"You look like you're going to your execution all over again," Jac said, dropping down next to him. She looked out over the water, which was cooler than the jungle had been, dark green save where the morning sun turned swaths of it golden, with patches of mist that hadn't yet been burned away. "The lake is so peaceful."

"It shouldn't be," Myra said. "Normally it's busy at all hours of the day and most hours of the night. Ships, boats, gliders... Even when those things are absent in the deadest hours of the night and morning, there is still activity. They say Mother Serpent and her many children live in the depths of the lake, always moving, and the lake itself is never still. When the serpents sleep, trouble comes." Myra sighed and looked out over the water. "At least they're only sleeping. The day Mother Serpent rises from the lake, she will send her children out to devour the unworthy."

"What happens to the worthy?"

"They will be invited to join the Great Serpents in the lake once more. When we die, it's believed we become either children of Mother Serpent or the fish they devour." Myra smiled faintly. "Back in Harken, calling someone a snake is an insult. Here, to call someone a fish is massively insulting and snake is a compliment. It was a very strange thing to get used to when I was settling in Harken."

Jac laughed briefly. "I bet!" She leaned against him, head resting against his shoulder. "I'm sorry your homeland has proven to be an ill fit for you. It can't be easy, feeling like your house isn't your home."

"I found my home. That's all that matters. Soon I'll never have to see this dreary place again." He sighed. "Assuming Sarrica will have anything to do

with me after this disaster. If not for me—"

"We've already had this discussion," Jac said, putting a finger to his lips. "You're not to blame. Stop it."

Myra kissed her finger playfully. "As you wish, my lovely mistress."

"Flattery will get you everything," Jac said with a purr, and leaned in to give him a brief kiss.

Charlaine huffed a laugh. "Like you need *flattery*. Near as I can tell, all you need is an offer."

Jac mock-scowled. "Are you implying my affections are easily and cheaply attained?"

"I value breathing too much to imply any such thing," Charlaine said with a grin. "I'm saying *we're* easy when it comes to you, and you're not likely to refuse."

"If that was true, we might have been doing this longer," Jac said, and leaned across Myra to give Charlaine a kiss as well.

Myra went back to staring at the water, a stretch of green and gold that seemed as endless as the ocean. The quiet was ominous, but it was also a last, gasping breath of peace before they faced Sarrica and whatever punishment he handed down.

He leaned into Charlaine, who held his hand, while Jac's arm looped with his, and together they watched the lake.

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They arrived in Odokka two days later, pulling into port just as a storm broke. They scrambled from the boat to the relative shelter of a loading station, right as lightning struck a single-mast ship not too far away.

Myra shivered and thought longingly of home. At least they were leaving as typhoon season approached, instead of doing all of this while in the middle of the rains. The last thing he needed was to have been dragged through Soldonir in the midst of a typhoon.

"All ready?" Hibiki asked. "Should be a straight path out of here once we turn there—" He pointed to a large warehouse marked with the crest of a cat with a koi in its mouth. "There should be transportation waiting, and we'll be across the city in...well, eventually, with this spirits-cursed weather." He smiled fleetingly.

They all nodded. Myra fell into step behind Charlaine, who followed Kimberly, with Hibiki covering the rear. Jac settled behind Myra, and he only realized then they'd managed to arrange him between them so he was protected. Ordinarily he might have rolled his eyes, but instead he only smiled. He'd arrived in Soldonir a captive; he was returning to Harken—symbolically anyway—protected.

But as they turned the corner, all happy thoughts fled as they stared at the bloodbath the rain had muffled.

Triumvirate soldiers and clan warriors were locked in brutal, bloody battle against Penance Gate. The rain, as hard as it was pounding down, could still not wash away the blood faster than it was covering the ground.

Myra stared in horror. "What's going on?"

"Come on," Kimberly hissed, and Myra went as Charlaine tugged, following them to the wall of a small warehouse where they were out of immediate sight.

Hibiki crouched to pick the lock on the building, while Myra and the others drew their weapons. "There," Hibiki said after a few long, miserable moments. "We'll wait—"

"Traitors!" An Iron Moon warrior ran at them, several other Iron Moon and city guards falling in as they followed where he was looking.

"Damn it," Myra muttered, and then they were under attack. Myra swept out the legs of his assailant and slit his throat, coming up smoothly to stab the next one in the gut.

"Move!" Jac snarled, and Myra fell back just a beat before she lobbed one of her deadly firebombs. Even in the rain, it worked—at least long enough to worsen the chaos and give them a chance to escape.

But they hadn't made it far when they were attacked again, this time entirely by city soldiers. Nearby, he could just hear Kimberly swear. Myra sprinted forward, dropping and rolling at the last minute, coming up in a crouch and taking two of them out at the knees, then spinning neatly and plunging his long knives into the backs of their necks, severing the spine and fatally damaging the rest of the neck. Noise came from behind, and he spun neatly, thrusting at an upward angle and taking his would-be killer in the gut, then knocking him down and finishing the job.

By the time he gained his feet, the rest of the soldiers had been taken care of.

"Let's get out of here," Hibiki said, rain sluicing away the blood covering his face and hands.

Myra nodded and they fell into place again, Charlaine and Jac close by.

They'd managed to make it halfway out of the harbor when a terrifying bellow filled the air, overpowering even the rain. "Enough!"

As Myra and the others cleared a warehouse, they found the source of the bellowing: Captain Chass and several more Penance Gate were facing down a group at least twice their number. The group closed in on Chass's forces—and then the screaming started.

Myra's group ran to help, and once more he found himself spinning and cutting and stabbing, his clothes as wet with blood now as with rain.

It was depressing how easily he fell back into his training. How quickly killing came back to him.

Just as the tide seemed to be turning in their favor, more soldiers arrived, many of them Iron Moon. Myra snarled and renewed his efforts, cutting down one soldier and then surging on to the next. The harbor stones were covered with enough water to reach his ankles—water that was rapidly turning from pink to scarlet.

Someone slammed into him from behind, upsetting his balance and sending him tumbling, one of his knives scattering away to be lost in the water and chaos. Myra swore, climbed to his knees and fended off the woman coming at him. Easier said than done when he was down a blade and facing two, but as she stumbled on an unseen obstacle in the water, he grabbed her head and slammed his knee into her nose. As she reeled back in pain and shock from her suddenly broken nose, he drove his knife into her gut and twisted.

As she collapsed, he stole one of her knives and went on to the next attacker.

Eventually, after what could have been minutes or hours, the circle broke. At its center Riker, Second Lieutenant of Penance Gate, slammed her war hammer into a man's face hard enough to send him flying just outside the circle. Whoever the man was, his death was shocking enough the other combatants froze.

One of them tried to run and was caught in a matter of steps by Chass, who swung his war hammer, breaking the figure's arm. Myra froze, recognizing the man's voice as he screamed in pain. He stared in disbelief, jerking free of the hands that tried to move him along as Chass prowled to where Ryan had fallen. Behind him, Penance Gate made swift work of securing the few still standing.

Chass motioned for Ryan to be picked up, and two Penance Gate surged forward to lift and hold him. Moving in so they were only a pace or so apart, Chass removed the faceplate of his helmet, hooking it onto his shoulder. He looked Ryan up and down, as though examining a horse that he'd been told was promising but was fit only for the slaughter house. "Are you finished? I told you resisting me was pointless and you'd only wind up awash in the blood of your friends."

Ryan spat blood in his face. "You may kill us, but Iron Moon will have the final victory."

"No, they won't," Chass replied. "Your numbers here in the city have been reduced to laughable. I've spilled the intestines of half of them myself. Your craven mother was captured hours ago. And as we speak, my first lieutenant is leading the second half of my forces to arrest your village and drag your worthless brother to join you on your trip to the Penance Realms. Or to be snake food, I suppose."

Spitting more blood in his face, Ryan replied, "You're as evil as they say."

Chass laughed. "You say that like it's supposed to be some revelation meant to put me on the path to righteousness. Do you think we call ourselves Penance Gate because we're kind and gentle? Penance must be paid in blood and pain, Iron Moon. Perhaps removing your head will spill enough of your blood to turn you into a serpent rather than a fish. But I doubt it." He motioned curtly to nearby soldiers. "Take him and the rest of this sorry lot away. One of you run to tell His Majesty the job is done."

"Yes, Captain," three soldiers chorused, two of them moving to help those holding Ryan, the third vanishing into the rain.

"You bastard!" Ryan snarled as he was taken away. "You brutal, heartless bastard!"

Fury like Myra had never seen filled Chass's face, and he once more closed the distance between them, swinging his gauntleted fist into Ryan's face, shattering his nose, the spikes shredding his face. Hauling him up by his bloody tunic, Chass said, "I am many things, all of them terrible, but unfortunately for everyone, a bastard is not one of them. You should know, given you murdered my brother and made me Crown Prince of Gaulden. Be grateful that His Imperial Majesty has dictated you be brought to him alive, else I would show you just how brutal and heartless I can be."

Ryan spat blood in his face a third time but Chass ignored it as easily as he had the first two times. "I may be a killer, but at least I don't thrive on it."

Chass's lips curled. "You're a violent cult that survives by committing murder for money. That is literally the definition of thriving on killing."

"I hope you die alone, miserable, and completely forgotten."

Chass smiled coldly. "At least I won't be a fish eaten by a snake and never missed." He motioned to the soldiers holding Ryan. "Get him out of my sight." Chass turned away and bellowed out, "Darkness is dull!"

The rest of Penance Gate roared back, "Pleasure in pain!"

Chass gestured sharply to the arrested soldiers. "Lieutenant Riker, see the prisoners are locked up tight, then sweep the harbor for any remaining problems we might have missed. Inform the imperial army they'll want to increase their patrol numbers."

"Yes, Captain."

Leaving her to it, Chass removed his helmet and tilted his face up to the rain, letting it wash away the blood and spittle caked on his face. When he was done, he handed the helmet off to a waiting aide, then held out his arms so two more could remove his gauntlets. "Thank you. Go find dry clothes and good beer."

"Yes, Captain!" The aides departed, and Chass strode over to Myra and the others in that predatory way of his, like a fierce bone-eater who'd just dropped a corpse on the rocks far below and was now landing to eat the shattered pieces.

He stopped a couple of paces short, his eyes falling on Myra, as vibrant as a summer sky, vivid against his blood red tunic and the tempest around them. "So you managed not to die."

Myra bowed his head. "I wanted to apologize, Captain. This is—"

"Spare me apologies that are not owed," Chass interrupted. "I find them tedious." He shifted his gaze to Charlaine and Jac. "I see the little *flittas* are still alive as well. I'd congratulate you, but I suspect it's mostly luck."

Jac scowled. "You—"

Charlaine grabbed her and hauled her back. Jac shot him a resentful look.

Smirking, Chass replied, "Don't be offended, Sergeant. It's mostly luck for all of us."

Charlaine grunted in agreement. "What are you doing cleaning up docks, Captain? That's a bit below your pay."

"I serve the High King howsoever he bids me," Chass replied. "The docks have been particularly problematic, as you saw. But they are no longer. Thank you for the assistance. Now you had best move along before another fight breaks out somewhere." His eyes flicked back to Myra. "I hear His Majesty especially is not faring well without his precious *kustari* around."

With that, he did a neat military turn and strode off, bellowing for some poor sergeant to attend him.

"That man is exhausting," Charlaine said. "What were those words he used? He called us that before—flee-tahs. At that, I'm not sure I want to know."

Jac smiled faintly. "I don't know *flittas*, but *kustari* is Gaulden. Allen has called Myra that too. It's a type of...minor diety or something, I think, that protects the homes of the pious and keeps away chaos and strife. He said it's also often used as a compliment for people like housekeepers, secretaries and such, who excel at keeping a house or business running smoothly. There are versions specifically for ships and crops too. Gaulden has all kinds of them. Little spirits, that's what Allen called them. A *kustari* is a little spirit of order and peace."

Myra stared in surprise, cheeks darkening slightly as he smiled faintly. "I didn't know that one. But I do know *flittas*, one of my undersecretaries mentioned them when he was worried about his sister's ship, which was two months late returning to port. It's another of their little spirits, but *flittas* are spirits who guide the lost home."

"Leave it to Captain Chass to make compliments sound like insults," Jac said with a laugh, and kissed Myra's cheek.

"He's terrifying, even when extending compliments," Hibiki replied. "Come on, let's go before we have to deal with him again. Mother Serpent spare me." He led the way out of the port and down a couple of streets to where he secured a carriage.

Myra closed his eyes as they traveled through the city, focused solely on not throwing up from the stress of the pending reunion with Sarrica. He closed his eyes and bid his stomach behave just a little longer.

Charlaine and Jac tried to comfort with words and touches, but they must have been at least as anxious as him. The hour of reckoning was moments away, and they had no idea what their future held.

But at least they had a future. That was more than he'd dared hope for just a few days ago.

When the carriage finally stopped, Myra didn't give himself any more time to panic. He threw open the door, nearly knocking over the coachman. He apologized profusely, then turned to Hibiki, Kimberly and Yugao. "We'll go speak with His Majesty first, if you do not mind."

"By all means," Kimberly said. "I'd rather rest and find some food, fortify myself before I am forced to meet this emperor I was supposed to kill."

Charlaine beckoned a nearby gawking guard and bid him take Kimberly and the others to the kitchens. Then he rejoined Myra and Jac, and together the three of them entered the manor.

It must have belonged to one of the Seven, or a family member of one of them. Nobody else could have afforded to live in such a ridiculously large house. Soldonir houses usually weren't built so large, and they certainly weren't built with so many stories, at least not this way. That was just asking for trouble when typhoon season came.

Inside, everything was chaos. Myra almost laughed at the familiar panicked, terrified look on the faces of the bustling servants and various persons waiting in the hall. A harried individual in Harken finery was standing behind an improvised desk, arguing with a Triumvirate noble about an appointment.

Myra peeked through the slightly open doors that led to an enormous room, some sort of meeting hall that had been converted into an office. He could see secretaries bustling around, Fathoms Deep and Penance Gate soldiers stationed along the walls...

In the midst of all the chaos, Sarrica's voice carried above all the rest, snarling and snapping like a leopard with a thorn in its paw. Every now and then, Myra could also hear Lesto's voice, but even he wasn't having much luck in calming Sarrica down.

His eyes stung. Damn it, he'd *missed* Sarrica. There weren't many days in the past twenty years that they hadn't spent at least part of every day together. He'd spent a lifetime working with Sarrica, learning all his preferences, how best to get certain things accomplished... He missed gently teasing Sarrica, sharing looks about difficult guests, reprimanding him for not doing something and watching the awe on the faces of those unfamiliar with their relationship.

He missed watching Sarrica: when he bickered with Lesto, fussed over first Nyle, then later Kamir and now Lady Genna. His comradarie with Jader, Rene, his kindness and genuine admiration for Lord Tara. The way he levied a fine on a cocky noble that he thought was a hard slap on the wrist, completely unaware he'd just bankrupted the poor bastard. Myra always sent the official notice to the courts and adjusted the fine to a reasonable, if still painful, amount.

He missed seeing how kind Sarrica could be, how madly and openly in love with Allen he was, the way he continued working when most others would have quit. How much he *cared*, about everything, even in the face of people who were quick with demands and criticism, and rarely bothered with praise or gratitude.

It didn't matter who condemned him, what people said, or how many times they beat him or tried to kill him—he would make the choice to save Sarrica's life over and over again.

Damn it, he wanted to go home.

Sarrica yelled at someone again, and Myra looked around the room, recognized that strained tone in his voice. The halfwit probably hadn't stopped to eat or even rest properly since Myra had been gone, and Lesto was no better most of the time.

Myra turned to the harried clerk. "Has anyone brought His Majesty tea recently?"

"He hasn't asked for it," the clerk replied, in a tone that questioned Myra's sanity.

Myra didn't roll his eyes, but only barely. "Send someone to the kitchens and tell them to prepare a full service. Strong black tea and hearty food to go with it—something with red meat, if possible, lamb especially, and make sure it's heavily spiced. Also a pot of coffee and some sweets for Lord Lesto. Do it now."

When a servant had been sent off, Myra turned to the red-faced man who looked ready to explode. "What is this about an appointment?"

"I am the Duke of—"

"Is your name on the list?" Myra interrupted.

"I do not need—"

Myra smoothly took the papers from the clerk's slightly trembling hand, skimmed it, and said, "Lord Carroway, Duke of Heron Bay? You were rescheduled for an afternoon appointment."

"I beg your pardon? I do not get rescheduled."

Looking up, Myra replied coolly, "Are you saying your time is more valuable than His Imperial Majesty's? Or did you want me to cancel the appointment since you cannot make the new time?"

The man puffed up like one of the head cook's cats when they were fighting over scraps. "Who are you?"

Myra ignored him, returning the papers to the clerk and motioning to the two Fathoms Deep guards who'd noticed who was talking and were trying not to grin. "Escort His Grace from the premises. If he wishes to schedule a new appointment with His Majesty, he will have to send a secretary or servant to arrange it."

He took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders, and with a last look at Jac and Charlaine for reassurance, turned on his heel, pushed open one of the doors and stepped into the room.

"I gave orders I was not to be disturbed for any reason," Sarrica snarled, not bothering to turn around. "The only way you're going to live is if you've brought me something to drink."

Lesto smiled from the high-backed chair in which he was sitting.

Myra swallowed. "T-tea is on the way, Your Majesty."

"Thank you, Myra," Sarrica said, and handed off a piece of paper to a waiting secretary.

Then he dropped all the other papers he was holding, causing the other secretaries to cry out in dismay, and whipped around. "Myra!" Before Myra could form a reply, Sarrica strode across the room and swept him up into a tight embrace. "You're alive."

"Barely," Myra choked out, wincing slightly when his ribs protested the squeezing.

Sarrica immediately let him go. He frowned as he looked Myra up and down. "You've lost weight, and I'm guessing you've a bruised rib or two." He took Myra's chin between his thumb and fingers, turning his head every which way. "Who beat you? Have we arrested them yet? Lesto—"

"I'm sure if they haven't already been arrested, they will be shortly," Lesto replied, uncurling from his chair like a leopard that had decided it was time to seek out dinner. He glanced past them to Jac and Charlaine, who hovered in the doorway, and gestured sharply for them to enter. "You are lucky I'm no longer High Commander and that Jader is too busy to deal with you himself." His eyes swept over them, studying every bruise, cut, and scrape, but lingering on the lurid bruises around all their wrists. "You were manacled. Why?"

Jac winced. "You really don't want—"

"If I didn't want to know, I wouldn't ask," Lesto snapped. "You're in enough trouble, Sergeant. I suggest you not add to that by telling me what I do and do not want to know."

"Apologies, Your Grace," Jac said, then glowered at him. "Wait a minute. You're not High Commander anymore, and I'm not Fathoms Deep.

You can't boss me around."

Lesto narrowed his eyes, but before he could respond, Sarrica said, "She's not wrong."

Huffing, Lesto said, "I have every right to demand explanations. I am still in command of Fathoms Deep and we oversee the protection of the imperial family. These two—"

"Are not yours to punish anymore," Sarrica said. "Lesto, knock it off. They're exhausted and terrified and your Arseni temper isn't helping."

Lesto shoved him away. "Shut up." He strode over to Jac and Charlaine. "You're a pair of damned fools." Then he embraced them tightly. "It's good to see you alive and well. We were terrified we'd have to send Allen and Kamir bad news."

All three of them flinched. As Sarrica let Myra go, he asked, "How is His Majesty? I am so very sorry I failed him. I'll never be able to atone for that."

"You did everything you could, Myra," Sarrica said gruffly. "It's not your fault. You would be the first to say that to anyone else in your position." He turned to the rest of the room, sweeping his arm out and toward the door. "Everybody out. That door is not to open again until I am the one opening it. Anyone who disobeys me will find themselves regretting it sorely."

Everyone fled, the doors closing with a bang.

The moment the room was utterly silent, Sarrica bellowed, "What in the Pantheon were you thinking! All three of you were so damned busy trying to play hero that you nearly got yourselves killed, and how exactly did you expect that to help anything?"

"If I hadn't gone—" Myra stopped when Sarrica motioned sharply.

Sarrica jabbed him in the chest. "You should have trusted me to take care of the matter." He rounded on Jac and Charlaine. "And you two! You're fucking bodyguards. Your job is to *stay where you are*, not run off like figures in a bad play—"

"If we hadn't gone after him, Myra would be dead," Jac said. "I know I've failed in my duties and let everyone down. Especially Allen. I'll accept my punishment for that without complaint. But I won't be sorry I tried to save Myra."

"Tried to save?" Lesto asked. "What—" He broke off as a knock came at the door.

Sarrica glared murderously, but before he could go level fines or order some poor servant to the stocks for a few hours, Myra said, "That's the tea."

"Fine." Sarrica turned and stomped off to a chair next to the one that Lesto reclaimed.

When the tea had been set out and the servants gone again, Sarrica resumed glaring at them. "Tell me everything."

Myra drew a breath, let it out slowly, and recounted everything that had happened to him from the moment he'd been taken away. By the time he'd finished his portion, at least up until he reunited with Jac and Charlaine, Sarrica's face was stormier than ever. Lesto rested a hand on his arm, but even that was barely enough to keep Sarrica in his seat.

Charlaine recounted the first part of his and Jac's tale, and Jac took up the story from where they reunited with Myra.

When they were finished, Sarrica surged to his feet. "I want Iron Moon \_\_\_"

Lesto yanked him back down. "I believe Captain Chass has the rounding up of Iron Moon well in hand. I'm actually rather impressed he's left them alive as ordered. I would have been hard pressed to blame him for any 'accidents'. He has more right to kill them than anyone else here."

Sarrica ran a hand down his face. "I wouldn't have blamed him either."

Jac asked hesitantly, "Is Lady Mark all right?"

"Yes," Lesto said. "We connected with her not long after landing. She is going to be appointed Acting Margrave until a more suitable, native individual is found."

Myra stared, swallowed. "So...so you are taking the Triumvirate into the Empire?"

Sarrica lifted one shoulder. "They broke a long list of international laws, and I am within my rights to do as I please, given the blood that is on their hands. But I am not going to punish the whole for the crimes of a few. Unless they give me cause to do otherwise, these nations will be given the same conditions and offer that all who are brought into Harken are given."

"That must have everyone anxious," Myra said. Even he still had a kneejerk reaction to such an idea, given what had happened the last time someone had shown up to claim Soldonir as their own.

But Harken wasn't Benta or Treya Mencee, to pillage and take and reshape. There were overarching laws that everyone in the empire was expected to obey, and most royalty and nobility learned Harken, but by and large the kingdoms were left to govern themselves.

The provisionary period was two years in which the kingdom in question was expected to follow certain imperial laws, could incorporate or ignore others as they chose—but with the understanding they'd have to adopt them upon formally joining—and decide if joining Harken was what they wanted to do. If they decided to part ways, the exit was worked out between the High Throne and the kingdom's rulers.

Only Cartha had ever decided against joining Harken. Not every kingdom had joined easily or quickly, but none of them had ever been forced, though Tricemore had an uglier history than most regarding joining Harken.

"You would be well-suited to the role, given your unique history and ties to both the Triumvirate and Harken." Sarrica said.

Myra frowned, half-afraid of what he'd missed. "To what role?"

"Margrave," Lesto drawled.

"W-what?" Myra shook his head vehemently back and forth. "No, please no. I—" He pinched his eyes closed to will away the sudden sting, then opened them and looked at Sarrica. "I was happy being your secretary. I don't want a title."

Sarrica smiled. "I admit it would not be the same without you, not after all the years you've been putting up with me."

Myra swallowed. "Does—does that mean I haven't lost my job?"

Lesto's sharp bark of laughter drowned out Sarrica's reply, and he completely ignored the scathing look Sarrica sent him. "Harkenesten would collapse if our esteemed High King lost his High Secretary."

"I should leave *you* here," Sarrica retorted, kicking Lesto's ankle.

"Ha!" Lesto kicked him back. "My spouse would have something to say about that."

"Probably 'thank you for the peace and quiet.""

Lesto snorted. "No, that's what *your* spouse would say."

Myra laughed quietly, eyes stinging anew. He'd missed this, had been certain he'd never enjoy it again. More than anything, being in Sarrica's midst while he teased and bantered with his family was home.

Turning back to Myra, Sarrica said, "I will especially need you as a consult as we start sorting out and repairing the damage done by the Seven. I do not think that mode of rule should continue." He scratched his chin. "I leave it up to the Triumvirate to decide what *would* be best. But that is a problem for later. For the present, I'm not quite done being angry with you three over your careless, reckless, *stupid* behavior. You know better!"

Myra reached out and took Jac's hand and offered Charlaine a smile, wishing he could move them all to the sofa where he could sit in the middle and hold them both.

"Ordinarily such disobedience would result in a prejudicial discharge," Sarrica said, levying a grim look at Charlaine and Jac. "Worse, since you're both imperial bodyguards and fled in the aftermath of an assassination attempt and your actions could have resulted in a nasty diplomatic mess."

"We understand," Charlaine replied.

Sarrica sighed, his anger dulling. "I cannot say I would have acted much different in your positions, and your stories prove that had you not acted so, Myra would in fact be dead by now. I must also take into account that your actions have brought Dark Tide to my attention, and their contributions to future happenings will be crucial. So while I cannot let you go unpunished, you can stop looking like you're going to be thrown out on the street."

Jac slumped, and Myra could just barely hear her muffled laugh-sob.

Charlaine eyed Sarrica and Lesto warily.

Myra commiserated, because they were suddenly looking entirely too pleased with themselves for his comfort.

"What *is* our punishment?" Charlaine asked.

Lesto's smile was evil. "You, Lieutenant, are being temporarily assigned to Penance Gate, there to keep an eye on Captain Chass. He is obviously in severe distress from the both the loss of his brother and this mission, not to mention that he was deeply worried about Allen when we left. When he

returns home, he has a drastically different life waiting for him. We're concerned about what all the anguish and stress might do to him—or drive him to do. So you are tasked with shadowing him, and protecting him where necessary, even if that means protecting him from himself. He has not yet been informed. We will be doing that shortly."

Charlaine groaned. "Could I just have the prejudicial discharge instead?" "No," Sarrica said with entirely too much relish.

"But what about Kamir?" Charlaine asked. "I'm supposed to be his bodyguard."

"He's married to the High Commander; he'll manage without you a little longer, even if you are both sad about it."

Charlaine buried his face in his hands, several colorful invectives filling the room.

"Why is Chass worried about Allen?" Jac asked. "They're estranged, to my understanding."

"Be that as it may," Sarrica replied, "Captain Chass has never been anything but fiercely loyal to Allen. And Penance Gate is fiercely loyal to Chass. Right now that could be a problem. So it's vital we have someone to watch him, protect him, and intervene if you think he is going too far or is in danger of breaking. Understand, Lieutenant?"

Charlaine bowed his head. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Good. You have tomorrow to recuperate and will begin your duties the day after that." Sarrica turned to Jac. "Given your reckless behavior and brash decisions, I think you would be served to take on some authority, Sergeant. Starting the day after tomorrow, you will be put in charge of all military personnel in this building until our departure."

"What!" Jac said, the word coming out shrilly. "I'm just a sergeant!"

"Well let's see if you can earn a promotion," Lesto said.

Jac wilted in her seat, but after a moment straightened and set her shoulders. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Sarrica smiled. "Well, now that's taken care of, I think you three are dismissed for the day. Hopefully someone will have had the sense to prepare rooms for you."

Myra rose and bowed. "Thank you, Your Majesty. If you don't mind, I had a question—when we arrived, Chass was arresting people on the docks, including my brother Ryan. Something he said made it sound like the rest of Iron Moon would soon be arrested as well."

"Yes, all of Iron Moon is being rounded up. They're the ones who actively broke the treaty, and we've reason to believe they're a danger to the Triumvirate as well. Your family is going to be executed," Sarrica said. "I am sorry. They're your family."

"I killed my own father," Myra replied quietly. "They haven't been my family for a long time. You owe me no apologies. I was only confirming that was their fate."

"Yes, and you are forbidden from attending the executions. That is not something you should have to see, and I do not trust them not to try to do something to you."

Myra started to argue, but then closed his mouth and gave another bow. "Yes, Your Majesty."

Sarrica rose and hugged him again, mindful of his ribs. "Go rest. The day after tomorrow is soon enough to be my secretary again."

Out in the hallway, they spoke briefly with Kimberly and the others before they were summoned to speak with Sarrica and Lesto.

A servant stepped forward and shyly said they would guide the three up to their rooms, apologizing along the way that there were only two for the moment, as all the other rooms were occupied and they hadn't had a chance to move anyone.

"That won't be necessary," Myra said as they were led into the first room, which was meant to be shared by him and Charlaine. "We can all three use this room. Please inform whomever needs to know."

The servant frowned but forbore comment, only bowed and murmured that the housekeeper would be informed.

"Did we just cause a scandal?" Jac asked.

"It's generally frowned upon for men and women to share spaces if they are not blood relations or married," Myra replied. "That wasn't always true, but it's one more change forced on us by Benta that has never gone away."

"Well, I'm sure Sarrica will ensure all of that starts to change. Look how hard he's working to ensure the Islands are treated properly should they join Harken, and that they're representing themselves throughout. Mark is a good fit for Acting Margrave until they can find someone who's actually from here. She'll ensure the people here are treated fairly and heard and train her replacement. But I've had enough talk of politics." Sitting down on a stool, she set to unlacing her boots, throwing them aside when she finished. Then she stood and started working on her clothes.

Normally Myra would have been more than happy to enjoy the view and show his appreciation, but right then he was too exhausted. Not to mention filthy from all the fighting. Fortunately, it looked like baths had already been arranged, though there was only two since Jac had been expected to take a different room.

But just as Jac finished stripping and Myra and Charlaine were half done, a sharp rapping came from the door. Charlaine motioned he'd get it, and Jac slipped behind a changing screen.

Servants came in with a third tub and bucket after bucket of water.

"Thank you," Myra said when they were done, and locked the door once they'd gone.

Jac immediately threw herself into one of the baths. "Oh, merciful Pantheon."

Charlaine shook his head as he settled into one of the other tubs. "You act like you didn't have a good bath back at Dark Tide's home."

"I will always act like each bath is the greatest bath," Jac replied as she set to cleaning. "I hate being smelly, especially when killing people has been involved."

"Fair enough. Pantheon knows a bath is the first thing I do when I get back from a mission," Charlaine said.

"The only thing better will be that food I'm going to devour in a few minutes."

Charlaine snickered. "You and your food."

Myra yawned as he settled into his own bath. He scrubbed through his shorn hair, sad all over again that it was gone. He cleaned himself quickly, then simply enjoyed the water until it cooled.

They climbed out and pulled on dressing robes that had been laid out for them—including clothes brought from Jac's room—and sat to eat the meal that was waiting for them. Though it was barely dinner time, Myra finished eating and promptly crawled into bed.

Charlaine slid in one side, Jac the other, and Myra kissed them both before settling more comfortably and closing his eyes. "It's hard to believe it's over. And that we haven't been arrested or thrown out."

"Oh, I'm pretty sure I'll still wind up arrested," Charlaine muttered. "Or dead."

Jac laughed. "If you can survive everything we just went through, you can survive Captain Chass."

Myra didn't bother to open his eyes as he replied, "At least Captain Chass or one of his subordinates will kill you quickly."

Charlaine heaved a sigh, but Myra could hear the smile in his voice. "Thanks for that reassurance. Still, at least I'm not being put in charge of all military personal in Sarrica's temporary home."

"Ugh, don't remind me." Jac dragged the blanket up, and moments later all three were asleep.

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"I'm fine," Charlaine said, waving off the alarmed looks of the attendants who opened the doors to Sarrica's commandeered manor. "It looks worse than it is." He walked stiffly inside and breathed a sigh of relief as the doors closed behind him.

Officially, his day was done. Thank the Pantheon, because twelve hours with Chass felt like twelve years. He'd only ever interacted with Chass in bursts. Being with him for hours on end...

Pantheon, the man was intense. He was like a bottled storm, and someone had done a poor job of sealing it. But he was also suffering intense pain, even the densest, most disinterested person in the world could see that. Charlaine had thought at first that Sarrica was overreacting about Chass needing a shadow, but he was starting to think that one wasn't enough.

But Chass was off duty the rest of the day, and Mark had promised to keep an eye on him while Charlaine got some rest. Which he sorely needed, because babysitting Chass left him three times more exhausted than anything else he'd ever done.

Pantheon, he couldn't wait to return to his normal duties. Being thrust back into his old life had made one thing clear though: he much preferred his new life of guarding Kamir and struggling to fill his free time. Especially now that there wouldn't be much, if any, struggling at all.

If the past several weeks had made nothing else clear, it was that he was happy to muddle along with his career as second, even third, place.

Yawning, Charlaine trudged his way down the hall to Sarrica's office.

He was distracted from his mission as he saw Hibiki coming down the hall. Lady Yugao and the rest of Dark Tide who'd come with them to Odokka had returned to clan lands to begin speaking with all the others. Hibiki remained in Odokka as a liaison, though according to Jac both he and Kimberly were thinking of traveling to Harken. Permanently or temporarily, he wasn't certain. "Merry afternoon."

"Merry afternoon," Hibiki replied. "You look like you had a fun day."

"Fun is one word for it, certainly. How are you?"

"I had a favor to ask, actually, if you don't mind."

"I'm at least willing to hear you out and consider it," Charlaine said with a smile. "What do you need?"

"My mother has granted me permission to travel abroad. With all the changes happening here, I thought visiting Harken for an extended time would be prudent. The High Commander has said I might join the army as an adjunct and consultant, if you or Jac would provide a recommendation."

Charlaine's smile widened. "Of course, I can do that gladly. Did he say whether he wanted it written or verbal?"

"He said verbal would suffice."

"Sounds like he just wants it as a formality, in case anyone back home tries to whine or fuss. Is Kimberly going as well?"

"Yes, though not as an adjunct. She wants to go simply as a student and is working the matter out with His Majesty and Myra."

"I'm glad you're both doing so well, given all you did to help us." Charlaine clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll hunt down the High Commander tomorrow and give the recommendation."

"Thank you."

Charlaine nodded, squeezed his arm lightly, and excused himself. He continued on down the hall to the clerk station outside's Sarrica's office.

"His Majesty is not here at the moment," the man at the desk said, eyes widening as he took in Charlaine. It wasn't the usual clerk who knew Charlaine by now. "Um. Can I make you an appointment, Lieutenant?"

Charlaine waved a hand. "I'm actually here to see Myra. I'm Second Lieutenant Charlaine."

The man flushed, his eyes somehow getting even wider. Pantheon, what rumors were already flying? On second thought, Charlaine didn't want to know. "Oh! My apologies, I should have realized. Go right on in, please."

Smiling to hopefully ease some of the man's flustered state, Charlaine then slipped into the office and closed the door quietly behind him.

Myra was at his desk, bent over what looked like a weak imitation of the enormous, impossibly complicated schedule chart he maintained back home. He had a pen in one hand, the fingers of the other skimming along

the paper, his teeth dug into his lower lip. His short hair looked like fingers had run through it several times, and he had the faintest flush from the wafting steam of the tea at one elbow.

Charlaine cleared his throat as he pushed away from the door and headed across the room.

Myra's head shot up, but his welcoming smile dropped as he took in Charlaine's face. "What happened to you?" He rose and moved around the desk, meeting Charlaine halfway and gently cupping his face. "Did Captain Chass do this? I will knock—"

"He did, but it was an accident. A matter of bad timing, that's all." Honestly, the biggest surprise was how upset Chass had been. Charlaine had been accidentally whacked so many times, he'd lost count. To him, it was usually amusing more than anything else. Chass, though, had seemed genuinely distressed, for all he'd tried to bury it beneath his usual hostility and derision.

"How does someone *accidentally* punch you in the eye?" Myra snapped.

Charlaine chuckled. "Spoken like an assassin rather than a soldier. We accidentally maim each other all the time." He kissed Myra softly, savoring the warmth and softness of his lips, the hint of jasmine tea that clung to them. "We were arguing, but the argument had ended. He turned away to address another matter. There was a group of recently arrested soldiers nearby, and one of them broke free and threw something at Lieutenant Aria. It went wide. Chass turned to block it at the same time I stepped forward to do the same. My face and his hand collided. I'm just glad he wasn't wearing his spiked gauntlets at the time." He kissed Myra again. "Stop pouting. Chass was also the one who treated it with remarkable skill. It doesn't even really hurt. He seemed vastly more upset than I was about it. I'm fine, except not very pretty to look at right now."

"Oh, be quiet." Myra gave him a bitey kiss. "You know perfectly well nobody looks at your face anyway."

"Stop making jokes about my ass," Charlaine said with a growl, grabbing handfuls of Myra's ass, pulling him flush and treating himself to a much more thorough kiss.

The sound of laughter made them jump apart before Charlaine registered it was Jac snickering. "Don't stop on my account. What happened to your

face?"

Sighing, Charlaine retold his story, rolling his eye when Jac just laughed and laughed.

Myra poked him. "You didn't want sympathy from me, so don't huff that Jac isn't giving you any."

"Why didn't I have the sense to pick *nice* lovers?" Charlaine asked, shaking his head and laughing when they pressed close on either side of him and reminded him just how nice they could and would be later.

The sound of the door opening drew them apart, but there was no hiding what they'd been doing as Sarrica and Lesto strode in. Their brows rose, and they exchanged a silent moment of conversation before Lesto huffed and Sarrica laughed. "No fair misappropriating my office when I can't."

Myra's face burned as he hastened back to his desk. "My apologies, Your Majesty. It won't—"

Lesto's sharp laughter cut him off. He leaned against the edge of Myra's desk and turned to cast him an amused look. "Of course it will happen again. Sarrica certainly doesn't restrain himself."

"I'm the High King, and do we want to discuss how often *your* office door gets locked when Shemal drops by to visit?"

Lesto gave him a look that had both Charlaine and Jac snapping to attention, even though he had not been High Commander for years now.

Sarrica just poured wine and handed a cup to Lesto. "So who won that bet going around about Charlaine?"

Charlaine groaned and buried his face in his hands. "Why did I ever give up being the man everybody ignored? Why does the *High King* know about this stupid bet? Why is everyone in the Harken Empire placing bets on my ass and what I like in the bedroom? I hate all of you."

"You should just appreciate what the Pantheon blessed you with," Jac said with a snicker, and kissed his cheek before whispering in Charlaine's ear, "I'm certainly going to appreciate reaming it once we're upstairs."

"Stop that!" Charlaine hissed, grateful his tunic was long enough to hide how eagerly he was anticipating her appreciation.

Myra quirked a brow at them as Sarrica and Lesto laughed. Jac just winked.

Motioning to the door, Sarrica said, "You three can—"

He broke off as someone knocked briskly.

"Come in," Sarrica called with a sigh. "I miss *my* office."

It didn't take the longing that flitted across his face or the faint smudge of shadows in his eyes to know that the office was the least of the things he missed. Charlaine could still remember the early days when Sarrica had returned to the palace for good, resigning from the army and leaving it wholly to Lesto's command. He'd been a caged leopard at first and looked for any excuse to leave the palace. Gradually he'd settled, and even more slowly seemed content, but even Charlaine realized he hadn't been absolutely, completely *happy* until Allen had come along. Sarrica and Nyle had loved each other, but that love hadn't endured well in the confines of palace life, as hard as they'd tried.

One of the double doors opened, and a terrified-looking clerk scurried in. "Your Majesty, Prince Chass has arrived."

"Show him in," Sarrica replied and poured a third cup of wine.

Charlaine and Jac bowed. "We should get out of your way."

"No, you're right where you should be," Sarrica said. "You are his bodyguard and voice of reason, after all. This will be relevant to you, and Jac will need to know of the changes taking place in her domain."

Jac didn't groan, but the look on her face was opinion enough.

Lesto chuckled, but before he could comment, Chass strode into the room.

In all the years Charlaine had served as a soldier and mercenary, he didn't think he'd ever seen Chass dressed as a prince rather than a soldier. With many nobles who served in the military, it was hard to forget their station. Chass, however, it was hard to remember. He was a mercenary through and through, carved for battle the way Allen was shaped for politics.

Seeing him in civilian dress was decidedly strange. Like Sarrica and Lesto, he wore more traditional Harken clothing. His pants were fitted and striped cream and dark green, with a knee-length tunic in a lighter shade of green and embroidered all over with white-and-gold plumeria, the hems embroidered with bands of gold, silver, and dark green. The tunic was

belted with a cream sash embroidered with a fine gold geometric star pattern. Around his neck was the famous Gaulden gold torc. He also wore a fine gold chain from which hung a teardrop sapphire. It glittered and cast light upon the walls as the sun struck it.

He swept a beautifully elegant bow and remained that way as he said, "Your Majesty."

"Have some wine, Your Highness," Sarrica said, and handed it to him as Chass rose. "Thank you for coming so promptly."

"My honor to serve," Chass replied, accepting the cup. "Thank you."

Sarrica nodded and motioned for him to follow as he took a seat on a nearby sofa. "As always, Penance Gate has been absolutely vital to our success. We would not be where we are in this matter without your unique skills and efficiency. I overrode Jader's advice that you should not be brought along, given your personal investment, but I do understand how you feel, at least to some degree." His fingers tightened around his cup, a shadow passing over his face. "Pantheon knows I was not particularly merciful to those who killed Nyle. Now that matters have quieted down, however, I should be sending you home."

Chass's brow furrowed. "But..."

"This morning I received some interesting reports and a letter from Allen. We have good reason to believe that King Desmond is in danger—if not now, then soon. You are crown prince, and there's no one left to take the Gaulden throne should you die, so by all rights you should not be involved, but Allen has specifically requested that you be sent to Benta to secure Desmond—by whatever means necessary. Either stabilize the problems there or drag him out of Benta and take him to Harkenesten. You leave in the morning." Sarrica's eyes flicked to Charlaine. "Lieutenant Astor will continue to accompany you, and he will be reporting to me." He shifted his gaze back to Chass. "Your safety is his only priority; I expect you to obey him. I'm not stupid enough to order you to stay completely out of battles, but show more self-preservation than is generally your want. Am I understood, Highness?"

"As my High King commands," Chass replied with another bow, shock filling his face briefly before he managed to school his expression.

"I mean it, Highness. Your parents and Allen have suffered enough. There's good reason for the tense relationship between us, reasons I've not forgotten, but I cannot overlook that you have always been unfailingly loyal —especially to Allen. I expect you to continue that loyalty by keeping yourself alive.

Chass saluted. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Jac, coordinate with Penance Gate on anything they need regarding their departure that we haven't thought of."

"Yes, Majesty."

"Then if the rest of you will all leave us, I would like a private word with His Highness and Lieutenant Charlaine."

Lesto gave Sarrica a look but said nothing, only led the way out of the office and closed the doors and locked them once everybody was out.

Sarrica said, "Sit, both of you."

They obeyed, and Charlaine didn't think he was imagining that Chass felt as leery as he did. No good ever came from a private audience with the High King.

Sarrica finished his wine, then set the cup aside, settled back in his seat, and said, "Lieutenant, effective immediately you are promoted to Captain."

Charlaine choked on the tea he'd swiped from Myra's desk. "I'm what."

"Should the need arise, you will take over as Acting Captain of Penance Gate."

Chass's face turned into a thundercloud. "I have never acted outside the purview of my position."

"But you have certainly lashed out in the past, against those you thought deserved it," Sarrica said coolly. "I am sending you into a situation where that would be far too easy to do, against my better judgement, because Allen specifically asked for you, and he has good reason for doing so. There are about a hundred things that could go wrong in Benta, up to and including your demise, and I need to know that Penance Gate will be under control should that happen—and no, I do not trust your lover or her bloodthirsty protégé to ensure that, whatever you say otherwise."

"Majesty," Chass bit out.

Charlaine was absolutely certain he'd rather go back to being staked in a field than stay in that room one second longer. It had been clear from what Jac had said, along with other comments, that Chass had once hurt Allen—abused him, likely. Whatever he'd done, Sarrica feared he'd relapse to that behavior somehow.

And Charlaine was supposed to ensure he didn't, or deal with the fallout if and when he did. Marvelous. Damn it, he just wanted to go home and resume protecting Kamir.

"I know you think I'm punishing you, Highness, but I promise I am only trying to ensure that you and your people survive and minimize the possible fallout of sending you to get directly involved with Benta's internal strife. We cannot afford to lose King Desmond, and you're our best chance at keeping him alive—and Charlaine will ensure you don't die doing it."

"As my High King commands," Chass replied. "Might I know why His Majesty specifically requested Penance Gate?"

"Because if his suppositions are right, you will be walking into a brutal, ugly mess as rebels attempt to take the throne. Takeovers by necessity entail murdering the current monarch. There were other groups we could have sent, but you're the closest and quite frankly the best. So stop being mad at me for ensuring your protection and go do what you do best, Highness."

Chass rose and gave another of his beautiful bows. "An honor to serve." He turned to Charlaine. "I'll see you at the harbor at first light, Captain." He gave the barest smirk, then swept off with the menacing grace of a blade being wiped clean and slid back into its sheath.

"Nice black eye, by the way. Who in Penance Gate gave you that?"

"Chass, actually," Charlaine said, and at Sarrica's angry expression explained yet again how it had happened.

"You certainly are going to have a difficult time of it," Sarrica said. "Dismissed, Captain. Tell Lesto to get back in here. You have the rest of the day to yourself. Take your lovers with you."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Charlaine replied, and with a fleeting smile, departed.

When Lesto had returned to the office, and Charlaine was alone in a side hallway with Jac and Myra, he explained all that had transpired. "I was hoping we'd have a bit more time together before something like this happened, but I should have known better. Still, I am sorry to be leaving so soon after we escaped one disaster."

Jac shrugged. "We knew what we were in for. We all have busy lives. This was going to happen eventually, and it will happen again. No apologies necessary. Just come back alive and well, Captain. In the meantime, I'll send you plenty of red wax letters."

Charlaine groaned. "Don't you dare! Penance Gate will never let me hear the end of it."

Jac laughed and kissed him.

"How about we move this to more private quarters?" Myra led the way upstairs to their room and locked the door once they were all inside. "So what did you whisper in Charlaine's ear, brat?"

Snickering, Jac pushed into his arms, twined her own around his neck, and kissed him soundly before pulling slowly away and replying, "That I'm going to fuck him senseless, more or less. I found time to go shopping."

"Only you would find the time to traipse about a country that doesn't like us, whose language you can't speak, to obtain sex toys," Myra said with a laugh, sliding his hands idly down her body, teasingly pinching her ass when he reached it, and laughing louder at the squeak and affronted look that got him. "How did you manage to accomplish your mission?"

Jac bit his lips in retaliation. "Lady Mark was delighted to help when I asked."

Behind her, Charlaine groaned. "I'm moving as far from Harken as I can possibly get. I like my life *private*. Why does everyone seem to know every little detail?"

"It's like you've not a Harken citizen," Myra replied, letting go of Jac to cross over to Charlaine and steal a few kisses, grinding a knee against his already hardening cock. "Or did you miss it every single time we've been called birds since arriving here?"

Charlaine dragged his tongue across Myra's lips. "Let's see how funny you find it when everyone is discussing the High Secretary and what he's doing with two imperial bodyguards."

"Less talking, more gossip fodder," Myra said, and pushed him along until Charlaine hit the bed.

Then he set to work on their clothes, dropping and tossing haphazardly until they were naked. Charlaine looked around for Jac and stared helplessly at the lovely sight of her walking toward them, naked and bathed in sunlight from the bank of windows on the far side of the room, turning her dark skin gold. Her body was riddled with scars old and new, muscles trim and lithe, and she moved with the easy grace of a seasoned soldier.

In one hand she carried a bundle of leather straps, in the other a small glass bottle and a not-so-small artificial phallus. Myra reached out to take it as she reached them, running his fingers over the smooth jade. "Lovely. You have excellent taste in toys."

"Don't ask how much it cost," Jac said. "I don't want to be forced to remember."

Charlaine rolled his eye but dragged Jac close and trailed a line of wet kisses from her mouth down to the valley between her breasts. Myra slid behind her, teasing at a mark low on her throat, right where it started to curve into her shoulder, and reached around to cup and tease her breasts with his fingers while Charlaine tormented with his mouth.

Jac dropped the harness and bottle on the bed, reaching one hand back to grab Myra, the other digging into Charlaine's shoulder. "I really hope I'm not called away for some emergency, or I might finally start killing people." The words ended on a moan as Charlaine's fingers dipped low to tease her clit and along the already damp folds hidden by dark curls.

"I suggest we get to work then," Charlaine said as he abruptly grabbed her around the waist, twisted, and dropped her on the bed.

Laughing, Jac pulled herself farther up so there was room for all of them. Her eyes blazed as she watched Charlaine crawl toward her, spreading her thighs so he could settle between them. Charlaine dove into a kiss, and Jac's hands slid along his broad shoulders and down his back, her nails digging in delightfully and leaving a trail of red marks that stung just the right amount to make him shiver instead of wince.

Nearby, Myra gathered the dropped items, tossing the harness where it would be easy for Jac to grab. The bed shifted as his weight joined theirs,

and he crowded in close to press hot, wet kisses down Charlaine's spine and along the crack of his ass.

Charlaine shuddered, and Jac's eyes gleamed with anticipation and approval as she met Myra's gaze. Charlaine didn't have to look to know Myra was smiling back, and a moment later all thoughts fled his mind as slick, teasing fingers circled and nudged at his hole.

"Bastard," Charlaine gasped out. He pushed and shifted back, turning briefly to give Myra a long, wet, and filthy kiss. Once he was breathless, Charlaine turned back to Jac and shifted to put his mouth where he liked it best. He savored the slickness that said she wanted badly, the way her thighs occasionally tightened as if wanted to clamp down on his head, the fingers that ran through his hair, all the hitched breaths and ragged moans as he tongue-fucked her.

He was so lost in tasting her, making her scream, that he jumped slightly when Myra's fingers returned. They were infuriatingly teasing at first, circling and pressing but never *pushing*. Before Charlaine could kill him, however, Myra finally pushed one slick finger inside.

Charlaine moaned as he continued to feast on Jac, which just made her whimper and pull his hair more.

A few minutes later, as one finger became two and threatened to distract Charlaine completely, Jac screamed as she came and went limp on the bedding, panting softly. Charlaine could stare at a well-fucked Jac the rest of his life and never for a single moment grow bored. "You are magnificently, horribly good at that."

"Horribly?" Charlaine asked, mouth ticking up. "I can *stop—*"

"I will kill you."

Charlaine laughed and kissed her, loving the way she didn't insist he go clean up first, simply fed at his mouth like he was the treat she'd waited all day to enjoy.

Myra withdrew his fingers as Charlaine rose, laughing breathlessly when Charlaine grabbed him and put him in the place that Jac rolled out of. He shivered as he met Charlaine's gaze, and Pantheon, Charlaine was completely, utterly, totally drunk on his best friend—one of his two best friends now—looking at him with such open, fervent desire. Myra curling his hands around Charlaine's hips and urging him down for a long, slow,

and utterly filthy kiss. "I don't know if it's a good thing or a bad thing that I didn't know until recently just how excellent a kisser you are."

"Probably a good thing. We might never have had the sense to trick Jac into joining us," Charlaine said.

"Trick, says the man with a Pantheon-blessed tongue," Jac says. "Please, keep tricking me."

They both turned to watch and thoroughly admire as Jac finished securing the harness for the dildo. She looked better than every illicit thought and filthy dream he'd ever had combined. To judge by the way Myra shivered beneath him, they were in agreement. She looked decadent —naughty, beautifully mussed and utterly decadent.

"I'm glad we have the rest of the day off," Charlaine said, eyes locked on Jac. "Because after staring at you looking like that, I'm not going to be able to think of anything else."

Jac flushed, smiling as she fussed with the straps and adjusted the dildo slightly. "Thanks. I've never had complaints, but uh—" She touched her tongue to her upper lip as she idly stroked the dildo. "I don't think I've ever gotten such enthusiastic approval."

"Halfwits all of them." Myra reached out one hand and tugged on the dildo, accidentally toppling Jac to all fours, nearly bringing her crashing down on them. Jac swore as she knocked heads with Charlaine and glared at Myra. "Sorry," Myra murmured, and leaned up to kiss her in apology.

When Jac finally pulled back, she looked to be in a forgiving mood. She licked her lips, then kissed Myra, and Charlaine would never grow tired of that lovely, lovely sight.

"So are you going to fuck Charlaine while he fucks me?" Myra asked.

"Yes," Jac said, the word coming out somewhere between a hiss and a whimper.

Charlaine smiled faintly, shaking his head. "I know an order when I hear one. I wish all my orders were so pleasant." He shifted and settled, pulling Myra to just the right angle and teasingly rubbing his cock against Myra's entrance.

Jac moved behind them, and Myra's breath hitched as he stared at Charlaine. Before Charlaine could ask why, not that he was certain he could

have formed the words with the way Jac worked her fingers inside him, Myra said, "Pantheon. Did he make that face before?"

"Yeah," Jac said, voice ragged. "I don't think using his mouth is the only thing Charlaine *really* likes."

"Oh, be quiet," Charlaine muttered, face going pink. He shifted his hips and before Myra could retort, was sliding inside him.

Myra keened, rolling his own hips to take Charlaine deeper. "Jac. Now. I can't wait any longer."

Jac pressed a soft kiss to Charlaine's shoulder, and then she was sliding into him slowly, working the heavy phallus with care.

Charlaine groaned, moving between them, overwhelmed by the feeling of the hard dildo filling him and Myra's slick heat wrapped around him. He pushed back, taking the jade cock deeper, then thrust harder into Myra, moaning for more but not quite able to get the words out.

"I like you this way, Laine," Myra said huskily, and licked his throat, lingering on a mark left by Jac the previous day. "I think our good captain is trying to say *harder* and *faster*, Jac."

Laughing, Jac obeyed, eliciting another groan that Charlaine was happy to surrender if it got him more of the same. Jac fucked him hard, her hands on his hips, motions driving Charlaine deep into Myra, who met and matched every thrust, clinging to Charlaine's sweaty back.

They fell into a rhythm after that, spurring each other on with breathy pleas and desperate gasps, raking nails and too-tight grips, lost in heat and sweat and need.

Charlaine gave Myra a quick, hard kiss, and with a few more thrusts Myra came, clinging tighter than ever as his release shuddered through him. A moment later, Charlaine followed, spilling over Myra with a hoarse cry as Jac drove into him one last time.

After a moment, Jac carefully pulled out, making Charlaine shiver anew, and quickly unbuckled the leather straps, tossing everything aside before pushing two fingers into her own body and coming hard only moments later.

She crawled up to join them as Charlaine gently withdrew from Myra and flopped down next to him.

Jac gave them both lazy kisses. "I hope we can do that a few more times before you have to leave."

"I'm sure you'll make certain we do," Charlaine replied dryly. "Even though I leave in roughly fifteen hours."

Myra squirmed free of them, pulled on a dressing robe, and went to pull the bell rope to summon staff. When a woman arrived, he requested an early dinner for three and food that would keep so they could eat it later instead of having to call for it again.

"Ah, the joys of being in a relationship with the most efficient man in the empire," Jac said with a happy sigh as they sat down to eat. "I wouldn't have thought of getting food for later so we don't have to worry about further interruptions."

"I'm glad I can be of use," Myra replied, mouth quirking as he took a sip of wine.

Jac's eyes glittered. "Oh, you're of use all right."

Charlaine shook his head. "I'm not sure I'll survive this relationship, at the rate Jac wants us going. We're not as young as you, remember."

"Oh, please," Jac said. "Don't start with that. If anything, you two could do better than—"

"No, we couldn't." Myra covered her hand with one of his. "I agree: let's not start with any of that. After all we've been through together, age is so trivial it doesn't deserve further comment."

Charlaine gave a slight nod, then said with a sigh, "I'm sure the gossips will discuss it plenty enough for us."

"Speaking of gossip, I bought something else while I was out," Jac said, abruptly looking nervous. "Lord Lesto made me think of it."

"Should I be afraid?" Charlaine asked. "If you bought a flogger or something, I will strangle you with it."

Jac dissolved into giggles. "No! I did consider it just for the look on your face, but my funds wouldn't allow it. Um, just a second." She pushed away from the table and went to the small chest where she kept personal possessions, coming back with a wide, flat wooden box. "They're not much. I'm no Allen or Sarrica or anything..."

"Jac," Charlaine said, pulling her close and sliding an arm around her waist. "If someone handed me the kind of clothes and jewels they wear, I'd be terrified. I have no desire to wear something that costs twenty times my yearly income."

Myra's mouth tipped up at one corner. "I admit I spend a good deal of money on my clothes, but that's largely because of my position."

Jac let out a breath and set the box on the table. Charlaine opened it and turned so Myra could see, both of them smiling. Charlaine pulled Jac into his lap as Myra lifted the necklaces from the box.

"It might be too soon," Jac murmured, "but after all we've been through together, I felt like we should have something."

"I agree," Myra said as he fastened one of the necklaces around his own throat.

Charlaine traced the lines of one. They were handsome pieces, made of braided black leather with three long silver beads interspersed with smaller round ones. One long bead was carved with a dragon, another with swirls that resembled rolling waves. Between them, the last bead had narrow bands on either end. In the middle was a crescent moon made of some pale, glittering blue stone.

"I wasn't sure you'd like the moon, but it seems to suit you, even if Iron Moon doesn't. The woman said she made it for the legend, and it's one of her most popular beads for the same reason. I didn't know what she was talking about, but Lady Mark told me on our way home."

"The Legend of the Stolen Moon," Myra replied. "I haven't heard that story in...well, decades." He reached up to touch the bead, watching as Jac and Charlaine put their own necklaces on. "My clan never liked the story because they think it makes the moon look weak and helpless."

Charlaine's brows rose.

Myra took a sip of wine and then said, "Each phase of the moon is a different goddess. The oldest and wisest of the eight goddesses is Full Moon, the youngest and kindest is Gentle Moon. All who met Gentle Moon fell deeply in love—including a fierce dragon who was the youngest son of the goddess of the ocean. But he loved her in vain, for Full Moon had decided that her sister should marry the god of the mountains and forbid her to ever again have anything to do with Blue Dragon. In despair, Gentle

Moon cast her sash, which was made of summer clouds and decorated with stars, into the sea. Blue Dragon found it and realized that his beloved had not forsaken him as he'd believed. In a fury, he flew up and up and up and snatched Gentle Moon from the sky. Together they plunged to the deepest, darkest parts of the sea, where legend says you can sometimes see fish that glow with moonlight. That is why to this day, you cannot see the moon at all on some nights, which is called Stolen Moon now."

"It really does suit you," Charlaine said.

"I suppose it does," Myra replied with a smile. "I fell in love with Harken, and then with a dragon and an ocean who brought me home."

#### FIN

## 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.

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# COMING SOON – THE FINAL TALE OF THE HIGH COURT

#### The Fallen King's Penitent Soldier

The youngest son of a despised king, thrust upon a throne he never wanted, Desmond nevertheless tried to be a good monarch to Benta—but the rebels discontent with him and the alliance with the Harken Empire have taken control, and Desmond's private guards are either dead or turned traitor. Unexpected rescue comes from Harken, in the form of the fearsome Penance Gate mercenaries and the beautiful, brutal man who leads them.

Beneath the shining edifice of every empire is a foundation of violence and pain, and Chass has always done his duty to Harken by being the bastard who endures and metes out both. He is used to being hated, and does not deny he deserves it. But in the aftermath of rescuing the enchanting, compelling Desmond, he wishes more than ever that he could be the noble hero just once, instead of the monster good only for spreading terror.



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